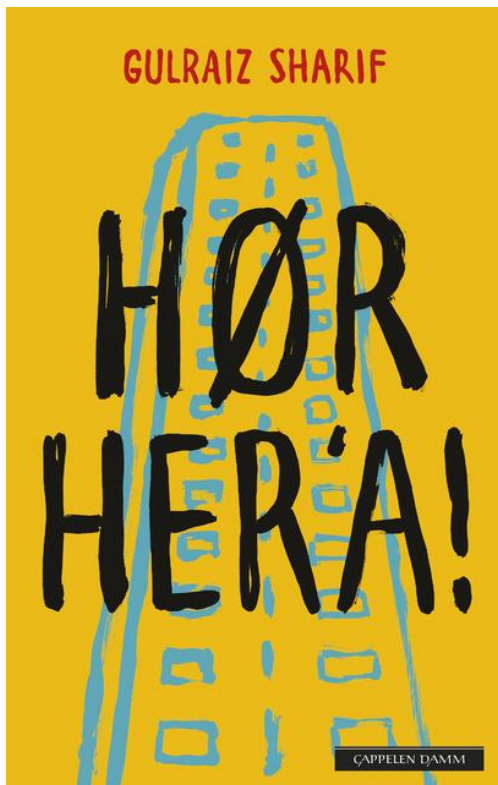


Cappelen Damm Agency *Autumn 2020*



It's the summer holidays and 15-year-old Mahmoud pictures long days on the bench outside his block of flats. Norwegian Norwegians go off on their summer holidays, but what do penniless foreigners do?

All the same, though, this summer will be different because the family has a visit from Uncle Ji from Pakistan, and Mahmoud is given the job of showing his uncle around Oslo. Uncle Ji is amazed by Norway and then he starts to wonder what's wrong with Ali, Mahmoud's little brother – the one who plays with Elsa dolls and doesn't behave the way Pakistani boys are supposed to.

Before the summer is over, Mahmoud will be put to the test – both as the son and brother of his Pakistani family.

Listen up! is a firework of a novel. It renders a community of minorities in a truly original and distinctive voice.

Listen up!

foreignrights@cappelendamm.no
www.cappelendammagency.no

CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

Listen up!
Gulraiz Sharif

Gulraiz Sharif

b. 1984

Gulraiz Sharif is from Oslo, where he works as a teacher.

Listen up! is his first novel.



foreignrights@cappelendamm.no
www.cappelendammagency.no

CAPPELEN DAMM AGENCY

Listen up!
Gulraiz Sharif

Sample translation by Kari Dickson

HØR HER'A! (Listen Up!)

Novel by Gulraiz Sharif

Pages: 174

Publisher: Cappelen Damm

Translation © Kari Dickson

Translation Grant Support received from NORLA

pp. 7-23

Summer holidays, right. Really nice for Norwegian Norwegians, but I tell you, not so great for us foreigners with no money! I mean, what's there to do? They have their sea cabins, mountain cabins, ocean cabins, mainland cabins, coastal cabins, and those ones the teacher told us about, yeah, archipelago cabins, man! Plus the Swedish cabin, you know, and the Nesodden cabin. Imagine that, they've got cabins practically in Oslo! Not that all Norwegian Norwegians come from Oslo, but when I heard that, like, I just about fell over. I mean, if you want an outside toilet, you just have to drive to the outskirts of Oslo. And then they stay there for weeks. Sit their white and pink bums down on those scary black holes, with a great pile of shit below. Those toilets, man, they scare the life out of me, give me a heart attack.

You want to know what I think, well: Bro, my dad didn't travel in a train and a container through Germany and Denmark, to Norway, to have a shit outdoors. In an outside toilet with wonky wooden walls. They look like they're about to fall down. He came to this beautiful, long country to shit indoors. If he was going to shit outdoors, I mean, we've got plenty, and I mean PLENTY of space outdoors in Pakistan. The problem is, there are poisonous snakes in Pakistan, man. In Norway, you've got those cute little adders, with little adder fangs. Gotta laugh, man! I've seen them hundreds of times when I go for a walk around the lake at Grorud, to find myself, like, get some inner peace, away from my little brother and mum and dad. They're so not dangerous, not my family, like, the adders. They lounge around on the paths, totally chilled, they've got it good cos they live in Norway. The snakes in Pakistan would scare the balls off me. And anyway, I wouldn't be walking around a lake to find myself! Norwegians have taught us that. Pakistani parents take a sandal and whack you so hard you can't find the door, so how the hell are you supposed to find yourself?

One time Dad slapped me hard around the head after I'd been for a walk round the lake, and asked: "Oi, Mahmoud, did you find yourself?" And I said, nah, you're joking, mate, by mistake, cos I wasn't really listening. And I promise you, bro, he asked my mum to get him the broom, and he said: 'I didn't come to Norway so you could walk around in the forest and search for your soul all the time.' I swear, after that I don't bother saying I'm going out to find myself, I just say I'm going out to meet a friend, though I don't actually have many friends.

Thing is, after a summer holiday in Pakistan, you feel like a Marvel hero. You've survived everything, no joke. Small lizards, big lizards, frogs, snakes, cockroaches, great bulldozer-sized spiders, I mean everything. Plus all kinds of diseases like typhoid, TB, herpes – there's one for every letter in the alphabet! And deadly diarrhoea, which makes you bolt for the bog forty times a day till you've got nada fluid in your body, man. And street dogs! I mean, dogs in Norway eat that Pedigree Pal and chew on toys, they sit and watch the news with their owners, know what's happening in the world. Smiling, happy dogs with healthy pink tongues and healthy teeth, living the life, like those adders, you know. In Pakistan, the dogs eat dirt and shit, man, dead animals, and god knows what other crap! They loiter and hang around all day like the foreigners down at Grønland, or the Kurds at Oslo City who think they can pull there. And if they see a tasty morsel, they're on it. The dogs that is, not the Kurds. Like once when we were on holiday there, this bastard mongrel started to chase me. I had a bit of Dehli belly that day cos I'd eaten a mountain of chilli curry the night before. The ugly mutt started to lick my arse, he was so hungry. Anything was food. The boys from the village laughed at me. So I ate loads of naan bread so I'd get constipated. And I only went twice in the last three weeks I was in Pakistan, luckily both times it was in a good restaurant with Western toilets.

But I promise you, the moment we landed at Gardemoen airport, I blasted the toilet bowl like it was the third world war. The Norwegian Norwegian who went in after me, poor sod – bet that was an experience and a smell he'll never forget. Bro, three weeks' shit compacted in my intestines! The Norwegian probably thought he'd relax, read a Pondus strip or check the weather on the YR app. I'm guessing he still has nightmares. Poor Robert, who went in for a dump after me. I can just imagine him: from the south of Norway, so he speaks almost Danish. Voted for the Progress Party after that trip to the airport toilet, man. Probably thought to himself: 'I don't want those smelly people in my country!' And now Robert's got one of those Facebook groups called "They're taking over our country! Spreading their vile stench!" Sits there in his basement flat in the blue light of a computer screen writing shit about us foreigners and getting lots of likes from other Norwegians sitting in the dark in basement flats in front of blue, flickering screens.

But I tell, man, most of us have our bellies full of chilli, kebab and fizzy drinks, how could we take over the country? By farting or burping?

It's not that easy to take over Norway, man, there's a lot of forest here, mate! And how would you take over the North Cape? What black guy's going to go there and say: 'Ok, brothers, I've taken over the North Cape?' And who's going to dare to go all the way to Svalbard? Like: 'Here I am, Toofiq, I'm here to take over Svalbard, brothers!' I mean, they've got white polar bears there! The Somalis chew khat all day long, the skinny bastards, so how are they going to take over? Abdi with khat in his rucksack crosses the mountains on foot to take over Bergen? The Somalis like to sit around in smart blazers chatting to their mates in Grønland, while their wives give birth to more children, they haven't got time to take over Norway. The Iraqis can make a cup of coffee last for hours in their favourite corner cafe. The Turks have their fruit and veg shops and want to watch Galatsary play Fenerbahce in the Turkish cafes – they don't have time. The Pakistanis don't have the time either, they're too busy driving taxis, so their offspring can become doctors, lawyers and engineers.

Nah, it's up to the Norwegian ladies, really, to have more little potato babies. You know, like Emil, Theo, Lukas and Sindre. More Emmas and Noras and Saras. Even the nation's mother, Erna, said

in her new year's speech: 'Ladies, you have to have more babies.' I think Siv Jensen must've said to her: 'Erna, you tell those Norwegians to have more sex, not just eat brown cheese and goji berries and that quinoa stuff. They have to run less on the treadmills, and make more babies instead. Otherwise, we'll end up with a Somali or Berber prime minister one day.' Wollah, Erna probably said: 'Siv, you're a psychobitch. And I'm a level-headed Bergenser and I run the country. But if there's things you want me to say, just whisper in my ear, or we could set up a WhatsApp group so you can tell me what to say.'

Imagine Asker changing its name to Askerbaijan, or Bærum to Bahhrum. Bahhhhhrrum. You get it, brother?

But then Norwegian children are born with skis on their feet, and those skis, man, they're big, so maybe Linda, Mari and Kari don't dare have any more kids. Whereas Abdi wasn't born with skis on his feet, so Khalida gives birth again and again and again.

I remember we went to visit an aunty once – and don't forget, all Pakistani women your mum's age or older are aunts, otherwise you're being disrespectful. We went to visit aunty because she'd just had a daughter. And there was this other foreign woman in the same room, who'd just had a baby too and her seven other children, yeah man, had come to see her! They'd all be born with about a year apart, no joke. And they caused mayhem in the hospital. I swear, the poor Norwegian nurses looked on in shock. Because remember, everything's nice in Norway. Siv Jensen doesn't want too many of us foreigners here because then it won't be nice anymore. And if something's not nice, well, Norwegian Norwegians get that look on their face, and their mouths tighten like a cat's arse. You can see it on their eyes, like: "This is not nice. Gunnar and Karin are not happy with the situation."

I often sit on the bench outside my block and daydream, every hour, every second, of moving closer to where it's at. Down into the centre, past all the tired metro stations out here that no one can be bothered to do up. I feel like an Oslonian and want to conquer the capital. But if you're going to do that, you need dosh, don't you, money, ka-ching in your pocket! No fun for us foreigners with no money and nothing to do but wear down the benches round here. I swear, even the benches don't like us. They're like: 'Come on, guys, have you not got anything else to do in the summer holidays? Everyone's away to get their Vitamin D hit from the sun, and we just want stretch out a bit, rest our weary planks. Do you have to sit your foreign bums on us for hours while you complain about your sad loser lives?'

The only thing I hear on this, the first day of the summer holiday, is my mum screaming like a banshee from our balcony on the eleventh floor, like someone in the family had died.

'Oieeeee, Mahmoud! Go and buy four litres of milk and three loaves of brown bread. And get a litre of kefir as well!'

Then she throws the money down in a tired plastic bag, cash that my dad probably didn't get from taxi fares because most people pay by card or mobile phone these days. I promise you, man, seeing this bag is enough to make you depressed about your life. The bag is you, minus the money. You drift around like the bag in the air, dreaming of better days. But then you snap back to reality when the bag hits the ground and your mum shouts: 'Oieeeee, Mahmoud, did you get the bag? No one's taken it?'

‘Yeah,’ I shout back, looking up at the woman who gave birth to me.

But I’m not what this nation needs, it needs ethnic Norwegian Norwegians. Mum shouts again even though I’ve told her that no one’s taken the money, I mean, who could’ve don’t that anyway, the world’s fastest thief, or what?

‘And some bullet chillis. And don’t forget the natural yoghurt. Your dad gets blood in his poo if I put pure chilli in the food! I have to mix it with yoghurt, balances his stomach. Oh, and get two big bottles of normal Coke and a big Sprite. Your uncle only drinks Sprite.’

Balances his stomach, my hazelnut-brown arse! My dad drinks so much yoghurt, I mean, so much that he cleans out the shop. I reckon about half his wages go on balancing his bowels! And still he lets rip evil farts, man, they’re brutal, I tell you! The Greens should report him for those emission, they should build a toll around his arse! Norwegian Norwegians are trying to get CO2 emissions down, and here’s Dad blasting even more CO2 into the atmosphere! I actually think my dad is responsible for the hole in the ozone layer, because I mean, like, how would Norwegians ruin the air, like? Salmon, potatoes and crème fraiche? Wouldn’t work, man, not spicy enough! Look at them, poor sods practically only eat white or yellow cheese – never been able to tell the difference – on their bread, or whatever else they eat on soft polar bread. The only spices they use are salt and pepper. If they’re really pushing the boat out, they might put a bit of curry powder in with the fish balls – makes them feel proper adventurous and exotic! Like when they’ve eaten that Sarita’s tikka masala.

The uncle my mum is talking about is my dad’s big brother. He thinks drinking all that Sprite cleans his insides. Hope he doesn’t fart as much as his little brother, man. We’d have a brutal Pakistani fart orchestra then, two brothers whose arses whistle every time they eat chilli.

Uncle-ji is coming to visit on one of those two-month visas. I promise you, Siv Jensen and her party were so scared he might try to trick the system and stay for more than two months that he was interviewed seventeen times by the police! They asked him the weirdest questions, and he just got confused. Dad had to give a guarantee that he had the money to have Uncle to stay, and that he wouldn’t keep him in the country. I mean, where would we hide him, like? The storeroom in the cellar?

‘Yeah, yeah,’ I say, as I pick up the bag that seen better days and should really be replaced. But then I remember what my dad always tells me, he looks me deep in the eyes and says with conviction, like it’s some profound philosophy: ‘I didn’t come to Norway to buy a new plastic bag every time I go to the shop, Mahmoud. A plastic bag can be used until it no longer looks like a plastic bag.’

My darling mother shouts down again, and then something happens that makes me even more embarrassed.

‘Be quick quick, I need to put the kefir in with the herbs and spices. Don’t hang around with that donkey friend of yours.’

As soon as Mum announces Dad’s problems with his gut and his butt, the local ladies sitting on the benches or hanging out the washing on their balconies, all hear her and start to shout up old wives’ cures from back home in broken Norwegian, Urdu or Punjabi. It’s like a UN conference, man, only it’s not about poverty, famine and global warming, it’s about my dad’s bum! They shout up advice about

what she should do to stop my dad getting blood in his shit from all the chilli. It's so embarrassing that I want to run all the way up to the eleventh floor, into flat, then out onto the balcony and jump over the edge in front of my mum and hear all the advice about my dad's farts fade into the background. Bro, I hear the strangest things. 'Massage his buttocks with ice cold mustard oil.' Another woman says with a Kurdish lilt: 'The fart channel is in the spine, sister, put in needles that you've warmed in black olive oil and egg white!'

I tell you, my poor innocent ears hear the wildest things, they all play at doctors and physiotherapists. My dad's bum has cost me any self-respect that I've built up round here over the past sixteen years. Even the six-year-olds look at me and snigger. A wee mummy's boy without front teeth asked me: 'Mahmoud, is it true your dad's got a sore bum mole?'

I look up at my mum who's scribbling down all the advice she's getting on a piece of A4. I hold the hard-earned Norwegian cash tight in my hand, in the plastic bag. Practically everyone wants this money. An aunty wanted Norwegian money so much that she took some back to Pakistan. She wrapped it up in clingfilm, in lots of little parcels. Layers and layers of clingfilm and she rolled them in tamarind and turmeric, then hid them around her torso. But she got caught by some dogs that could smell too much foreign currency around her belly. Their noses weren't fooled by the curry, my aunty's chosen combination.

Now Aunty's sitting in some women's prison in the middle of Nowherestan and knitting socks with horrible patterns for me and my brother, which she sends to us twice a year. She once sent me a hat with a kind of failed Marius pattern, which I lost somewhere at the back of the cupboard. If I ever get rich and move to a big flat down in the centre, I'm going to put on a Marius sweater and Marius hat. I'll go for the full Marius look, bro. But where I live now, if I'm too Marius, the local lads would give me a thrashing. So, as the Norwegian Norwegians say so well, the best thing is to be who you are, in other words, Mahmoud. My dream is that one fine day, all Norwegian Norwegians will wear the Mahmoud sweater. It'll be curry patterned, with knitted garlics all over. Red onion, some green chillis at the bottom, chilli flakes in the middle. The Mahmoud sweater, my friend! It will sell like hot naan. A pure fantasy dream is Erna Solberg wearing a Mahmoud sweater on national television while holding her state of the nation address. Imagine, all the garlics and chilli bouncing about on her chest, man! The onions would dance around her belly as she said on TV for all of Norway to hear and see: 'This sweater is very comfortable and top quality, that Mahmoud really is a sweater entrepreneur.' Yo, bro! Siv would probably call my Mahmoud sweater Islamisation by stealth. She always whispers to me in a creepy voice in my dreams: 'Norweeeegian values, Mahmoooud, Norwegian vaaaalues.'

I'm torn from my daydreams by my mother shouting: 'Oieee, Mahmoud, don't just stand there, get to the shop. Uncle will be here soon. Hurry!'

I get myself to the shop, quick quick, and go over to the long bakery shelf. And there I meet another poor sod like me. The one who Mum told me not to hang out with. My donkey friend, One-Eyed Arif. He's called that cos his mum threw an empty CD case at him and hit him in the eye. She said: 'Are you going to listen to your mother or those dumb, rapping black boys?' And then boom, before he could answer, pure Ninja style, she threw the empty CD case at him while "Ain't no mama like you mama" blasted out at full volume. Instead of comforting him, his mum was like: 'Is ok, Arif. I got eight other kids. They can see. So no problem you can't see with one eye. We got NAV, they give you money. Norway help people who can't see. If you lose both eye, then me and you father make one more, no problem!'

We cheered him up and said he looked like a hardcore Somali pirate now, who listens to pirate CDs from Somali dealers. He's the local Somali Jack Sparrow, minus the parrot, but we can sort that for him one day, a real cockatoo, if he wants to the full package.

Now he's standing there looking for some white bread, he's like a dog looking for its own tail, man. I take four white loaves and put them in his basket. He says thanks. Don't know if it's a tear in the corner of his one eye, or if it's a sudden allergy to pollen like most Norwegians get, but he knows we're bread-shopping partners for life. Every fucking day.

The thing with our shop is you have to get here fast in the morning if you want the normal bread, brown or white. You have to have both eyes open, well, apart from Arif, that is. Be a mixture of Lightning Macqueen and Flash if you want to get the right fresh bread for your mum. Or she'll give you a good whack, believe me. Not a Norwegian slap of the hand, we're talking proper immigrant force here. She calls you the bastard son of a dog and blasts you because of a lousy loaf of bread. All DNA tests show that you're her child, but she still calls you a bastard, I don't get it. I can't keep track of the number of times I've been whacked because of cheap brown bread. The other bread is too expensive. You want us to eat bread that costs how much? My dad always says: 'I didn't come to Norway to eat bread that's like bark, normal brown bread has fibre enough.' No wonder we've got blood in our shit.

Just wait, when Mahmoud gets rich, I'll buy the best, I mean the beeeest bread in the world, and then they'll see. Brother, I'm going drive my Tesla to the local shop, which will be a posh one and I'll buy the best bread with the best fibre and the best seeds. The bread will be kneaded and baked by blind nuns from Valencia, believe me. And who will have spread the seeds? Sexy mamacitas chiquitas from Cuba! And if I'm not that rich, just quite rich, then I'll be happy with oat protein bread from Bakehuset or that Northug bread.

Me and One-Eyed Arif pay for the food we've bought and then stop on the slope outside our block. Arif always wants to hang out there, delay going back to the noise from his eight brothers and sisters and mum who's forever on the hands-free in her hijab to some relative or other from Somalia.

Mum and Dad love their dood patti – Pakistani tea which is brewed to death and back. Uncle-ji probably drinks it by the bucket-load as well. So we'll be needing extra milk at least every other day and that means a whole lot more trips to the shop for me. I can picture how my summer holiday's going to pan out already. While Peder and Filip jump into the water from the five-metre board, I'll be out buying milk.

Dad is on the way to the airport in his taxi to pick up my uncle. I stand there with my one-eyed Somali brother, we stand there and enjoy the warmth of summer on our skin. Not that we'll get any

browner or blacker than we already are, but a bit of vitamin D won't do any harm, like. We generally don't have much to talk about. But it works. I can stand there thinking about things, philosophising a bit about life, because believe me, there's plenty to ponder. Mum calls me her little philosopher, son of Gahlib – an alcoholic who used to write poems in India. She says I think too much.

Suddenly Arif breaks the silence.

'Bro?'

'Yeah, bro?' I say.

'I thought about looking for a summer job, but don't see that well with my other eye, you know.'

'Don't give up looking, like, even though you're way too late! You need to look for summer jobs before now, brother. Not *in* the summer holidays, like, you dumbass, crazy, madman Abdi.'

'Bloody Stan Pakki! How d'you write the best possible application and what d'you do at an interview, bro? Tell me, you're a smart man!'

Arif looks at me in anticipation as though I've got the answer to all the world's mysteries, at least when it comes to getting a job.

'Mate, listen up, play the Norwegian Norwegian. Talk like a gora, get it? Don't use words from the street, ok? Talk like an Olav or a Preben, or even better, like an Axel. Flow, man, flow. The Norwegian Norwegian has to believe you're a Norwegian Norwegian too, just the wrong colour, he has to think you're adopted, bro. You have to show that you're hardworking, or they'll think that you'll get a sick note as soon as you've got your first pay, cos it's in your blood! Laziness, yeah. You're the first Somali who ever wanted to work, Erna Solberg should be passing round the cake in parliament, brother!'

I wink at him.

'You just shut it, the cheek, man!'

'Bro, listen up! You gotta change from being One-Eyed Arif to being One-Eyed Kurt Bjarne Amundsen, right!'

I should have looked for a summer job myself, but I'm so nervous about not being called for an interview, I just dropped it. I kind of get the feeling that before my application is even read by Astrid or Sigrid in whatever company, she'll have crumpled it into a ball and thrown it in the bin as soon as she sees my name. I mean, Mahmoud Mahroof. I tell you, I've considered changing my name a hundred times. I should just call myself Jørn or Bjørn, and say that I was adopted from India, Bangladesh or Iran. Because you've got to trick them, man, if you want to survive, you gotta give them a story that will shake them to the core, you get it? Wake their humanity so much that they want to take you home and make you hot chocolate, man, and give you a couple of slices of bread with yellow cheese or white cheese, whatever, and red pepper or cucumber!

Even though I'm a young person, I know I'll have to work hard one day. Everyone has to. Otherwise the system won't work and run smoothly. And anyway, Pakistanis are going to be celebrated at Oslo City Hall soon, cos we've been here for fifty years! We've worked hard for fifty years, man, but we've got our own problems too, right, like arranged marriages, pirate taxis, and the A, B, C and D gangs, etc. Imagine in fifty years time, we'll be a national minority, like the Samí, the travelling folk and the gypsies! I bet Siv Jensen has to take sleeping pills to get that thought out of her head.

But bro, when I have children, I'm going to give them names that could be from the Koran, the Tora or the Bible, names that are used by people from all three great religions. Jacob, Michael, Gabriel or Daniel. Not Ismail, that's too Muslim, and not Isaac – too Jewish. Then they'd get jobs! Because your name doesn't give away the colour of your skin. If you want your son to get a job, don't give him some full-on Arabic name.

A woman from round here called her son Jihad. She went to the nearest shopping centre, four stops away on the metro, and the wee bugger ran off super fast and she couldn't find him. So she went around shouting 'Jihad, Jihad! Where are you, Jihad? Come back here, Jihad!' Now, this aunty was a bit fat, so it looked like she had a suicide belt under her long coat. Poor Norwegians, right, they were there to enjoy a cup of coffee and a piece of cake in the tired cafe, and instead of cozy, they got chaos. Everyone running in different directions, some to the lift, some to car park. I saw old ladies with rollators, old men on those small car things with zero horsepower, I heard the Norwegians screaming and shouting as they ran for their lives. Then suddenly I saw little Jihad coming out of the TGR shop with a blood-red clown's nose in his tiny terrorist hand, waving to his mum! I swear on my mother and father, and grandparents, man, I've never been so scared in all my life, bro. We were there to buy a cover for my dad's mobile phone, and I tell you, I've never seen my old man run so fast. He normally complains about having sore legs, but that day, man, no evidence of pain, just the will to survive. I heard my dad shout: 'I didn't come to Norway to die in a terrorist attack, we've got enough terrorists in the markets in Pakistan when you go to buy oranges. Run, you bastard child of four mules!'

There was a boy in the parallel class at school whose dad had called him Halim Ul Hassan Bin Talib Bin Khawaja Bin Kayyum Ul Khusri Al Daroori husne Kitaaba. Man, bet he doesn't have an easy time getting a job!

I can just imagine the Norwegian interviewing him, a calm Norwegian man in a Gant sweater and nice Ralph Lauren shirt, pure gold wedding ring on his right hand: 'So, Halim Ul Hassan Bin Talib, well, that's quite a long and exotic name you've got. What would you say were your strengths then, Halim Ull, um, yes, um, sorry, not managing to get all this. How would you feel if we just called you Hassan? Would that be okay? Otherwise I'm afraid that we could sit here all evening and still not remember your name, haha.'

Brother, if you want to nail a job, you only need two names, max. If Mahmoud Mahroof doesn't work, I'll change it to Morten Martinsen.

Hope Arif's clocked the important bits, not just made his own pick'n'mix version -then he'll just make an arse of himself at the interview and say the stupidest, most messed up thing you can't even imagine.

We high five, low five and back five, like proper ghetto boys. We take our time cos we know the summer holiday's going to be looong, so we can take the time we want to tell each other that we're best mates by hitting hands in different ways.

'Have to go, bro. Talk later on Snap, yeah?' I say.

'Can't charge my phone before later on tonight, man. Remember, there's eight more in my family who want to charge their phones, so we've got charging list, right. But as soon as I'm on it, you'll hear from me.'

I start to walk up the blood slope, as we call it, towards our block. Turn round and shout back to Arif: 'Remember to tell them you can only work a half-shift!'

'Fucking cheeky Pakki face! Just you wait, I'm going to thump you. You deserve a beating!'

Arif shows me his palm.

'Speak soon, mate. You know I love you, wannabe Kurt Bjarne!'

I wave to him with the worn-thin bag in my hand. Hear him say: 'Yo, bro. Love you too, wannabe gora!'

My brain is fit to burst. The more I see Mum and Dad, their faces, the harder it gets to keep things secret.

Dad came to Norway, so now he has to start accepting things, right. People are different. Norway is different. Does he want his little boy to be depressed, or what? He already freaks every time he comes to the mosque with me to pray; thinks he's a mistake, and God's angry with him. I mean, what's that all about? He's only a kid. Does he have to hate himself for everything now, cos he's a Muslim, got brown skin, Pakistani, not Norwegian, born in the wrong body, foreigner, immigrant, darkie, Paki, curry kid, should he hate himself for all these different?

My head's going to explode, man. Wouldn't it be better to tell Mum myself? She's my mother, after all. She carried us in the dark of her belly for nine months, she should know about these things. I just have to back her. Don't want her to be blamed for everything. Like that day in the taxi. Barbiecomicgate!

I go out into the living room, Dad and Uncle-ji are somewhere, don't know where. Maybe gone to meet some of his mates. Ali's outside playing. I look at Mum sitting on the sofa with a cup of tea in her hand, relaxing. I think: I can tell her now, we're all alone, just the two of us, Mum'll understand. I'm just about to open my mouth, when her phone rings. I hear her say hello to one of the aunties. They'll talk forever now on WhatsApp, man.

I let Mum know I'm going out, she looks up from the phone and tells me to stay nearby and that Auntie Nazish sends her love. I send mine back. Keeping an eye on us as usual. She's worse than Siv, she is.

Such a good chance, then some aunty had to get in the way. Wonder what they've got to talk about all the time? I go to the big stone and plonk my arse down, not much to do really. Just pass the time.

I daydream, get lost in my own thoughts. Look up at all the tower blocks, look around me, not everyone knows everyone here, but everyone knows who everyone is. I think that if people find out about Ali, then there'll definitely be talk. Behind our back, to anyone who'll listen, whispering and gossiping. I know there'll be chaos in the hood, people'll say see Zubaida and Maqsood's little boy, he's their little girl now. Everyone talking at once. Eating nuts, drinking soft drinks, praying to God for forgiveness in case they've done something stupid, and thanking him that it wasn't one of their children that wanted to change sex!

Bending over in prayer, deep and long. Maybe give some money to those in need at home, so they avoid the curse that's struck my parents. They'll say: 'Zubaida and Maqsood must've done something bad, maybe forgotten their religion, what've they done to get a son like that?' And they'll definitely come up with their own theories, cos they're good at that.

I see the mini-Kurd Goran gang, who all share the same surname, coming towards me – they’re much younger than me, so what do they want? They’re kids, but they look at you like you’ve stolen their money, man.

The big boy comes over.

‘Is it true?’ he says.

‘What?’ I ask.

‘That your Ali wants to be a girl, feels like a flower? That he likes wearing girls clothes? That’s what he’s been saying round the playground! Proper proud he was, too! Showing off your mum’s jewellery! Haha!’

The mini-Kurd does a high five with his other mini-mates! Ali, the little idiot, couldn’t keep his mouth shut. One: because he’s little, two: because he trusts people, three: because he thinks people are nice. When’s he gonna learn? That jerks are just jerks, it’s in their blood. How can he trust these fucking losers? They’re going to spread it so fast they’ll be worse than fishwives. I swear all I want to do is find Ali and strangle him. Great that he feels proud, but he doesn’t have to share it with everyone.

I want to kick the Kurd in the balls, but stop myself. My mind’s racing, then fast as f, I retort: ‘Is it true?’

He looks at me confused. ‘Is what true?’

The little gangsta gives me the eye – I’ll give him what’s for, I tell you!

‘That you ... little wannabe gangsta bitch ... piss yourself, eh? Wet your bed! Every fucking night, you piss yourself. Psssss psssss!’

And then I take the best dramatic pause ever.

‘Every fucking night you get a whack from your mum! I hear you screaming every night, she’s sick to the front teeth of cleaning up after you, changing the sheets, doing the laundry. Everyone can hear the washing machine going in your flat! Thumpthumpthump, long spin! Ninety-five degree wash! The whole block shakes cos of you and your bed-wetting!’

Not a word, no gangsta look either, all gone. Lost his cojones now. I rant on, cos now I’m raging! Wave my arms around, stare him down, want to punch him, but then remember that he’s only little. People would say that Mahmoud beat up a kid. Don’t care if they round up the whole of Kurdistan and let it loose on me, those gayboys are going to leave my brother alone!

‘Muddafukka, one word to my little brother and I’ll plaster the place with posters that say you get a beating every night cos you can’t control your Kurdish dick and bladder! Now fuck off before I crush your balls! Only nursery kids wear nappies!’

He deflates instantly and runs off. Just cos you're quiet and not in everyone's face or a wannabe gangsta, they try to eat you alive. Test your limits, like.

I looked up to the eleventh floor, hope Mum didn't see anything. I scour the area for Ali, but can't see him anywhere. I'm breathing hard. My cheeks are burning.

I walk around looking for Ali, it takes awhile, but eventually I find him on a bench at the bottom of the hill, not far from the shop. Man, I swear, he looks so sad. I shout to him, but he doesn't hear, can't see me. It's like he's somewhere deep inside his head. I want to give him a bollocking, but can't. Think it's maybe best to go over and talk to him. Explain about who you can trust and who you can't trust.

He's just sitting there, staring straight ahead. I go over and hug him hard. Don't let go. I see all the tears in his eyes. I kiss him on the forehead, hug him tight again.

'Ali,' I whisper, but make myself sound hard, bite my teeth. I'm firm, but don't bullock him, it's best to show him love.

'Ali, listen up, little man, what are you thinking? You trust those guys? You mustn't tell anyone anything. Not everyone's your friend, understand?

I carry on – if he doesn't get it now, he never will, mate.

'Bro, listen to me. You mustn't go round saying things like that, man, they'll take the piss, you understand? They came over to me, they were laughing at you, calling you a pussy, a girl, saying you want to be a bitch. They were like: you're going to buy girls clothes, wear a dress that kind of thing. Ali, seriously, bro, trust your big brother. Don't go round telling people things like that. Just take it easy, I'll back you, man, but I have to know I can trust you, right? Listen up! If everyone round here gets to know, they'll be laughing at you, at me, at Mum and Dad. D'you understand?'

Ali looks at me with big, sad eyes and tries to explain. 'Bhai, I just wanted to show them how nice I look with jewellery, that's why I told him. I took some jewellery down in a bag.'

It makes me sad to hear that, but at the same time, Ali needs to know the truth, so I tell him.

'Bro, I love you loads, yeah, but not everyone loves you like that and they won't keep your secret, people think things like that are ... well, strange, funny, frightening, disgusting, even. They'll go around talking crap about you. D'you understand?'

He nods.

'Yes, they said I'll bring shame on the family, on you. That I should kill myself, that I should die.'

Feels like someone's stabbing me in the gut. It's all so innocent. Ali put on some jewellery in the playground to show the Goran gang how nice he looked! And they say stupid, unnecessary things to him, he's only a kid, they're not much older themselves, so where did they get those ideas from?

What if they took pictures of him? Everyone's got a smartphone these days, man, what if they took a picture and posted it on Snap, or Insta, what do I know, man? People love that sort of thing, any opportunity to diss someone, laugh at them, bitch about them.

All of sudden, the summer holidays are a lot more exciting. People will think: 'Yay, finally, won't rot away in the holidays now, we can bitch about Ali. Take pictures of the tranny when he's out playing girl. Muck him about, ask strange questions. Fuck with his head!'

They love all the likes, they love to see how many views they've had, man! Makes them so popular, be curious to see how long it lasts, but for the time they've got something to talk about, man, they'll talk. Like fuck. They won't stop. All the attention and entertainment they can get. Suddenly even Netflix is boring, man!

I hug Ali tight, keep my arms around him. Seriously want to throw up, my stomach hurts so much at the thought. His words are just churning over and over in my head. "Bhai, I just wanted to show them how nice I look with jewellery!"