

# Asylum Seeking

On her first day, she hung herself.

It had nearly worked too. I noted early in my stay in Sandwell Mental Health Hospital that all the rooms had sloped doorframes to prevent this very thing. This new lady jammed the cord from a bedside lamp through the gap when closing the door. Apparently, the lamp gave out first. Some piece of junk from the '70s. They removed all our bedside lamps after that.

I thought back to the first night Smokey entered our family home. Waking up to an almighty crash downstairs, I thought we were being burgled. Arthur and I had rushed down the wooden staircase to find Smokey, gorging herself on a box of cat treats spilled across the floor. Felix, whiskers already grey, sat staring at the scene while we cleaned up. He seemed torn with fury at himself for a decade of similar opportunities missed, whilst warring with a grudging respect for the upstart kitten who had managed it all by herself that very first night.

Perhaps we all felt like Felix as we were ushered back to bed by bedraggled night staff.

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It wasn't until dinnertime the next day that she emerged into the Garden Room, a wide, high-ceilinged common area. It was her coat that drew the eye first, how couldn't it? Swirls of psychedelic colour adorned the scuffed garment, zipped up to her chin. Did she intend to offend the eye, or was this all she had? Her vivid blue sari underneath competed to catch the eye. It may have looked less out of place had it been cleaned of all the old food stains and perhaps displayed amongst the multicoloured finery of a grand wedding – like the ones we used to attend when we lived in New Delhi all those years ago.

It was because of all this that I nearly missed her eyes. Heavy, beneath her brown lids, as if the weight of the entire world bore down upon them. Yet, I think she must at least have once known joy, hinted at by the faint shadow of laughter-lines at the corners, crisscrossing the deep folding ruts that drew down from her forehead.

“Hey June, is she the new one then?” asked Ben, looking up from his cards. “The one that hung herself last night?”

“Mind your own business.” I said, turning back to the game and laying some cards face down. “Three fours.”

He responded in turn. “Two fives. They talked about it in the board round this morning.”

“Aren’t you medical students bound by confidentiality guidelines?” I asked, one eyebrow raised.

Ben’s brows furrowed. “Crap, I forgot.”

“Cheat, by the way. You put down three cards. You’re being very unethical today, aren’t you?”

Ben groaned, adding the deck to his ever-growing hand. “Man, you’re too good at this. But I figured it’s not breaking confidentiality if everyone already knows? The overnight nurse said she woke up half the building.”

“Just because everyone knows about something doesn’t mean you can talk about it. And she was very quiet about it, actually. It was the night staff that had the indecency to wake everyone up. What’s her name anyway?”

The medical student looked up warily.

I rolled my eyes. “I’m sure you can at least tell me that?”

"It's Amala. She's from Pakistan."

I looked down at my cards, pretending to study them carefully, then picked an eight and a queen, laying them. "Two aces."

After a moment, Ben still hadn't said anything, so I looked up. Amala had shuffled over and was looking down at him.

"Hi, my name's Ben – I'm a third-year medical student. Is it Amala, your name, I mean?"

She continued to stare down at him. Ben shifted in his seat. "I'm here on a placement for a few weeks, doing interviews and learning about mental prob- health."

He gave me a nervous glance, and I decided to help the poor lad out. He did try, bless him.

"Take a seat, dear." I said, gesturing to my other side. "You are welcome to join in our game. Cheat is a little predictable when there's only two of you."

She turned to stare at me, her eyes seeming to see yet not see. I noticed she had a slight squint, one eye pointed disconcertingly off just behind me.

"Hiya! Welcome new person!" Brendan had come over and was standing behind her with arms open wide. I tensed a little. Despite his big smile, he was still a big lad. Brendan had arrived late Friday night; and three days later he was still coming down from a manic episode which had left him £5000 poorer. He was a little exuberant and tended to be over-familiar. I didn't know whether that was sensible around Amala.

She turned suddenly, and hissed something at him, backing up. Ben shot up from his seat, his cards abandoned on the table.

"Now Brendan, I'm not sure if Amala wants to be hugged right now." I began, but before I could continue, he had stepped forwards into an embrace.

Amala's hand shot up, slapping at the side of Brendan's head. She shrieked. Again and again, then with the other hand, flapping at him like a startled bird. He cringed backwards, covering his face with his hands, squealing.

Cold filled my belly, and I looked to Ben. He only stood, paralysed and staring. "Help, somebody help!" I shouted.

A mob of nurses descended – wrestling Amala off Brendan, his hands streaked with thin red lines where she had scratched him. They carried her away, kicking, hissing and screaming like some feral animal, her eyes rolling; the sounds of the struggle fading as they left.

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You could always tell the visitors, when they came. Perched, like anxious rabbits on the edge of their seats, grins fixed and eyes darting nervously around the room. Projecting an air of sanity. Just in case they might be accidentally mistaken for residents, sedated and dragged away. Emily was better than most. She knew how to look comfortable in here, but I could see the subtle signs. A slightly increased pace to her speech. Her handbag stayed firmly tucked into her shoulder, her hand clamping it in place. The other clutched a small cup of tea in cheap green porcelain like a shield.

"Well mum, I'd best be off." she said, standing up. "I need to pick up the kids from Linda's."

"So soon? You've only been here –" I looked at my watch, breathing out slowly like that psychologist had told me to, as if doing so could gently release the spike that had been driven into my heart. "– ten minutes. And you missed coming on Tuesday too. It's Thursday now, and you and Paul said you had something on at the weekend, so it won't be next week till I see you again?"

Emily shifted uncomfortably onto one leg, the way she had done since she was a child, as if denying there were sweets hidden under the bed when I had already found them.

I raised my cup of tea and took a small sip. "You could always bring them here you know."

Emily looked at me as if I were mad. I felt my mouth twitch in the hint of a smile at my own unintentional joke. She glanced furtively around the Garden Room, then spoke in a whisper so harsh she may as well have yelled it.

"Don't be ridiculous, Mum. I can't bring the kids in here. It's not safe. Besides, they think you're just on holiday. It would be cruel if they knew you were in here. Neither of us would want them to see you like this."

A dozen half-thought responses, some angry and bitter, some clever and rationale, went through my mind, but I had trouble catching any of them. Perhaps if it had been morning, but the 5pm meds were kicking in and my brain was fuzzy and slow. "Just tell them I love them then."

"Mm." Emily was looking down at her phone. "Oh, and I've got a call from the solicitor today asking when we can arrange a meeting. I said you were still admitted, but should be out next week?"

Admitted. Seems that weaselly-eyed solicitor was about the only person Emily was able to admit my situation to.

"Maybe. I've got a meeting with the consultant on Monday."

"Well, if you could be out soon. I want to get the finances sorted. I read that people with... you know, your condition, can go on horrible spending sprees and lose lots of money."

"My manic episodes are few and far between Emily. More's the pity. And when they do happen it's my sleep, eating and what I wear that's most affected. The most I've spent during one of those was £60 on that purple hair dye you disliked."

“We still need to make sure everything is safe, just in case. Just think about what’s being left for the kids. Anyway, I really must go. Love you, Mum.”

“Love you too, Emily.”

Emily swept up and left. The room felt suddenly empty and hollow. I wish I’d said something more, made her stay a bit longer, even if we argued. Just for some kind of connection.

I spotted Amala hunched in a corner alone, still in her garish coat with neon sari underneath. She was rocking slightly. Her lips were moving. Perhaps she was talking to herself, but I couldn’t hear the words. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Brendan had taken a seat at the opposite corner of the room, talking to his latest girlfriend. I didn’t recognise her, and I wondered how he had managed to acquire a new one since Sunday when the last one came visiting. He glared so fiercely towards Amala, it gave me no doubt as to the topic of their conversation.

I got up, wincing as a shooting pain ran down the back of my leg, then hobbled stiffly over. My heart raced. A small voice in the back of my mind, the voice of reason I presumed, asked what I was playing at. But the rational part of me had been in charge so far in life, and look where that had ended up. So, I figured I would try something else.

“Hello, Amala.” I said. “My name is June. May I sit down?”

She looked up, eyes blank, one looking slightly beyond. It was the same look she had when I had spoken to her the other day. A thought occurred to me.

“Namaste, meraa Naam joon hai. Kya main yahaan Baith SakTii huun?” The same phrase in Hindi.

Something cleared in her eyes and they grew suddenly sharp with intelligence and life. She bowed her head solemnly.

“Good evening, June. My name is Amala. You speak Hindi?”

“Yes, I lived in New Delhi. Some time ago now, when the children were very small. My husband had a job there, working in construction. I helped teach English in a school, but we didn’t—“

Amala’s eyes clouded over again. She put up a frail hand. “Please, you must speak more slowly. My first language is Punjabi, and my second is Urdu. I understand most of what you say, but slowly.”

I was rusty. I hadn’t practiced for years and the words felt unfamiliar as my mouth and tongue tried to remember how to form them.

“You are from Punjab?” I asked, speaking more slowly. I remembered an old greeting I had once been taught, local to the Punjab region: “o bole So Nihaal, Sat srii akaal.” *Blessed is the person who says, God is Truth.*

She smiled, her mouth brilliant white and sending dark wrinkles of joy across her face. There was something tremendously warm and open about it, and I felt my earlier fears draining away. She bowed her head again, speaking the reply.

“Sat srii akaal.”

“I saw your lips moving. I wondered if you were alright?” I don’t know why I asked it, with all the things we could have spoken of. It was probably that damn medication again, slowing my mind.

“I was praying to God that he would deliver me.”

“Oh.” I replied. I managed to stop myself from asking ‘How’s that going for you?’. My mind wasn’t so befuddled that it let through every rogue thought or impulse. I must have been silent for a moment, because she spoke again.

“I saw the woman with you. Your daughter?”

I nodded, looking towards the door. Part of me still hoped she would come back through it with Peter and Annie, tell me how she changed her mind in the car.

“She has kind eyes. But also, she seems to have a stubborn tongue?” Amala followed my eyes, pointing at the exit. Despite the thoughtfulness of the words, there was something off-putting about her pointing, like when I tried to meet her squint. Like she was seeing something I couldn’t. “My daughter is the same.”

She coughed, raising a fist to her mouth. The movement tipped the front of her coat forward, and I glimpsed a thick, angry red line around her neck for just a moment before her coat shifted back into place.

“Your family are not ashamed. They visit. Mine say I have a demon. Something I have done.”

I grimaced, feeling my grip tighten on my tea. “My family are ashamed alright – it just looks different to them. They make excuses. Say they are busy. Tell their friends I went for a three-month holiday to Spain.”

“They believe that? Your friends?”

I took another fierce sip of tea. “My neighbour, Mrs Ainsfield will believe anything. You should see her with politics.”

“Maybe I do have a demon.” said Amala. I gave her a wary sidelong glance, but nothing seemed to have changed in her demeanour. “I hear the voices. When I’m alone most of the time. Sometimes when I’m around my husband, telling me to kill him.”

“Has this been going on a while?” I said. I found myself vowing never to mock Ben again, at least not to his face, for the awkward questions and phrases he asked during our little chats



in the Family room. How is one supposed to respond in these situations? Talk about my own demons?

Amala met my eyes. "It started when they burnt my house to the ground with my son inside."

I stiffened, my body reacting before my mind grasped the meaning of her words.

"They made me watch... My husband got Sria and I away. He had a cousin here in England. He thought to protect us. He told me the voices would go away once we left. I prayed he would be right. When we arrived, and the voices carried on, he said perhaps it was something I had done, perhaps I had a chance to stop them but was too afraid."

I did not know what to say, what to think. I wanted her to stop, to stop saying it so matter-of-factly and to tell me it was a delusion, a lie. Having instigated the question, I unwittingly stepped into Amala's raw and vulnerable existence. What if had been me, in her shoes? Images flashed unbidden to my mind of a burning house, Emily inside, screaming. I closed my eyes tight, trying to force the nightmare away.

"That sounds horrible, dear. What a thing to go through." I heard the words escape my lips, like a reflex. I cringed inwardly and took another sip of tea.

Amala wobbled her head side to side, signaling agreement. "I must get back to praying now."

She bowed her head and continued moving her lips soundlessly.

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“Did you bring any cards?”

Ben shook his head.

“Bloody kid.” I rolled my eyes.

“Connect four?”

He had the decency to blush when I stared at him.

“How about we carry on that interview thing you keep bothering me about? I tell you all my darkest secrets, you nod along and we all pretend you are learning something instead of playing games, eating biscuits and bugging off home at lunchtime each day.”

“Well, I...” he said, stumbling over his words. “I’m not sure, that is to say –”

“I’m only offering this now.”

“I have to be in the seat by the door again.” he said, wincing. “I’ve been told that after the Amala incident –”

“In case I snap and start mauling you to death?” I asked, taking a sip of my tea to hide my smile. I enjoyed this more than I should have done. Perhaps I should have felt guilty about it.

I got up from the table, stifling a curse as my leg throbbed with a lance of white-hot pain, then limped to the Family room. It was cool and slightly musty inside. A pair of long, battered sofas sat opposite each other. A bland picture of a fruit bowl hung on one wall, and a little natural light shone in through a small, narrow window high up on my right.

I pointed as I entered. “The only thing they need to do to make this place feel more like a prison is put some bars on that.”

He gave me a guarded glance as we sat down. “How do you know I’m not timetabled to be in ‘til lunchtime each day.”

“The girl here before you stayed until five every day. I’m guessing the medical curriculum hasn’t changed in the space of a few weeks?”

He grimaced.

“I won’t tell; I don’t care one way or another. She was far nosier than you anyway.”

He seemed to relax at that, and took out his notebook. “Do you mind if I write you up for my case study?”

“I’m that interesting, eh?” I asked, my lips curling slightly in amusement.

“Well, it’s just interesting. In my head, people with bipolar have lots of manic episodes where they do crazy stuff – sorry –” he looked up, worried. I rolled my eyes. Ben seemed to have some strange hang up over certain words.

“Everybody does crazy stuff, Ben. You haven’t offended me. Carry on.”

“Yeah, well, but you have really bad depressive episodes, with occasional manic episodes, so that’s interesting. Also, before I came here, I imagined that people with mania and schizophrenia and stuff would all be really weird to talk to, but you’re just really normal. Like, you remind me of my Grandma.”

“If your Grandma was a slight, grey haired white woman and not Jamaican?” Ben had showed me a picture of his grandparents the previous week.

“Even Amala. She didn’t talk much, but she seemed really nice, which I didn’t expect after what happened with Brendan.”

“You know she doesn’t speak any English?”

“Yeah, just a couple of words. But you’ve been speaking to her right?”

“Hindi and Urdu crossover enough to be understandable.” I said, somewhat guardedly. I didn’t know where he was going with all this.

“What’s her story then? You guys seem to get on well each time I see you chatting.”

“Well, I’m not sure how much I’m bound by confidentiality.” I said meaningfully, looking at him over the rim of my glasses. “But I have spent some time with her this last week, yes. She seems to have opened up to me, I expect partly because I speak the language and partly because I haven’t tried to poke her with any sedatives yet.”

In truth, I had been forcing myself to speak to Amala daily. There was something unpredictable about her, and that scared me. It was the same with a lot of the patients who came here after acute psychosis. They didn’t react the same way everyone else did. But she was all alone, even in here, trapped by language. And god, I knew what that was like. So, I made sure to spend some time with her each day.

“Can I also ask something, and if this is a bit too personal, just let me know?” said Ben, looking up at the window behind me, his fingers absent-mindedly clicking the pen.

“I’ll let you know.” I replied. Though if anything was more personal than dredging up sixty-eight years of regrets, failures and sunny golden days forever lost, I would be surprised.

“When you came in here just now, you talked about this place being a prison. But I spoke to the consultant, and he said that you have asked to delay your discharge twice now. So, I was wondering why you feel this place is a prison if you don’t want to leave?”

I nodded slowly. Several seconds ticked by before I replied. "I think that I will need to go back to my room and take a lie down, I'm afraid. These old bones are bothering me all sorts today. Would you be kind enough to get the door for me?"

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"Are you ready to face your fears?"

Dr. Achebe had kind eyes, even if his face did look like a squashed prune. I looked out the window; the small ornamental garden appeared cold and listless under the thick grey blanket of cloud that crushed the sky beyond.

"Not sure if fear comes into it." I said, still looking out. "Can you be afraid of something so vast you can't even comprehend it?"

He gave a small laugh, his gaze following mine outside. "I didn't take you for a philosopher, June."

"I spoke to Ben today. He asked me the same question, more or less."

Dr. Achebe sat back in his chair, folding his fingers in his lap. He nodded for me to continue.

"Don't get me wrong, doctor –"

"It's Maurice, as always." he interrupted gently.

"I don't like it here. But it's steady. It's known. I can understand it, and through that, I suppose make a bit more sense of myself. There's nothing that reminds me of Arthur around here. It makes it easier."

Dr. Achebe raised his eyebrows expectantly, waiting for me to finish.

"Maybe I'll give it another go."

“Tomorrow?”

I sighed, setting my tea down. “Tomorrow.”

He nodded, as if I had made some excellent point in conversation. It’s as I said. He had kind eyes, Dr. Achebe.

“Just so you know, I’m discharging Amala in a couple of days too.”

“You can’t do that.” I looked at him sharply, as if scolding one of my old pupils.

“It’s her choice actually. She has capacity, she’s complying well with medications. With you gone, there’s no one else to speak to her apart from the interpreter. I’ve arranged for daily visits from the community team.”

“I see where Ben’s been getting his confidentiality issues.”

He waved his hand at me in a shooing motion, his laugh like a rippling brook. “Don’t you do your school teacher routine again, Miss June. It reminds me too much of the boarding school of my youth. Amala asked me to let you know, in fact. And on that note, I don’t normally suggest things like this, but I’ve seen you two getting on in the Garden Room. She doesn’t have much family or friends – and I thought you may want to know just in case you wanted to visit her. It sounds like she’s offered you an open invitation. It may be good for you both.”

“I’ll think about it.” I replied.

“So June, I’ll ask again and I want a proper answer this time. Are you ready to face your fears out in the world?” he leaned forwards. “Maybe they will happen. Maybe you will still rise above them.”

“Maybe I won’t.” When it came out of my mouth it sounded like a challenge, but I wondered whether I meant it.

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Mrs Ainsfield poked her head out her door as I fumbled with my keys. She was carrying a watering can and trowel — her lawn looked manicured, as usual.

“Ooh June! You’re back, how lovely! It has been quiet. How was Spain?”

I managed to open the door without glancing her way.

“Gorgeous.” I said, slamming it shut behind me.

I leaned against it; my eyes closed for a while. The hallway was grey and silent and musty. Like entering the tomb of my former life. I pottered about for half an hour, switching things on, trying to keep busy. My leg ached, but that was some comfort, knowing I felt something, somewhere.

When I was done, I sat, alone in the living room. My eyes found their way to the slightest indent still left in the worn fabric on the chair opposite. Unable to stop myself, leaning just too far over the edge of a cliff. The clock ticked in the hallway. The sound of silence began to grow loud, the space between beats demanding attention. Relentlessly dragging time forwards, step after inescapable step.

When the phone finally rang, I was roused as if from a deep sleep. It seemed to come from far away at first, the sound echoing around the old house, creeping from all its shadowy corners. Emily’s voice buzzed through the handset.

“Hi Mum, did you get home alright?”

“I’m here. The ambulance dropped me off this morning.” I said, one hand rubbing my eyes. They felt sore and salty. My mouth was dry. I needed a drink of water. Yet another helpful reminder that the meds were apparently working.

“Oh good, have you been keeping yourself busy?” She sounded bright and chirpy. The guardedness that had hung around the edge of her words was gone.

“Yes.” I said.

“Lots to do around the house I imagine. You’ve always been one to keep a clean home. Shame I inherited Dad’s genes on that one.”

A pause hung in the air. I wanted to agree, to make some acerbic joke and hear her laugh. Nothing came. Emily seemed to sense it too, her tone still bright, rapid, filling in the silence.

“Well, now you’re back, I was thinking I could bring around the kids tomorrow after school. They’re dying to see you, and now you’re better, it will be something to look forward to.”

I thought about Amala. I had her address, written in her curling, shaky script, folded up in my pocket. Emily filled the silence again.

“I think this can be a new leaf for you, a new lease of life. They’ve sorted out your medications, you’ve had some time to recover and if they say you’re well enough to go home, well you’ve got to take confidence in that haven’t you? They are doctors after all. You should think about getting a new cat again, just for some company around the house.”

“I’ll see you and the kids tomorrow, Emily.”

“Ok Mum, we’ll be around about four.”

“I love you, Emily”

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On her first day, she hung herself.

I found her in the hallway. She had fastened the rope to a banister, tied it tight. I thought then about how I had seen dead bodies before, first as a nurse, later again when we lived in India. So it distressed me less than I thought it should. I tried to lift her, but my leg nearly gave way in pain. I realised then I was in shock. I wasn't thinking straight. Having seen dead bodies before didn't prepare me better for seeing Amala. I hobbled to the kitchen, switching on a stained kettle and pulling two mugs out of an otherwise bare cupboard before I realised I should replace one. My limbs seemed to be on auto-pilot.

I forced myself to stop, to think. I should call an ambulance.

Ten minutes later, I had poured myself a cup of tea. My hands were shaking now. I spilt a lot of water on the table top.

There was a knock at the door. I saw blue lights strobing the living room. As I passed through the hallway, I noticed something on the floor by her feet. Bending down, I realised it was a battered old bible, laid open. The left side of the page was written in a vaguely familiar script I thought might be Urdu, the right side in English. Probably some relic from a missionary age in the past. A line on the left was underlined, and there seemed to be a similarly placed line in English underlined too.

'Come to me, all who are weary and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.'

Was this god's deliverance then? Another knock came from the door, and I realised my mind was still working slowly. I needed to let the ambulance in.

I opened the door. Two grim paramedics waited outside with a stretcher, their frowns hardening when they peered over my shoulder.

"I'm sorry for your loss." said the more senior-looking of the two. "Were you her next of kin?"

“No, just a friend.” I said. The word stopped me for a moment. The paramedic put a gentle hand on my shoulder.

“I need to go, my grandchildren, they’ll be here soon. There, I mean, home. I need to go.”

“Don’t you worry about this. The police will be here soon, they’ll sort everything out and we’ll deal with your friend.”

I think they may have said something else, but I was already out the door, heading towards the bus stop. I remembered the cup of tea, left on the side with all the spilled water. I wondered who would clear that up now.

I thought about Dr. Achebe. He had been wrong about Amala. Wrong to send her home. Did that mean he would be wrong about me? I remembered our last conversation. Maybe he would. Maybe he wouldn’t.