

The Only Language She Didn't Understand

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I can still see her eyes. So black. So deep.

The bouncer looks at me, seeing my short hair, my pale skin, my tailored suit, and he lets me in. I look the part. I don't feel the part, though. I have to stop shaking. I feel the phone in my left trouser pocket. I feel the phone in my outside jacket pocket. It's all set. Keep it together.

I'm in a packed hall. Hadn't expected there to be so many of them. People are talking to me, and I answer, trying to spout the rubbish I think they expect. I brush my hand casually over my smartwatch, starting my jacket phone recording. I glance down, even though I shouldn't, to check it's lined up. It is. I look away and try to calm down. Record and get out. That's all I need to do.

Such dark eyes. Such a wicked way of raising an eyebrow to make clear she was joking.

The crowd gets louder and restless, and then the speaker arrives. He looks like a bouncer too, with his oversized suit and his shaved head. He looks around the crowd, watching as the place quiets down.

'I'm glad to see so many good Englishmen and women in here today,' he begins, 'not like all the foreigners I had to get through to get here.'

There's clapping and whooping. I hate it. I want to run, but I can see her eyes, willing me to stay. I fight back a tear. Tears would be weakness to this lot.

‘It’s not like we’re racist. But this country’s full. I’m sickened to see you hardworking decent people, with your families, unable to get jobs, buy houses, alongside this swarm of scroungers who shouldn’t even be here. They don’t belong. They’ve got their ways, and that’s fine, but they should have them in their own countries.’ He looks around, smiling – almost friendly if you weren’t hearing his words. ‘They don’t want to compromise with us, so why should we compromise with them? They want to change our way of life. Do you want to know what happened when I went about perfectly lawful campaigning in your town last month?’

There’s a shout of ‘tell us’ which feels planned. Scripted maybe. Am I the only one without the script? I look round, turning a little so my pocket points around the crowd. I don’t know which of them it was – I’m not even certain that they’ll be here at all. Or indeed that I’ll somehow know them. I need to capture as many faces as I can. I can go through the video later. When I get out of here.

‘There I was, walking through a good English street distributing information, telling people the truth, a pile of leaflets in my hand, and one of their women – well, if I can call them women when they have to walk five steps behind...’

I remember her face, so beautiful, so perfect, framed by her dark hair. I can see it. I can see that black dress she wore to the party, the figure-hugging one. I couldn’t help but put my arm round her waist, pulling her towards me. I told her how beautiful she was. She smiled and kissed me. I’ve never been happier. I don’t think I’ll ever feel that way again.

The voice continues, and I drag myself back to the room.

‘...and hide their faces so they can claim benefits and no one can check. They’re stealing from hardworking decent families. Like yours.’

She wore a headscarf when she went home. Her father was old, and she didn’t want to have the argument with him. She’d told her mother. I’d met her mother. I liked her. Her mother always wore a headscarf when she visited. I remember her tears, the day after Sabi died. I remember how she reached out and held my hand as I cried. I wept in front of her. She stared at me, holding something in, maybe a lifetime of holding things in. A lifetime of hope for her daughter. Dashed on the street.

‘...plus they all have a dozen children, just so they can get more benefits...’

We'd planned a family. We'd planned two weddings – one for each of our traditions – but she still had to speak to her father, and she hadn't wanted to yet. She was scared of that, which was all that held us back. We sat on a park bench by a children's playground and her eyes, looking at the children playing. She wanted children. She had so much love in her I wouldn't have been enough to love. We would have had beautiful children. Her looks. Her brain. Her wicked sense of humour. Even a small fragment of that would have made wondrous human beings.

'...until this one, she stood in my way and shouted, right in my face, that I was inciting hatred. Me! She tried to grab the leaflets off me, but I wasn't having that, so I pushed her...'

I look up. My eyes are pulled to him. Was it? The police said she had a leaflet in her hand when they found her. That's why I'm here.

'She got up and tried to hit me, stupid woman, and said something in that language they speak...'

English. That's what it was. Better than you speak it. And she could speak four more.

'You can't let them get away with that. It's our bloody country, not theirs. So I gave her a bit of a slap, the way the police used to do when I was a lad. When this country was great.'

A bit of a slap? I saw her, after. No, surely this can't be you. I thought it might be one of these hate-mongers, but the main man himself?

'She fell, and you know what? They're scared once you stand up to them. Once you stop the bloody political correctness brigade from interfering. They're bloody scared then. I ripped that stupid scarf off her.'

Oh God. It is him. I'm trying to breathe. Her headscarf had been ripped away.

'And then I carried on with my leaflets. As is my legal right.'

There's no air in here. My finger goes to my smartwatch. I press stop, and then start recording again, so the first video will save and upload. It has to upload. I've already sent my friends the link to where it'll be. Oh God, it's him. He's the one that pushed her to the ground, ripped off her scarf so hard it cut her neck, and then... well, she'd been repeatedly kicked.

'Now, if people ask what we're doing campaigning, we're trying

to persuade our fellow countrymen to stand up to them. Make them clear they're not welcome. And if that takes boots – on the ground – well, all the better.' He laughs again.

I want to collapse. I want to cry. I want to get out of here.

I stop and start the video again, and then step back. One step, then another. Past an old man – maybe he's only hearing the fear, the hope that a country he misremembers somehow exists. Past a young woman, mouth hanging open, breathing in the hatred. Past a man in a suit, like mine. Well dressed. Businessman, probably.

I'm not far from the door. I could turn and run, but I know the bouncer's there, and I shouldn't draw any attention. I look at the time, setting up an 'I need to be out of here' kind of excuse. Turning, I take a single step and bump into someone. He's not a skinhead. He's well-dressed. He's got a face I recognise.

A column, in the local rag. Writes opinion pieces. What's he doing in a place like this?

'Wait a minute,' he says, and puts his hand on my shoulder. 'I recognise your face.'

Oh please, no. No. He did the report into her death. He came round. I showed him the picture of us in Malta, sitting in a café watching the world go by as we were stranded by that volcano. He was in my house.

'Sorry,' I say, 'I have to go.'

'Oi Baz!' he shouts. 'This one!'

The crowd goes quiet and looks round.

The door is ten feet away. A few steps, but the bouncer's blocking the exit. He's standing staring at me. Everyone's staring at me. I put my hand in my pocket and press the button on my other phone. The app I wrote kicks in. It's calling. I need time.

'I have to go,' I say, again.

'Not so fast.'

The large man from the stage – Baz – comes down and looks at me.

'What's this one then?'

'That raghead you hit,' says the journalist, lowering his voice a little. 'She was this bloke's girlfriend. He's not one of us.'

So many men fancied her, and so many fell for those eyes. But the way we orbited each other's worlds for months before finally spending time

together, the way she slowly opened up to me – me! – and the times we spent together, planning our lives, until one stupid bigoted man pushed her to the ground, kicked her, stamped on her head, and left her to bleed to death... left her to bleed to death in the gutter.

He's standing in front of me. He says something. I know now. It was him. I'm staring into the eyes of her killer. If I was stronger, and not surrounded by his followers...

One reaches forward and grabs the phone from my top pocket. 'He's been recording.'

I deny it, but I know from my voice they'll not believe me. One drops the phone and stamps on it. I hope the upload completed in time. Her face comes to me, and tells me to be strong. For her. I won't beg. I won't let them have that. My other phone is still working. I only need time. Time I now don't have.

'You killed Sabi,' I say, trying to stop my hands shaking. 'You killed the most beautiful woman who ever walked this planet. The kindest, the...'

and my guts collapse as someone punches me.

I fall, and my eyes shut. I feel more kicks. I feel pain, but she comes to me again. She's holding my hand, and telling me to let the pain wash over me. She'll stay with me. I've done what I can.

Even though I can't see them I recognise their voices as they take turns giving their guilty pleas. The policewoman looking after me asks if I want to stay – she's noticed I'm shaking – but I have to. For Sabi. I still picture her face, more so since I lost my eyesight. I've been told I will walk again. They said I'm lucky to be alive.

As the sentences are read out, I don't feel what I was hoping to. I feel numb, with a grim sense of satisfaction. Of having completed a job.

I certainly don't feel lucky.