

Park Life by Katharine D'Souza

Chapter One

CRAIG

That went well. I had an answer for every question. Firm handshakes, smiles all round – this job will be mine. I am the business.

I was last into the room. I know I made a good impression. So why haven't they offered me the job yet? I've been here, putting in the hours despite the stress of the day, but no call has come to ask me back to the boardroom, the boss hasn't dropped by my desk to have a word. What could possibly delay their decision?

'Not going home today?' asks Gav. He shrugs into his jacket, pats a couple of pockets to locate his phone and keys. 'Thought you might fancy a beer on the way out.'

'Got to see it through, haven't I? Besides, Amisha's still here.'

Gav looks over his shoulder. 'Nope, she's gone.'

I jump up, knocking papers from my desk to check if he's right. He can't produce an accurate report on a balance sheet, let alone identify a colleague at fifty paces. He's right though. The far side of the open plan office is deserted. As I watch, the motion sensor controlled lighting dims meaning no-one's moved there for the last ten minutes. Ten minutes in which Amisha either went home or was welcomed into the boardroom.

I can't have lost to a girl.

She must have gone home. Must have. I want this promotion so much I will win it by pure stamina and I'll throttle Gav if he suggests that's not the case.

'Hmm,' he says. 'She never leaves before us, does she?'

~

SUSAN

I used to be a nice person: someone who never had a bad word to say about anyone and always looked on the bright side. Of course, it was often an act and everything changes. These days I'm all new, but perhaps not improved. Although, now I'm in my forties, it may be too late to realise that life's a game and, if anyone knew the rules, nobody's playing by them. It seems that everyone cheats, moves the goalposts, tells you it's a marathon when it turns out to be a sprint.

I mean, 'til death do us part' was supposed to last forever. I dreamt it would.

Dreams are one thing though, reality quite another. So, now I'm breaking the rules, and why shouldn't I? I do wonder one thing though: does everyone else feel this guilty?

It's taken me less than twenty four hours to unpack. I'm alone in this strange space. The front door opens straight into the main room where the kitchenette squeezes into a corner. The bedroom is too small for the double bed crammed into it; although what do I need a double for anyway? I have a bathroom. Well, shower-cubicle room doesn't sound right even if it is more accurate. It's a bijou apartment crammed into what used to be a storage depot – a large space securing items of value within its red brick walls now converted to a tiny space to hold me.

The flat isn't that bad. It's just not what I've been used to. The first time I sat on the economically thin foam cushions of the grey sofa, trying not to identify the stains left by the previous tenant, I cried so hard it felt like a scream.

~

CRAIG

Right now all I want is to be at home. Not on a bus stuck in traffic with some other bugger crammed in my personal space. This entire day has been total shit. I deserved that job; proved myself, worked hard for it. Not enough though, is it? Because I'm not a woman and that's who they wanted: a pretty face to tick the diversity box. Not a white man. Not me. Even though I've been there longer, pulled more clients in, made more dosh.

They claimed she interviewed better than me. Huh, that's a joke. Like her timid, squeaky voice sounds like a Marketing Exec. Yeah, she's a looker, but interview better than me? No way. I ace that stuff and I've more experience. But Amisha gets the promotion, and me? I just get to carry on.

There must be some kind of rule about how many people the driver's supposed to let on the bus. But here he goes, picking up more passengers and holding up the traffic. It's standing room only and no-one's going to give up their seat to this grandad shuffling down the aisle. Not the fat woman with her head stuck in a magazine, not the shaved head jerk plugged in to his iPod. Guess it's down to me then. At least the old guy says 'Thank you,' as he takes my seat. Like that'll make up for having to let smelly people squeeze past me to get off. Doesn't anyone wash their clothes?

I need a beer. And to take off these fucking uncomfortable shoes. I don't have pointy feet. What made me think pointy shoes were a good idea? Can't even go out and

get pissed tonight. No, because I've got a meeting with the boss tomorrow morning. Even though they reckon I'm not as good as Amisha, he wants my input.

Guess I'll stay in. There's beer in the fridge. I'll roll myself a joint, order a pizza and slam some sounds on. Hope the new woman next door isn't going to be the noise police. Still can't believe Davo left. OK, he wasn't the perfect neighbour, but he was pretty damn close. Always plenty of booze and weed and girls loved him. Always got lucky on a night out with him. But now the flukey shit's in London 'cos his firm thought he was promising enough to transfer. Tell that to my lot. If Davo's promising, I'm the fucking Messiah.

This driver is doing my head in. It's like he doesn't want to get there. They're all the same. Fucking Formula One when you're early; tortoise speed when you just want to get home after the day from hell. Like he'd know anything about pressure at work – sat there in his perspex box, pretending he can't speak English when anyone tries to ask something. If this guy's setting the standard, you don't even need to be able to drive to get the job.

The price of parking in this city is a sick joke. Forcing me to put up with this bastard bus every day. Twice a day. And it's always full, always got a random empty Lucozade bottle rolling around the floor, and today some wanker's playing bhangra on his mobile. No one else wants to listen to crap music on the bus. Not at eight am. Not at six pm. Not as amplified by Nokia. Not ever.

But I can't say anything. Oh, no. He'd take me for a racist. So I can't say, 'Look mate, it's nothing to do with the colour of your fucking skin, or what mosque or temple you go to. This is a public space and it's already hell on earth without you giving me some soundtrack that makes it a horror film as interpreted by fucking Bollywood.'

No. I can't say that. I don't want to get stabbed.

Almost there now; nearly at the flat. First thing I'll do is get that beer out the fridge. Feel the shape of the bottle snug in my hand, condensation running clear tracks down frosted glass. Hear the fizz as I flip the lid off. Then drink. Drink deep. Gulp after gulp of that sharp, cold, sanity-saving nectar. I'll crash in my chair, kick off these damn shoes and stick on the PlayStation.

They should give you a double decker as one of the rides on Gran Turismo. I'd thrash it round the circuit, show this bastard driver how it's done. Knowing my luck they'd give it the fucking Bhangra soundtrack.

I'll stick to Pro Ev Soccer tonight. A couple of beers. Pizza. Or maybe a kebab from across the road. Then, I suppose, I'll have to ring mum and tell her I didn't get the job.

~

SUSAN

I smiled at the young man from next door as we crossed on the stairs this morning. He said 'Hello' but frowned and dashed off. This place seems so cold and anonymous. Late into last night there were thumps and sounds of dragging across the floor coming from upstairs.

My first task today was to arrange my possessions. I brought several boxes with me, all taped and labelled: kitchen, bathroom, living room. Even though I left home in a storm of resentment, the carefully laid plan saw me through with a minimum of fuss.

Now there's a good summary of my life so far: a minimum of fuss. Until recently, anyway.

One box gave me a problem, the only one I hadn't labelled with a destination. You could pin labels on the contents: sentimental, nostalgia, keepsakes. But where do they belong? Hidden at the back of a cupboard? Tucked under the bed? Out on show and gathering dust? I'm not sure reminders of the past belong in my new life, but I couldn't throw them away. Not yet.

I've heard of people who write diaries every day. What do they find to say in them? Some days are so dull, so dreary and full of humdrum pointlessness. I never wrote a diary but do like to record things. Well, I did. When things happened. In recent years there hasn't been much worth noting; until now.

I put the box on top of the wardrobe, but took out the book. It's an old school exercise book probably intended for a much more important purpose. It may have been issued to me for the noting of chemical formulae, or to record the dates of important historical happenings.

I ambushed it, press-ganged it into recording events of staggeringly minor significance, details only of relevance to me. It's pale blue, A4 size with thin card covers. Faint ruled. Blue biro is the ink of choice throughout with occasional forays into black or pencil. I was too shy to write the title on the cover and even left the first page blank to deter any casual, uninvited readers. It looks so insignificant. This is the record of my formative events between the ages of thirteen and twenty. I wish I'd splashed out on fancy stationery rather than using stolen school supplies.

In my mind it's called 'The Book of Experience', and I'm going to read it to see if I can spot where I went wrong; what I should have done differently. And I'll write in it. Because I'm changing and one day I might want to work out how.

~

It didn't seem as though we'd talked in weeks. Well, of course we'd talked:

'What's for dinner?'

'Have you put the bins out?'

'What time's that programme on TV?'

We hadn't talked about anything important and, now I've no one to talk to, I wonder if there is anything important anymore and, if there isn't, when did it go quiet?

'Susan!' he shouted as I walked away.

Well he would: it is my name, I was refusing to look at him and Pete has always been prone to aggression. He called it assertiveness of course and told me I could use more of it. I told him he could use a more pleasant tone of voice when he talks to people.

OK, so I didn't. I'm not assertive enough.

But I did leave. After making my plans, I packed while he was at golf, the man finished loading the van as Pete got back, and I walked away down the block paved drive while he stood his ground in the uPVC porch. How could I?

My marriage would have been described as happy if you only talked about the first few years. He was wonderful, my Pete. Tall, not ugly even if not quite handsome, popular, gainfully employed. What more could a woman want?

It was more a case of 'what more could a girl want?' of course. At only eighteen, and a young eighteen at that, I was naïve and dazzled by the confident, fifteen years older, Pete. I worked in the pub he drank in where I washed glasses as well as wearing them and felt a thrill whenever this charismatic leader of the pack tossed a comment my way.

It was my only proper job; I've looked it up in 'The Book'. A typical entry I think:

My first job - 1986

Started my first job today and can't believe how grown up I feel. Was so nervous, wanted it to go well, didn't know what to say, hoped people would be nice to me, didn't know what to wear. It was all OK though. I started at six and it was pretty quiet so they showed me what's where and how to work the till, then at six twenty I pulled my first pint. Messed it up with a huge head frothing over the side and people laughed, but I've got the hang of it now. Wednesday night, so not too busy. Shattered though, need a lie in tomorrow.

Not exactly a thrilling read, and that's me recording something important.

Reading it revived the memory. The pub was an ancient building, all fireplaces and stone lintels, wooden floors and brass beer pumps. My job began in the summer holidays and they kept me on at weekends when college started. So I always treated it as a casual thing, a pocket-money job. Now I'm shocked it's the only job I've had, the only work I ever earned a wage for. My contribution to the economy didn't exactly make waves. Well, Pete came along and said wasn't it great, that I didn't need to work now he looked after me? Weren't we the lucky ones, able to afford for me to stay home?

I don't think I was fortunate in the end. I never finished that college course; it's not easy when you're pregnant. Then, through the nineties I devoured magazine articles about women who were stressed out trying to have it all: the home, the career, the babies. It felt as if I'd made the right choice because I had the best bit: the beautiful home, the adorable baby. Now though, the adorable baby is eighteen (and not naïve like his mother at that age, worldly wise, self assured, with no need of his mum anymore) and the beautiful home felt more like a prison with each day I worked in it. I could have done more. Now I want to do more.

Pete wouldn't listen when I said I wanted a job ('But we don't need the money') or go back to college ('What would you need a qualification for? Waste of time'). Pete always thought he knew best. Bit like my friend, Jo, in that respect. But now I do need the money. It's time to join the ranks of the employed.

Of course, there aren't all that many jobs around and I'm qualified for nothing. Well, I'm good at telling people what they want to hear. I can cook and clean. I can devise a secret plan and carry it out. So, my options are what? Housekeeper or undercover agent?

I have, at least, made a start with my escape to here but the rest of the world has already arrived. I went to the parade of little shops across the road last night; they all stay open late. With the light from neon signs, illuminated adverts and blazing windows, the cluttered street is as brightly lit as in daylight. The general store sells food from Poland or Pakistan. The DVD rental place supplies films from Hollywood or Bollywood. The chip shop seems to be Chinese, but sells Turkish kebabs. The windows of the mobile phone shop are plastered with signs bearing phrases I don't recognise as English.

The items available confused me so I bought tea bags, cereal and milk and came home. Home is what I'll have to call it I suppose. Bye-bye sleepy, country town; hello inner city Birmingham.

I don't know this city and it scares me. It's so big, so crowded, so capable of swallowing me without a trace. Which is why I came here. Which now fills me with terror.

Double decker buses plastered with adverts rumble along the road every few minutes. I'll be a little bit brave and catch one towards the suburbs; that might be less daunting than the city centre. I'll travel to the next place that looks interesting and see if I can find an opportunity. It's spring – the time for new beginnings. Turning the clock back is not an option.

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