



'HILARIOUS'
STYLIST

'DAMN FUNNY'
MATT HAIG

'WEIRD AND WONDERFUL'
JENNY OFFILL

'BUZZING WITH
STREETWISE SMARTS'
INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

'HIGHLY ENJOYABLE
AND SALUTARY'
GUARDIAN

'TOTALLY ORIGINAL
AND FUNNY AND HUMANE'
SATHNAM SANGHERA

'THE GREATEST BOOK
ON LONELINESS SINCE
THE CATCHER IN THE RYE'
GARY SHTEYNGART

MEATSPACE
NIKESH
SHUKLA

THE COSTA FIRST NOVEL SHORTLISTED AUTHOR OF COCONUT UNLIMITED

Nikesh Shukla

Meatspace

Аннотация

The second novel from Costa First Novel Award shortlisted author Nikesh Shukla. 'The first and last thing I do every day is see what strangers are saying about me.' Kitab Balasubramanyam has had a rough few months. His girlfriend left him. He got fired from the job he hated for writing a novel on company time, but the novel didn't sell and now he's burning through his mum's life insurance money. His father has more success with women than he does, and his Facebook comments get more likes. Kitab is reduced to spending all of his time in his flat with his brother Aziz, coming up with ideas for novelty Tumblrs and composing amusing tweets. But now even Aziz has left him, travelling to America to find his doppelganger. So what happens when Kitab Balasubramanyam's only internet namesake turns up on his doorstep and insists that they are meant to be friends? Meatspace is a hilarious and troubling analysis of what happens when our lives become nothing more than an aggregation of shared content, when our online personas are more interesting than real life. A brilliant follow-up from an acclaimed young novelist writing at the sharp edge of modern life.

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MeatSPACE

Nikesh Shukla



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For Nimer, who introduced me to IRC in the mid-nineties

Why I Sent a Lamb Chop Into Space

Whenever my best mate and I have stood in line at Tayyab's in East London, our nostrils tingling with burnt mustard seeds, we've ogled the wall of fame – from Daniel Craig to Talvin Singh – and wondered, how in the name of all things sacred do we get

on here? I mean, a novelist and an artist, we may not be in the same league as James Bond or the guy who won the Mercury Music Prize in the 90s when being Asian was last cool – we knew whatever we did had to be a cut above.

So it was lucky that I had a book called *Meatspace* coming out.

Meatspace is what people who live their lives online call real life. Meatspace. There's something so strange, odious and fleshy about the word. It shows that we're just a collection of wobbly brains living in meat pods. Nick (Hearne – he's an artist) and I thought it would be funny to take the word literally. And send some meat into space.

We were sat waiting for roast dinners at Hackney City Farm, enjoying the faint, malt-y mist of pig shit and chicken feed seeping through the windows when we had the idea. What could be more ridiculous than sending some actual meat into actual space? And how easy would it be?

Pretty easy, it turns out – all we needed was a weather balloon, some helium and permission from the Civil Aviation Authority and we were good to go. We bought a GoPro camera, made a makeshift pod out of its packaging and forked the sizzling lamb chop.

We took the lamb chop 88.8 miles from Tayyab's in East London and out to the Cotswolds, filled the air balloon with helium and let go. The original idea – sending some meat into space – was just the tip of the iceberg, though. What followed was a lesson in endurance.

The plan was: the chop would rise at 325 metres a minute, for 95 minutes, before the balloon was predicted to burst 50 miles away over Hungerford, West Berkshire. The payload would then parachute back to earth with a predicted landing near Andover, Hampshire, 68 miles from the launch site. We would ping the GPS, go and collect and film a little retrieval skit with a 'stunt' chop we had in a coolbox.

We drank coffees in a supermarket car park and waited for the GPS to start pinging when the chop re-entered the atmosphere. But it never pinged. We waited and we waited. We had a little sausage sandwich barbecue in a park (in a designated barbecue area), ran into Lucy and Russell, whose farm was going to be the original launch site until predicted journey simulations put the pod in the sea. And nothing.

We returned home broken.

The lamb chop was lost.

We launched a local campaign to try and see if anyone had found it. Amazingly, someone did. Nick got a call from a farmer who had found the pod in his threshing machine. The farmer said he was near Yeovil, which was further south than predicted, and sounded like a straight up dude.

Except, he never returned the pod. He wasn't a straight up dude.

The farmer made arrangements to meet at locations in Dorchester, a service station in Bridgend, and Weston-super-mare, but failed to show every time. He dodged between different

phone numbers and locations, every time giving excuses why he couldn't return the camera. By this time the launch team began to believe that this was life imitating art. The main theme of *Meatspace* is the lies that we tell ourselves and others in the modern social media-obsessed universe. Was this a case of elaborate catfishing? Or purely somebody attention seeking? I mean, we weren't dealing with a case of rare diamonds here. It was a bedraggled lamb chop.

The weird part was, in the book, a stray fact from a character opens up a Google search hole of all their social links, and private information. And with this farmer, an accidental text he sent to me – meant for his girlfriend – lead me to his rugby team, Facebook, LinkedIn and more. It was bizarre. It was life imitating art.

After five months of book promo and having babies, Nick and I called the rozzers. And, amazingly, the camera reappeared. A few weeks ago. We were mentally exhausted by this point. So much so that the irony of the handover, in a KFC, escaped us till afterwards. When we saw the footage, it was unbelievable. Utterly unbelievable. We'd sent a Tayyab's lamb chop into space.

And the thing we gained, apart from the footage, apart from the promotion for my novel, was an absolutely ridiculous adventure that genuinely bonded Nick and I for life. Sounds cheesy, but besides the bizarre achievement of sending a bit of meat hurtling towards the moon, chasing the tail of a farmer who refuses to give the camera that filmed it back to you does great

things to a friendship.

Oh, and we made it on to Tayyab's wall of fame.

This article originally appeared on Vice.com

Meatspace

Pronunciation: mi:tspeis

noun

[mass noun] informal

the physical world, as opposed to cyberspace or a virtual environment.

'Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies.'

Sherry Turkle

'Have you ever had that moment when you are updating your status and you realise that every status update is just a variation on a single request: "Would someone please acknowledge me?"'

Marc Maron

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The first and last thing I do everyday is see what strangers are saying about me.

I pull the laptop closer from the other side of the bed and press refresh on my inboxes. I have a Google calendar alert that tells me I have no events scheduled today, an assortment of Twitter and Facebook notifications, alerting me to 7 new followers, a favourite of a tweet thanking someone for liking my book, an invite to an event I'll never go to, spam from Play and Guardian Jobs. Hayley Bankcroft has sent me a direct message about an event we're both doing next week. Amazon recommends I buy the book I wrote. There's a rejection email from an agency I'd applied to do some freelance marketing copy for. I didn't want the job, but now I haven't got it I feel annoyed and hurt. I think about tweeting 'will write copy for food' but decide against it.

There's an email from my dad. He doesn't usually send me emails; he prefers text messages. It's a forwarded message from

a woman on a dating website. In it she's written 'Would love to meet your son and be his new mummy'. In bold at the top, Dad has written 'Kitab-san, Wen u free?!!!!' I ignore it. I never want to meet one of his girlfriends. Ever.

The only other 2 messages from actual humans are a friend request from the one other person with my name on Facebook, which I ignore when I see the next one is from Rach: an email letting people know her new address. I wonder why she wants me to have this information. Am I supposed to think, 'Oh, she's moved out of her parents' house, which even being in Zone 6 and involving interacting with her racist brother and the cat that hated me and her dad's collection of plaid shirts with effervescent sweat patches was still preferable to living here with me? Or, more realistically, 'Why is she moving out of her parents' house *now*, 6 months after dumping me, 6 months after moving out, 6 months after she told me she couldn't bear the way I lived any longer and that I was draining her enthusiasm for life? Is that what I'm supposed to think?

She's moving to North London, where she lived when we first met. I used to like meeting her at her flat. It overlooked a park and had a big kitchen I would sit in while she made coffee with the landlord's Gaggia filter coffee machine. There was a disused railway line we'd take walks down. I haven't been there in years.

That flat was amazing. We cooked all the time, she didn't own a television, just stacks of books, a balcony where she grew tomatoes and a posh coffee machine. It was a middle-class idyll.

None of the furniture pointed at an entertainment source. We were those people. For the life of me, I can't work out why we chose to move her to my place instead of me to hers.

She was clinical in collecting all of her things when it ended. The only trace of her was a t-shirt of mine she took ownership of while we were together but I got full custody of in the break-up and the chutneys she left in the fridge. I notice them every time I open the fridge.

I hate chutneys. They're a painfully white condiment, a colonial response to the spicy Indian pickle. I keep meaning to throw them away. When she'd first moved out, I spent a drunken night spooning onion chutney into my mouth because that was the closest I could get to what she'd tasted like.

The related Google ad next to her email is for 'house-warming gift ideas'. I click out of my emails and think of things to tweet. I've got nothing to say. I look at the account of this other Kitab.

I've known about his existence for a while now. Around 6 months ago, his Facebook profile had started showing up in my self-Googleing. I was surprised at first. Another Kitab with my obscure surname. Another one. Another me. He kinda looked like me too. He had fair brown (what I call caramel, ex-girlfriends have called 'dusty') skin and the hairstyle I had in the 80s, swept up into a Patrick Swayze cowlick of quiff and oil. He had eyes like mine, almond-shaped and -coloured and he had my mouth. Full kissable lips. Or at least this is how I would describe myself on an internet dating profile – caramel-skinned, quiffed black

hair, almond-coloured eyes and big full lips.

He wore a white turtleneck sweater, like a Bond villain. His location was listed as Bangalore, India and the avatar photo itself looked like a warped driving licence scanned on a low-resolution photocopier. I was immediately disappointed that my namesake was so Indian-looking.

The related Facebook ad on the search results page for Kitab Balasubramanyam is an identity theft-solving app. It's 69p. I don't buy it.

I wonder why he's decided to add me.

I tweet: 'Feet hurt. Too much bogling last night. #boglingrelatedinjuries'

This is a lie. I was in bed by 10 last night. I had 4 beers on an empty stomach, felt pissed and irritated, shouted a lot in our front room about Rach and how I was better off without her and was put to bed by Aziz, who complained I was too drunk to take out on the town to find some trouble. He'd sighed, I was never up for getting in trouble now I was single.

I clear my throat. It stings like I've been singing too much.

The air in my room feels thick and musty. I try to remember the last time I left the flat. It hasn't been often since Rach moved out. Except for the pub and for supplies. If it wasn't for Aziz, I probably wouldn't talk to anyone apart from online. I left the flat yesterday. It was to go to the pub. And the big shop. I did the big shop after the pub. It consisted of Budvars, bread, and frozen pizzas for emergencies. Now Rach isn't here to fill the fridge

with fresh sustainable organic food and chutneys, I'm taking full advantage.

I sleep with my quilt rolled and bunched up into the sausage of a human body. She's my bedtime girlfriend now I'm newly single. I call her Quiltina.

As if he can feel me stir, Aziz opens my door and comes and sits on the edge of the bed.

'Watching porn?' he asks.

'No.'

'I never want to catch you wanking again.'

'Then knock,' I say as he checks himself out in my mirror.

'Actually I do want to,' he says, turning to me and grinning. 'I'm not going to lie, I think you have an interesting wank-face. It's somewhere between "this sweet is too sour" and "my knees are hurting from old age".' Aziz contorts his face into a pained cry and simulates juddering hand thrusts. I turn over onto my side and close my eyes.

'Did you and I go out bogling last night? I really don't remember that,' Aziz says.

I try to cover myself up. Just to annoy me, Aziz pulls the cover off.

'That was just for the internet.'

Aziz pounces on me, pulls the cover over my head and cuddles it. I can feel him humping my body. I try to push him off but he's too strong.

'Mercy?' he cries.

‘Mercy,’ I say.

‘Seriously, I can’t hear you. Mercy?’

‘Mercy,’ I call again.

Aziz pounds away, but I manage to get a knee up to connect with his side. He falls off me laughing. I allow myself a smile. I’m awake now.

‘I love you, idiot brother of mine,’ he says. He pauses. ‘What are you up to today?’

‘Writing.’

Aziz laughs sarcastically. He pulls the cover off me entirely. I go fetal. ‘No, but seriously, ladies and gentlemen,’ he says in his 1930s stand-up comedian voice. ‘What are you up to today?’

‘Job-hunting.’

‘So you’ll be on email?’

‘Yeah, probably.’

‘Cool. I’ll send you some pop culture gifs to keep you company.’

‘Won’t you be busy ... you know, working?’

‘That’s how I’m so swag, my friend,’ Aziz says, scratching the dark scar on his neck. ‘That. Is how I’m so swag.’

Aziz heads to the door. ‘Hey man,’ I call to him. ‘What were we doing last night? Singing? SingStar?’

He turns his head and looks back at me. ‘Do you even remember last night?’

‘Yeah.’ I feel my phone vibrate in my hand. A Facebook wall message. I don’t look at it. ‘A bit. I think I had too much chutney.’

And rum. There was definitely too much beer.’

‘Remember what you promised?’

‘Yeah. To forget about Rach, move on, stop whining about her and get some writing done.’

‘You kept going on about “keeping the wolf from the door”.’

‘Yeah. Money is fast running out, my friend.’

‘That’s not it,’ Aziz says, smiling.

I’m beginning to remember bits of last night: 4 big bottles of Budvar in, I was standing on our sofa, clutching 2 jars of chutney, while Aziz held my leg like he was Princess Leia on the cover of the *Star Wars* poster, and I was Luke Skywalker.

‘I am a golden god!’ I was shouting. ‘I am the golden god of literature. I am the golden god of this front room. I am the golden god of fucking chutneys.’

‘I thought you hated chutneys.’

‘I do, I fucking hate the white man’s chutney. CBE. Chutney of the British Empire. I’m going to get “I H8 CHUTNEY” tattooed on my arm so future girlfriends know where I stand on the chutney thing without even having to ask.’

‘Wait,’ Aziz had said. ‘You want a tattoo? I want a tattoo. Let’s get tattoos. We’re getting tattoos.’

‘Yes,’ I’d shouted back at him. ‘The golden god will get a tattoo. I want a tattoo. Right now, there is nothing I want in the world more than a tattoo.’

‘Maybe not “I H8 CHUTNEY”.’

‘No,’ I’d said. I hesitated and thought. In that second silence,

Elvis Costello came on the iPod, on shuffle. Aziz joined me on the sofa. He was all the Attractions and I was Elvis, crooning through the gap in my front teeth.

‘Chapt-uhhhh waaaaa-hun ... we didn’t really get along ...’

‘I’m going to get “Everyday I write the book” on my forearm. All the way up. I bloody love this song. It’s perfect. It can be a reminder to do my job. And Rach hated that song,’ I said, turning to Aziz as he switched from bass to drums.

‘Me too. I prefer “Shipbuilding”. Remember “Shipbuilding”. Always remember it, man,’ he said, bopping his head, his hands tight in the air.

‘Chapter wuuuu-huuuun,’ I sang.

‘Do you even like that song?’

‘Doesn’t matter. I like it. It’s good. It’s like ... you know ... analogue ... like ... write, mate, innit ... It’s a wicked song. I love this song.’

‘I prefer “Shipbuilding”.’

‘Nah, that’s shit. This one. Chaptaaah toooooo-woooooo ...’

‘Get it then!’ Aziz had bellowed. ‘Get the bloody tattoo.’ He’d jumped off the sofa and pretended to be a screaming fan, reaching up to touch me. I let him pull me down. We sang out the rest of the song like we were in the terraces and it was our club’s anthem.

During the fade out, I said, ‘I’m getting it. I’m bloody getting it. I can be impulsive too. In your face, Rach. Not so “a-fray-duh-of-uh-chay-nudge” now am I?’ I looked at Aziz. ‘I miss her.’

Aziz nodded. He scratched at the ugly scar on his neck, from the bike crash. I looked at my hands.

I threw the 2 jars of chutney in the bin defiantly. We shook on the tattoo and then, when Aziz was in the loo, I rescued the chutneys and put them back in the fridge, hiding them in the vegetable box where he would never think to look.

That was last night, I think. Today's going to be different.

Aziz has left the flat and I'm checking through Twitter – no replies to my bogling tweet, just some chatter about a recently dead obscure musician, everyone's coming out of the woodwork and saying they love her – and then through Facebook, to see what my wall message is – it's a reminder from the organisers of the event I'm doing with Hayley Bankcroft to increase numbers by promoting it to my networks. I ignore it. I DM Hayley back and say, 'It's been ages ... since I got fresh air. Expect barnacles on ol' Kitab.'

She DMs me back almost immediately: 'Till then, Barnacle Bill the sailor. I'll see you down by the docks. Xx.'

No other new interactions. My cousin Veena has just bought a new car. The numberplate says V33D33 – her initials, and accidental comment on her lifestyle.

I need to get up and write something. I check my bank balance on my phone. It's not what it was yesterday, which was not what it was the day before and so on. It's still the most I've ever had in my account. I am burning through the inheritance and when it's gone, and that is a matter of 3 months away, 4 if I live off

leftover chutney and force Aziz to actually buy some food, there's nothing else. I'm not a privileged trust-fund boy. When I told my dad I was quitting the job that I hated to become a writer, he said he was going to give me my share of my inheritance now, as insurance that I didn't become destitute. I took it. The sad truth was, I had been caught printing my book off to send out to publishers. This, coupled with my internet usage, meant I was asked to leave. Luckily, I'd finished the book by then. I wrote the whole thing at work on a Google Doc.

Dad worried about steady income and, being an accountant, made me work on 3 or 4 cash scenarios with him, covering every income-related eventuality. I was able to convince him that I could always find bar work while I looked for a job if I needed to. He wasn't disappointed, he was apprehensive and mentally prepared himself to lend me emergency money if ever I needed it. When he transferred over the chunk of my inheritance, he specified that it was for a rainy day, in case the writing full-time thing didn't happen. I was immediately grateful because I was days away from getting a bank loan or a secret job in a pub. It couldn't have come soon enough. The book didn't really sell. Thank god for Mum's life insurance policy. I live off my inheritance. Not for much longer.

In the absence of having anything new to write, I spend 20 minutes looking at my CV, last updated 3 years ago. I have nothing new to add to it except a link to my Twitter profile. Which I take off an hour later, because if they looked, and saw

the amount I tweet, they might not see me as a solid bet.

I scroll through Facebook. I click on the photos of someone I used to work with, Anne. She's just been to Majorca. I'm hoping for some bikini shots. There's one but it's a selfie so not too revealing. The rest of the photos are her looking sunburned next to her boyfriend. She's still hot. Hayley has changed her profile picture from her beautiful face to a picture of a cartoon penguin. Hayley's book came out the same time as mine. Her book was on a big publisher, mine on my tiny one, but we were booked at a few events and got to know each other. People want her attention all the time because her book was funny and cutting about male/female relations in a digital age and she gave good banter and probably a little because she's beautiful. She has approximately 3 times as many Twitter followers as me.

I head to YouPorn and look up 'plump' and 'chubby' till I find someone who looks real enough to watch. I don't want cartoonish today. I want real. It may be my, the entire world's, daily tick, but I can retain some sense of diversity. I watch as a static camera records a couple 'doing it'. They start off by looking at the camera in an approximation of what they think porn stars do. They awkwardly remove each other's clothes and fall into the patterns, Porn Grammar. But because the camera is grainy, this feels more like watching 2 real people. It feels like an actual rendering of the infinite intimacy at the heart of a couple making love, in tune with each other, in love and unable to contain themselves. The video finishes and asks if I want to watch a related one called

‘Anal fisting POV’. I close the window.

On Facebook, today’s context-less motivational message from my dad’s brother, a mustachioed former disco dancer who has sent me 47 invites to join WhatsApp in 3 months, is an Aum symbol with: ‘WHEN the sun is over your head, there will be no shadow; similarly, when faith is steady in your head, it should not cast any shadow of doubt.’

It links to www.inspirationalvedicquotes.com. I delete it from my wall.

My cousins and aunts and uncles all signed up to Facebook en masse, so they could turn online into one endless family reunion. I’ve met 20% of them. And that 20% I see less than once a year. They spam me with messages, invitations to apps, endless likes and ‘hilarious’ videos. First they had mobile phones, then they had Myspace and now Facebook. My cousins signed up in the first wave and were slowly joined by aunts and uncles. Now they interact with me because we’re family and it’s supportive of them to ‘like’ what I do. I cringe because once I’d written a book, I’d tried to be a bit more about selling myself, and that’s hard to do when you’re reminded you’re a son, a nephew, a cousin.

There’s a private message from a friend I rarely see called Cara. She asks how I am. She’s messaged me to say she’s annoyed I missed our Skype dinner. She knows I was online because I was live-tweeting a rant about chutneys and my Skype was on but set to ‘busy’. Cara lives 45 minutes away by tube but doesn’t meet up unless it’s on Skype. She does this thing called Skype

Dinners, where you cook some food and eat together online. It's supposed to be like a dinner party. I didn't do it because I feel weird about knowing someone has a full screen of me chewing. Cara's developing a site, like ChatRoulette, but for the dinner party aficionado. You create a profile, listing things you like to talk about, what you're looking for – a date or a conversation or to meet interesting people – whether you want politics, or humour, or life-affirming and then you're matched with someone you have dinner with. It's still in beta test because she can't attract funders.

I click 'hide request' on the other Kitab's add friend notification.

I have a job interview with an American internet company. It's for a community manager position. I would work from home and get to travel to Portland once a year for a global team meet-up. I've been asked to look at their website and be brutally honest about it, because part of what I will be doing will be working with developers to create a better user experience. After we've done our pleasantries and I've tried to impress the American interviewer, Lou-Anne, with my English accent, she asks me to tell her a bit about the website and my thoughts. I'm nervous. I don't know how to talk intelligently, sell myself, make me seem like a viable candidate. At the same time, I need the job, so I have to. I try to be as enthusiastic as a Skype call can allow me.

'Well,' I say. 'I like the way the interface allows for a granular approach to the user experience.'

'Mmmm,' Lou-Anne says. She wants me to keep talking. I

don't know what to say.

'The thing is, with the landing page, there's a real need for authenticity. Authenticity is important online. People feel like they trust you more if you're authentic. And this feels authentic.'

'What's authentic about it for you? Tell us what we're doing right and maybe tell us what we could be doing better.'

'Well,' I say. 'The whole thing feels like ... like, I logged into this website when I was having a look and the first thing I see is an empty shell. That empty shell is a reminder that we're alone online unless we make connections ourselves. We have an innate desire to create our own immersive journeys. But to do that, we need a proactive approach to content aggregation.' I'm saying words at this point. I applied for this job because I can use Twitter. I don't know what I'm saying.

'Right,' Lou-Anne says. In a clipped way. 'That's interesting. Great to hear your thoughts,' she says with an inflection that makes me think she doesn't care for my thoughts. There's a silence. And then:

'What else? What about the filter mechanism – is it aspirational enough?' I look around the screen for a filter mechanism. All I see is the empty shell of an account I signed up for 20 minutes before the interview.

'Well,' I say, nervously. 'The greys are very slick.'

'Kitab, I'm going to stop you there, and let you know: we just spent a quarter of a million dollars redeveloping our site ... for a chewier click-through matrix full of snackable content. In terms

of the ideation and its agility in the marketplace, I suppose, yes, that is a nifty grey ...’ She stops talking. I smile into the calendar and stare at the picture of me, my dad, Aziz and Mum on my noticeboard till it blurs. Lou-Anne waits for me to respond.

I spend an afternoon tweeting in-jokes with other writers. Mostly with Hayley.

We’re trying to write out the plot of *Midnight’s Children* using only gifs. So far, we’re only on chapter 2.

I trawl Facebook for what’s happening with my supposed ‘real friends’. They have been out to places and taken photos of what they had to eat and drink. Who knows if they really did, or perhaps these are stock photos. I ‘like’ a random selection, just to keep a presence.

I check Dad’s account. He’s recently added 6 new females and has been tagged in a photo by his brother, in which he’s falling over in the garden, drunk. I post a comment on it, saying ‘Ahhh, my role model’, and my uncle replies. We go back and forth about my dad’s antics – dating and drinking – until it turns nasty and I’m accused of being judgmental. My uncle comments: ‘Your father has worked hard in his life. Why can he not relax without his son getting high and mighty? We are all on a journey, Kitab-beta.’

I look at the fridge and know there’s nothing in there I want. Beer. Cheese. And the chutneys. Those fucking chutneys. Aziz eats all his meals out. He doesn’t have anything I can steal.

I notice that Rach has decided to join Facebook. And add me, I might add. I look through her feed. There are a few photos

and I'm in attendance at all the events they were taken at; they were when we were together. We look happy. We're smiling, laughing, dancing, cuddling, in one we're kissing, but this captured intimacy doesn't feel like something I've experienced. I stare at the photo of me kissing her and it doesn't look like me. For one, this Kitab looks happy. I remember that night. It was my birthday 3 years ago and we had ended up at our flat, shoes off, dancing to reggae. There was a limbo competition. I won. I'm surprisingly good at the limbo. I think about tweeting 'I'm surprisingly good at limbo', but I don't.

There's a few comments from people welcoming her: 'finally?!?!>>!'. That's it. She has made no declaration of her reasons for joining or what she likes or dislikes. She is simply there. Lurking. Watching. It's weird that she's on here. One of our main arguments was her 'Black Ops' aversion to technology, meaning she didn't have a mobile phone. She couldn't understand why we couldn't make a plan and stick to it; she wasn't signed up to any social networking site. She didn't have email or Facebook. 'Why can't we just phone each other on a landline and make an arrangement and keep to it?' she would say. She worked in a job that didn't require constant email access. You had to be present with her. And bloody hell, that was hard.

I go into my Documents folder, into Admin, and then into CV. In CV there's another folder called D323. It's got all my camera phone nude photos of Rach that I promised I'd deleted. I look at the one of her with her bra hanging off her knee, her foot

up on the bed. It's a sideways shot. She covers her right breast and down bits with this angle. I zoom in until the pixels blur into flesh-coloured squares.

I get a Facebook event invite from Rach reminding me about her birthday then a private message from her apologising for including me in it. She asks me 'How are you?', and even written down I can hear the emphasis on the *are*. I don't reply because fuck her for not understanding how social media works. She was constantly irritated that I spent my time self-promoting on the internet and living off my inheritance instead of giving her any attention.

She once told me, 'I hate how you're never in the room with me. Even when you're in the room. You're just on that bloody phone making lazy self-obsessed quips about nothing.'

'It's just fun, this big online conversation.'

'What about our conversation? I'm in the room.'

'I just think it's amazing, having this global audience to interact with.'

'What? And tell them all the stupid things I say?'

'You are funny.'

I used to mock her on Twitter. I thought she didn't mind. People found it funny.

Example tweet: 'My girlfriend pronounces the B in subtle but calls submarine sumarines.'

I had changed the focus of the tweet slightly to make her look stupid. At the time we had been walking through a village in

Devon, making fun of words with silent letters, saying them to each other slowly, like ‘E-NOO-GUH-HUH’ and ‘GA-HOST’. We were falling about laughing, and it kept up for another hour till during lunch, when, while Rach slowly finished her sandwich – she was such a slow eater, it was almost cute – I tweeted.

My dad replies to my text asking if he’s okay, saying: ‘Of course Im ok. seeing you tonight. Please shave. I would like to see my son’s face.’

Aziz, sensing my inert hangover, emails me a motivational message to get me writing. ‘If you are the Captain of a sinking ship, the best example you can set is to get off that ship as soon as you can. Really, you should be the first off.’

I shave. As my stubble comes off, I remember why I’ve kept it thick in recent months: it’s to disguise the bloating of beer and pizza in my cheeks. I look at myself in the mirror. Apart from the bags under my eyes and the beer gut, I’m doing okay, I think. I compose an email to Rach. I don’t send it.

Eventually, I’ve wasted enough time to justify opening a beer. As I close the fridge, I see another chutney that I’ve never opened before. It has Rach’s handwriting on it. It says mango, lime and cumin chutney. I close the fridge on it.

aZiZWILLKILLYOU episode 2 Aziz vs Tattoos [posted 8 September, 11:02]

People, there are 3 rules that apply to all tattoos ...

1 If you get the name of a loved one tattooed on your body, you will break up with each other.

2 If you design the tattoo yourself, chances are it's not good enough to go on your body.

3 If you think your tattoo is unique, it definitely isn't. If your tattoo is unique, it's most likely shit.

AMIRIGHT?

Take it from Aziz. This shit is gospel. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and AZIZWILLKILLYOU gospel.

So guys, something weird happened last night. I was talking to my brother, Kit, about getting a tattoo. I want one. I've never had one before. I'm definitely the kind of crazy motherfucker who needs a crazy motherfucker tattoo to make him look like a crazy motherfucker. But those 3 rules I listed, they always stopped me. And, why mess with perfection? Innit? My bro Kit's already declared he's going to get an ironic 'job description' tattooed on his forearm, the sensitive artist. But anyway, we were chatting.

I was saying I should get a random word like 'sparrow' or 'erudite' tattooed on my bicep as a talking point. Conversational lull? Wanna mystify some beanie in the pub with something

vague but talking-pointy? Flex your biceps and wait for the enquiries to pour in.

Because, then people'll be like ... why does it say that word? And I'll have this amazing story prepared for them. So, Kit and I are discussing words.

'Sparrow,' I was like, yeah, weird word.

And he was like, 'Why?'

And I was like, 'It doesn't matter. That's not the point. It's a talking point.'

'Yeah, but neither of us know what to say about it.'

'True. Erudite?'

Then Kit was like, 'And what?'

'And what what?'

'No ... and what?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean ... and what?'

'What the words ... "and what?"?'

'Yeah ...'

'That's pretty cool. What about an ampersand and a question mark?'

'Pretty cool.'

'Not cool enough.'

And then, it hit me. When he came back from the fridge, I was like, 'I have the answer.'

'Hit me,' Kit said.

'I'll get my favourite t-shirt. On my chest. That way I'll never

lose it, shrink it, or ruin it. Think about it, I'll always be dressed. In my favourite t-shirt.'

Kit laughed.

'Imagine,' I said. 'People who confine their tattoos to where they can't be seen when you're wearing a suit – what if they got a tattoo that smartened them up?'

'Like workwear tats?'

'Exactly. You gotta be smart for work, right?'

Kit said, 'I wonder if you could get a tattoo of a tie? That way you're always smartly dressed.'

'Nah, man. That would be annoying over your belly. Especially if you put on weight. It'd look stupid,' I said back.

'No, mate. A bow tie. Imagine a bow tie tattoo. You would be so dapper, mate. Do you think anyone has ever had a bow tie tattoo on their neck?'

We Googled it. Why not? We're modern men. And what is the smartphone if not the thing that means conversations never have to descend into bullshit? We have every answer at our fingers. I'm only too happy to look up bow tie tattoos, because if there is one out there, that person is my new hero. All my heroes are either stupid or brave. I typed 'bow tie tattoo' into my phone's search engine and tapped 'GO'.

I hit the image search and there, courtesy of the internet, were photos of a surprisingly diverse selection of people with bow tie tattoos. Some with bow ties on their breasts, some with bow ties on their forearms but only one where an actual bow tie would be.

‘That’s me,’ I said.

I handed the phone to Kit. Fourth picture into the image list there was a thumbnail of a man who looked remarkably like Aziz. This guy was wearing sunglasses I might wear (aviators in a new rave hue), a black wife-beater, a wicked shit-eating smile, Chico Dusty chocolate skin and the same spiky hair that’s been poking up between girls legs round my way for the last 15 years. The same nose. The same wide-eared ‘YESSSS BLUUUUUD’ grin. And a red bow tie. Tattooed under his neck. Where a real red bow tie would be. I clicked on the thumbnail and it took us to a larger photo. Kit moved to sit next to me. We stared at the screen, dumbfounded looks on our faces.

‘Are you thinking what I’m thinking?’

‘No,’ Kit said.

‘I’m doing it. That’s me. I have to do it. I owe it to this me.’ I pointed at the phone. I pointed at the scar on my neck. ‘It’s time to cover this malarkey up.’

‘That’s not you,’ Kit said.

‘It could be me. From the future. Apparently they can do that now with the internets.’

We examined the contours of the bow tie tattoo man’s face. The closer you look, you realise it isn’t me.

‘It’s bloody odd how similar we are,’ I said.

‘That’s the power of the internet,’ Kit said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The more we’re allowed to Google search stuff, the more we

realise we're not special.'

'Oh, shut up. There's no one like Aziz. And I'm getting a bow tie tattoo.'

What do you think?

There are 8 comments for this blog:

Moderation: DO IT

Philo Savvy: Yes, cossssssign. DO IT.

MichaelMcArthur: Seriously? WTF> You cray, Aziz.

Decarp: Someone just tweeted this blog and it's nuts. Wait – you're gonna get a bow tie tattoo cos someone else who looks like you has one? Yes.

Philo Savvy: Pics or STFU.

AZIZWILLKILLYOU: I've been thinking, this is definitely happening people. Not only am I getting that tattoo, but I'm hunting that fuckface down.

KITABWILLDESTROYYOU: Go to bed. Stop stalking people online.

Decarp: Go Aziz!

History:

Tattoo disasters – Google Spying on people’s Facebooks – Google Best Asian author – Google Jhumpa Lahiri hot – Google

It’s Friday night (my dad’s usual slot for me – Friday for the children and friends, Saturday for the ladies) and I’m sitting in our favourite Indian restaurant waiting for him to arrive. When Dad shows up, he is dressed in a silk pink shirt, a leather jacket that goes past his waist, and black trousers. The only thing missing is some crocodile shoes. Instead my dad is wearing the omnipresent black Nike Air knock-offs he’s been wearing for the last 20 years, which keep his now-mangled feet breezy and comfortable. I once bought him some proper Nike Airs but they’re boxfresh, unused – ‘unused to my feet’, Dad said. His feet are now moulded to the shape of the inside of these cheap versions. He is holding on to the remnants of his sparse, thin, silky silver hair by growing around the bald crown a fine mane as long as possible.

‘What’s new, kiddo?’

‘Rachel wants to be my friend on the Facebook.’

‘She wants to be back together? Good, I like that.’

‘No, just friends on Facebook.’

‘Why would she do that? Unless she wants to be back

together?'

I don't reply. We both snap poppadoms.

Dad spoons onion onto his shard and I stare at the bubbles on mine, before dipping it in the raita and crunching down, grimacing at the sugary yoghurt.

'Thank you for shaving. You know? Your face looks fat. Why is your face so fat? I need to work on this beer belly so I can get more dates, eh kiddo?'

When my mum died, when I was young, he went through a decade of wearing a fleece jumper and tracksuit bottoms, going to work in the same warehouse and coming home and eating the same food watching the same DVDs of the same Bollywood songs he and my mum listened to. It was a decade of mourning. Then he retired, and quickly realised how much of a social animal he is. He goes out 4 nights a week, wakes up in the early afternoons hung-over and watches old films till it's time to go out again. He is basically me in my early 20s. Wednesday and Thursday nights, he props up the bar in his local Indian pub, watching cricket and counting masala peanuts (finely-chopped onions and chillies mixed in with dry roasted peanuts, drizzled in lemon juice and chilli powder) as dinner. Fridays and Saturdays are date-nights for him. He only ever has dinner with me or with a lady. And because he's the type of guy who stands on old-fashioned ceremony, he will never let his child or a lady pay for dinner. We eat for free.

'Son, I am happy to see you because you are my son, but going

out with guys is no fun,' he says to punctuate a silence.

'What do you mean? You can talk to me about football, girls, whatever you want ...'

'I go out with people to have fun, not talk. I want to flirt, to dance, to eat with a knife and fork.'

'You can do that with blokes. Why do you need to date girls?'

'These are not dates. They are my friends. The girls are all my friends. Because I take them out, we eat good food, listen to the music, and dance. And they laugh at my jokes.'

'Because you're paying to take them out.'

'Why must you make me feel like they are my prostitutes?'

'Because you make it sound like you pay them to let you take them out.'

'Well, kiddo ... I'm old-fashioned.'

'And it is the oldest profession,' I say, spooning onions into my hand and throwing them into my mouth.

I feel, as I always do at these dinners, the unsettling pressure to be my dad's best friend as well as his son. Dad used to have 2 close friends whom he did everything with. They watched every sport going, from cricket to the World's Strongest Man, drank together, played cards, even worked together. Now those guys have retired and moved to Dubai, leaving my dad to date and take me out for dinner. And be a barfly.

He finds friends of friends, divorcees or widows who want to be taken out for dinner and a dance and he uses them for company. He pays to take them out and they give him

company. He has rules for prospective partners. He's trying to protect himself from history repeating. He doesn't want to outlive another partner.

My dad doesn't ever want me to come to see him in our family home, probably because he thinks the sight of all the kebab cartons and empty beer cans, dirty bathroom and unwashed dishes will probably send me into a panic. I think of the state of my flat ... Rach's chutneys filling the fridge are the only civilised things left about me.

Dad will dress up to visit in one of his 3 silk shirts and come and see me in my part of town because he thinks it's buzzy (he describes it as a 'carnival atmosphere') and filled with beautiful women. He's always disappointed to learn that the crowd is rarely, if ever, middle-aged single Indian women looking to be wined and dined, only thin boys and girls not bothered by our presence in the slightest. Still, he pays. And it's near my house, so I'm happy.

Dad, when first looking for a new girlfriend, set himself some rules and parameters. He laminated them on a card to stick in his wallet as an aide memoire. They were: she must be younger than me; healthier than me; Gujarati Indian but, not too traditional or religious; able to dance; tell jokes; know how to cook (and he goes on to reel off a list of my mum's signature dishes). I repeatedly told him in the last year that he's not going to find a replacement for Mum, not least because his parameters are too defined. He thinks, why mess with perfection?

‘How is your book doing?’ he asks me, placing his hands together in prayer formation, to show me he’s listening.

‘Okay,’ I say, not looking up from the table, as if enthusiasm would indicate failure. ‘Sales are slow, but you know, at least it’s out.’

‘But what is your marketing strategy?’

‘I let the publisher deal with it.’

‘How can you trust them to market you? You need to determine your market and sell the book to them.’

‘Sure,’ I say, to shut him up.

‘You better be writing a bestseller. One with police detectives in the countryside. One with murders and car chases. Something you can buy in an airport and a supermarket.’ He pauses. ‘And don’t talk about the past this time. No one wants to hear about the past. Talk about now, kiddo.’

‘That’s not my thing, Dad.’

‘You should though. Don’t think you have another inheritance coming to you. I’m spending it all now on enjoying myself. So, write a bestseller.’

‘Okay, Dad.’

‘In fact, you better not be spending Mum’s inheritance. You better be earning, kiddo.’

‘Yes, Dad,’ I lie. ‘I’ve been doing great. Really great.’ He doesn’t need to know about my job interview. Not until I have news. News that ultimately proves he’s right.

When he first signed up to Facebook, as a way of keeping

tabs on all the women he fancied in his life, he didn't understand how to phrase sarcasm nor that if he left a comment on my status update, everyone could see it. He used to sign off with 'lots of love, your dad' thinking that each comment was like a letter or email. Then he decided to use my self-promotion on Facebook to remind me that ultimately I had to make money from writing.

Kitab: 'Hey guys, if any of you are in the Luton area, I'm reading from my book tomorrow.'

Kitab's dad: 'Son, I hope they r paying yr travel because this is an expensive ticket. R U getting paid? I saw yr bk is £2.46 on Amazon. What % r u making frm this? Lots of love, your dad.'

When I put up a link to my novel on my status, my Facebook friends would 'like' it or maybe even say 'congratulations' and 'can't wait'. He'd troll me by saying, 'Can I buy this in Tesco? Tesco is the only bookshop worth its salt.' Then when my book came out, he said, 'You should make something that can be adapted into a film. Maybe I will read it then.'

A couple of years ago, when the film version of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* came out, he left me a comment on my wall saying, 'I read this Girl with A Dragon Tattoo book in 3 days. I still have not read your book. What does that tell you, son?'

His Facebook comments get 70% more likes than mine ever do. People prefer him to me. When Dad first joined what he calls 'the Face Book', it was all he talked about: its politics, its new language, its potential for stalking, and it bothered me how much he wanted to converse with me about its intricacies. I hate talking

about social networking in conversations.

‘Kitab-san,’ Dad says, playing with his new smartphone. ‘While you were in the toilet, I just *liked* this photo of a girl on Facebook. She’s in a bikini. I cannot unlike it. She looks too porky. I don’t want to give her wrong impression.’

‘Dad, do we have to talk about Facebook?’

‘Come on, Kitab-san. I joined the Face Book because it’s the only time I see you.’

‘Do we have to talk about Facebook though? My father is the one person I hope I’m free from that rubbish. You didn’t add me. So, I added her. Are you following me back? What’s on your mind? What are you thinking? LOL. ROFL. “Like”. These words mean nothing anymore.’

‘What is a ROFL? I have not come across this.’

‘Dad, don’t you worry our language is changing? That we’re as concerned with how to socialise with people digitally as much as physically? That language is dying? That everyone is using these bullshit words to mean new things they don’t?’

My dad looks at me, chewing.

‘It means rolling on the floor laughing.’

He swallows, nodding to himself. ‘This would have to be a very funny thing. To laugh out loud, we have all done this. But to be rolling on the floor. I am happy that at least it means you now speak the same language as your Indian cousins. You don’t have to pretend you know Gujarati anymore.’

I watch him funnel shard after shard of poppadom, slathered

in chutney and onion, into his mouth, chew loudly and talk slowly at the same time. He keeps his nails long, and years of turmeric abuse have turned them yellow. He starts telling me an anecdote about his Friday night. The anecdote boils down to, I went to this bar and it was full of people half my age and the beer was expensive and I couldn't hear anyone talk – but the way he tells it, I get the s-l-o-w version. I stop him mid-story so I can check my phone, which has chimed with a Facebook message. It's from the other Kitab. Kitab 2. It says 'Did you see my add request dude? What's taking so long, same-name-buddies!'

Why is he messaging me, the weirdo? I stare at it trying to think of an appropriate response. I don't know what to say. Can I just ignore it? Dad berates me for ignoring him.

'What is on that phone all the time?'

'Nothing – just messages from the world, telling me they love me.'

'I got a new phone. A Samsung. You should try it. Better than this iPhone crap. Cheaper too.'

'I'm fine.'

'So, tell me about you, Kitab-san.' Dad once worked for a Japanese company. He now calls me and all his male counterparts 'name'-san. Unless he's giving me advice, in which case, I'm 'kiddo'.

'Oh, you know ... I have this book reading this week where I ...'

'You know, I found this restaurant to go to with one of my

lady friends. It's called Strada. Heard of it?

'It's a pizza chain.'

'Any good?'

'It's a chain. They're all of an equal standard.'

'No, this is Strada of Knightsbridge.'

'Yeah, Dad, it's a chain.'

'Well, I'm going to take Roshi there for dinner.'

Our food arrives. I Instagram the curries in their steel dishes and upload the photo, adding the caption, 'Dinner with my dad. He pays for the food. I pay for my lack of achievement. We both pay for the over-indulgence in the morning.' Dad hesitates and then dives in. Hayley comments on the photo: 'Delish x.'

I reply: 'I'm with my dad. Rescue me.'

Dad is rarely keen to know what's going on with me, and that's fine because half of it he wouldn't be interested in (emails about things that don't emerge; short stories for magazines he'll never read, that I never read; ideas for self-promotion) and the other half is not for his ears (my lack of earnings, my lack of social or sex life, my lack of consistent happy mental state). Whenever I used to talk to him about my sadness about my mum, he used to tell me I had no right to grieve as much as him because I've only lost a mother, whereas he's lost a life partner. I argued that a life partner was replaceable while a mother wasn't. He would say, 'Wait till I introduce you to your new stepmother.' Since the last time, we don't talk about my mum anymore because I don't want him to know about my grief and he doesn't want me

to think he's a depressed alcoholic anymore. He drinks a lot. And not just quantity of booze, but quality too. I worried for years he was a functioning alcoholic. Able to go to work hung-over and not able to enjoy an evening till the first whisky and soda had been downed. Every night sat listening to his iPod of sad Bollywood songs, a bottle of vodka next to him. He told me once, 'I try to drink enough so I don't dream. Because my family is in my dreams all the time. I don't want to see them. I don't want to see what I've lost.' He lived on vodka and whisky, and takeaway food. Along with the various medicines for his ailments, every morning, he'd take 2 ibuprofen for his hangover. My concern led me, in the darkest part of our grief, to take him to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and depressed by the stories from people indistinguishable from him, he laminated a card that said 'Remember to no longer drown your sorrows in a bottle' and stuck it on his liquor cabinet. Which was effective because it got him to go out more. Which pleased me no end because I had bought him the laminating machine as a Christmas present 7 years ago and he'd finally found a use for it.

I laughed to Aziz that what I'd done was effectively said: getting drunk every single night and crying is not good; going out and getting drunk every single night, on the other hand ... well, that's just the rest of the country, mate. Aziz's attitude was, 'Leeeeeeave it, bruv. Let papa have fun. He worked 7 days a week for 50 years.'

'This one girl,' Dad says, laughing. 'She is violent. I tell you.

I said to her, if you want us to go out again, maybe lose some weight, eh?

I can see chunks of naan in his teeth.

‘Dad, you can’t say that, it’s horrible. It’s sexist.’

‘It’s true. She asks to share a garlic naan with me then eats all of it? No way, kiddo. No more sharing for me.’ Dad shoves a large piece of garlic naan into his mouth to illustrate his point.

‘Maybe she was being romantic.’ Dad laughs with his mouth open.

‘Why did she punch me in the stomach for calling her a fatty then, Kitab-san?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Look her up on the Face Book. Her name is Pinky Marjail ...’

I am part disgusted and part intrigued. What if my balding-fatter-older-version-of-me dad is North West London’s premier player, swimming in 60-something gash. What a guy.

‘Should I be on Tinder?’ Dad says, looking around. I don’t answer him.

I swig from my undrunk glass of red wine. Dad insists that a dinner isn’t complete without an accompanying glass of red wine – we never drink it, neither of us is partial. But damn, do we look classy eating.

I go home that night, feeling something nervy and burning in the pit of my stomach. I assume it’s a mixture of eating hot spicy food quickly and my nausea at my dad’s singledom. I’m glad he has someone he can talk to freely and easily. I wish it wasn’t me.

A bus goes past. My head turns when I think I see someone I know on the top deck. Except it's just some Indian guy and I'm not sure where I recognise him from.

I walk into the flat. Music starts up and Aziz is on the kitchen table bellowing at me, using a banana as a microphone.

'I'm giving you a loooooong look,

Everyday, everyday, everyday I write the book.'

I wake up the next day and check my emails – only notifications. I tweet: '2 nights ago we found my bro's doppelganger online. I'm still creeped out.'

I get no interactions. I click onto a Tumblr. Someone I follow on Twitter is taking a photo of the nape of her neck for 365 days, documenting it from normal to love-bitten and so on. The photos, all fleshy white nondescript stretches of skin, are hypnotic and the day-by-day nature of the Tumblr gives me a forward-thrust in my own inertia. She gets a lot of love-bites.

I'm making breakfast and staring out of the window at the bathroom of the house at the bottom of our garden, hoping to glance someone, anyone in the shower, opaque pixels of pink flesh, and listlessly stirring porridge when Aziz comes bounding in. He fills the room with his energy and he moves around the kitchen in loaded silence. He smirks audibly. He hovers over me. He leans back against the counter. He reaches over me for things, breathing quickly.

I unenthusiastically ask him what's up, knowing that whatever he tells me won't wake me from my hangover – Aziz and I

finished off my Budvars when I came back in last night, and then moved on to rum, and my head's pounding. He and I have mutually exclusive moods this morning. But thankfully he has work to go to and I have an inheritance to burn through while pretending to work on my second, all-important novel. I'll probably go back to bed with my laptop and a pre-downloaded cache of illegally acquired American sitcoms and dramas to keep me company till I fall asleep for my mid-morning thinking nap. Or look at videos of American college girl parties and feel sad about male pack mentality whilst tugging at myself.

'How was Dad?' he asks.

'Fine,' I reply. 'Same. Exactly the same.'

'He ask about me?'

'He's only interested in his own life,' I say, and Aziz nods. He looks around the room for something to distract us. He sticks his finger up.

'I wanted to tell you last night but you fucked off to bed. I've found him. His name's Teddy Baker, like the suit makers and he lives in Brooklyn, and I need to get out of the flat more, man. I've babysat you enough. Time for Aziz to get back on the adventure train. So, guess what? I booked a trip out to go find him. I'm going to surprise him. I'm going to New York. The dream, Kit. The dream is happening. I'm going to bloody New York.'

'What are you talking about, Aziz?' I ask, my mouth full of cereal.

'The bow tie tattoo man. I did some Googling when I got in

last night. I found another copy of the same photo, but this time with his name as the file name and that led me to his Facebook page and his Twitter stream. Sorted. The guy sounds wicked. He likes dubstep, he LOVES *The Wire*. I like dubstep and *The Wire*. Peas in a pod, Kit. Peas in a motherfucking pod.'

'Why are you going to visit him?'

'I need to populate my blog with content. I did that one post and then nothing for months. I'm stagnant before I start. I just need something to write about. A proper adventure. And tracking my doppelganger down might be it. I mean, it's better than what I was thinking of doing ... I was considering doing a photoblog of my manscaping everyday for a year.'

'Sounds like a dumb idea. He's just some guy off the internet. He could be a weirdo. He's probably a weirdo,' I say, gripping my temples. My stomach churns at the thought of Aziz leaving.

'This isn't 2001, when only weirdos and perverts and *Dungeons and Dragons* were online. Everyone's online now. Normal people. Secretaries and estate agents. And quantity surveyors. Who's more normal than a quantity surveyor?'

'And people want to read about that?'

'Yeah, but it's about the journey to find him, about tracking him down ... that's the entertainment.'

'Google destroyed the journey, man. All you have to do is look him up on Facebook and boom, journey over. Message him – he either says, yeah man, stop by or fuck off weirdo and boom, end of journey ... over,' I say, not wanting him to go.

‘Kit, man ... it’s just a laugh. I haven’t had a holiday in for ever. I’ve never been to New York. Mimi lives there now and I’ve got unfinished business in her pants. Why the why not?’ Aziz says, opening the drawer where the painkillers are. ‘New York’s the dream.’

‘I dunno. I’ll miss you. You never go away.’

‘Bruv, if I’m not around, you can’t use me as an excuse to not write. I’m going. It’s for both of our goods. I get to bang Mimi and have the most legendary time, and you get silence. No distractions.’

I cover my nose and mouth with my hands so Aziz can’t see I’m frowning.

‘When you going?’ I ask, wondering how I can talk Aziz out of it.

‘This week. After I’ve got my new tat. I’m getting the bow tie.’

I look at Aziz with a mixture of pity and confusion. ‘Why? Man, it’s not a good look.’

‘Buddy, it’s the one. It’s the one of ones. It’s the one most toppermost of the poppermost. I want it. I want to turn up at Teddy Baker’s yard with a matching tattoo pulling the same shit-eating grin and I want to film his reaction. Wanna be my camera man?’

‘I can’t, man. No money,’ I say, hoping my financial plight will cause him to stay. I can’t afford flights to New York. How else will I be able to afford beers and frozen pizzas?

‘Little Lord Fauntleroy starting to feel the pinch?’

‘Little Lord Fauntleroy needs to put his CV together today so he could find some B2B journalism soon just to keep steady income coming in.’

‘Sorry, man,’ Aziz says, rubbing me on the back. I stand up and walk to the open drawer with the painkillers. I take 2 out and dry-swallow them, hoping they’ll kick in with immediate effect.

‘It’s alright. I should have written something better.’

Aziz claps his hands to signal the moving on of the conversation.

‘Well, remember to finalise your tattoo designs. I booked you in.’

‘I don’t think I want a tattoo.’

‘I hate your hangovers, they’re always so full of regret. You’re so boring. This is why I need to get away. This funk. This funky stench. This funkington manor.’

I’m walking down our local high street staring at the gentrified ghetto of vintage shops, hipster bars and pound shops, marvelling at the busyness and bustle of 10 a.m. on an unseasonably chilly early autumn morning. Who are all these people and why aren’t they at work? Part of me realises that the innate nature of the hipster *is* not being in gainful employment but running about sorting out installations, video shoots and drinking coffee and talking about meta-collaborations. None of these have any place in a conventional office.

I tweet: ‘If the innate nature of the hipster is to avoid jobs, what do they do for money when there’s no installations to be

done?’

@kitab: ‘They all suck each other off and roll around in piles of their parents money’

@kitab: ‘burn socks’

@kitab: ‘Develop Eating Disorders ;)’

I record constructions of a series of nothings in either chronological or flashback order. I string together a few similes like a hack and I send it to my agent and they will either ‘like’ it and ‘share’ it or unfollow me. Either way, I’m stuck in a rut of nothing. I don’t really appreciate what I do, why should anyone else? I used to read so much. I used to sit in cafés and read. I’d struggle to eat with a knife and fork or with my hands as I navigated sentences on a page. Now that’s all been replaced with thinking of arch things to tweet, twitpic’ing my lunch or making up overheard conversations that might make people laugh.

I tweet: ‘Im in a café & this girls like to her boyfriend “Jamie, I wish you hadn’t fucked me in the arse so hard. I cant stop shitting myself.” ZOMG.’

@kitab: ‘LOLZ’

I get 13 retweets and it didn’t even happen. It gets 4 favourites. Even Hayley tweets me to say: ‘We’re reading together this week! Haven’t seen you in ages, blud. See you at @welovebooksbitches!’

I think I see someone I know sitting in an internet café. I realise it’s just another Indian guy with an oily side-parting.

It’s inevitable I will get ‘Everyday I write the book’ tattooed

on my forearm. Maybe drunk me knows me better than real me.

aZiZWILLKILLYOU episode 3 Aziz vs Ink [posted 10 September, 00:21]

I got a tattoo of a bow tie on my neck today.

My brother, Kitab. He got a job description on his forearm. He's a writer so 'Everyday I write the book'. It's so analogue. It's so meatspace, innit.

Anyways, I woke up my man Kit with some Buck's Fizz. Got the guy proper high so he don't back out. Then I did some push-ups to really tone up my neck and chest, because if man has a neck tattoo, man needs to rep it proper, seen. So anyways, anyways, anyways, I passed out. Don't mix alcohol and weightlifting, my friends. It's a dangerous business. I'm finally getting rid of this ugly stupid thing on my neck. This scar from when I was a kid.

We headed to Sick Charlie's for the tattoos. This guy is a proper swagatha. I argued with Kit all the way cos the dickhead wanted to pay with a cheque. He's got some royalties due but still, act like you know, you know? Wear this process with pride.

'Chequebook?' I scoffed.

'Yeah, I need it to clear in 5 days. I get some money in about 5 days.'

'What money?'

'I get that 80 quid from the Guardian for the best Asians in

fiction article.’

‘Sell-out.’

‘Yeah, I know.’

‘Still? A cheque? You’re so 1997 about things.’

‘1997? That’s the advent of the cheque in your brain?’

‘No, well ... you know ... chequebooks. It just looks a bit lame. Charlie, the tattoo artist’ll think you’re a mug.’

‘Oh right, so you’re worried about me looking uncool in front of a tattoo artist.’

‘Hey, the cooler you are, the more likely they are to do a good job.’ That right, right? Tattoo artists have to do a lot of work. Imagine if they think you’re cool, they’ll put in the extra 10% to make it 120%.

Sick Charlie’s tattoo parlour is too cool for school, my friends. Picture a tattoo parlour in your head. What you’re imagining resembles the outhouse of a biker gang’s gang hut. Where all the crystal meth and bukkake happens. This place was like a hipster design studio, innit. Everything was angular. There were so many angles, you’d think it was an isosceles triangle. There were iPads to read or watch the iPlayer on while you wait. The magazines in the iPad newsstand were Playboy and GQ. The music playing was loud, up-tempo high-pitched hipster indie ... you know the song ... nee-nee-nee-nee-nee-noo-noo-noo-noo riffs, thumping kick drums. White boy tunes. There was one chair for the one tattoo artist and the mirror was lit by a floating orb, suspended from the ceiling on a transparent string. The chair itself looked straight off

the set of Sweeney Todd. Meat. Meat. Meat. Branding meat.

Sick Charlie, he was malnourished thin, no arse to speak of, no visible tattoos, a pointed floppy fringe and dead eyes that told you whatever you're thinking, he was 'already over it'. Every time I see a white boy like this, I always wonder how he balances on a toilet with no bot-bot. What do the girls have to stare at when he walks away?

I Instagrammed the place and added 'Double virgin skin with @kitab'.

I went first into the chair and I watched as the bow tie was sketched onto my neck. It itched on my scar. Sick Charlie kept telling me it was going to be fine but there was one bit, the bottom of the gullet that might hurt a bit. I was like, bruv, I don't care, I'm really drunk, and Sick Charlie laughed because you're not supposed to get tattoos when you've had booze because your decision-making might be impaired and because they tend to bleed more. I told him I'm joking. But the reality was, Aziz had been drinking – we necked 3 bottles of beer from the fridge before leaving – and I'd had 2 Locketts and one packet of Monster Munch to disguise the smell, because Sick Charlie takes himself and his work very seriously. And some onion chutney. There is a lot of onion chutney in our fridge. But that's another story for another time told by another person, innit.

When Sick Charlie started the actual inking, I looked at poor lost little Kitab, sat there watching me like his master's voice and I was like, 'This is gonna be an hour, why don't you step out for

a bit?

Kit stared at me and I shrugged and close my eyes. Miraculously, 3 pints in, I fell asleep in the chair.

But when I woke up, I looked like a champion. It hurt like a motherfucker, the red of the bow tie and the red where I was bleeding didn't really mix well together but fuck it, I stood up a champion. I gave Sick Charlie a cuddle and told him he had done fine work. I look like a baller, a pimp, a motherfucking amazing Spider-man or some shit. I look like Teddy Baker. I look the best.

Looked like the wait was too much for little Kit too, so I woke him up. And then I fucked off into the night because there is nothing that can contain this guy right now.

Comments are disabled for this blog.

History:

Should I banter with my tattoo artist? – Google Girls tattoos nude – Google

When it's my turn, I stand up and walk over to the chair on autopilot, as if this whole lark isn't my decision anymore. Sitting in the chair, I feel like I'm halfway between barbershop and dentist's office. So, somewhere between tensed up and relaxed down. Sick Charlie asks to see the design again so I show him the printout. I found a font online I like, it's called Bell Gothic, and typed up 'Everyday I write the book' in it, printed it out, and now that's in Sick Charlie's hands. He inspects it. I'm not sure I like this guy. He does not give 2 shits about me. I wonder what he's thinking. He's seen a lot of tattoos in his time. He has an opinion on each one, hot or not. Will he put extra special effort into the ones he likes and just emptily, by the numbers, do the ones he thinks are so-so, okay, and pretty shit? Does he just rush through the really bad ones?

'What do you think?'

'Yeah, man. All good.'

'Do you get it?' I say. Everyday, I write the book, I think to myself. It's a political statement. I could pitch this to the *Independent* or the *Guardian*. 'In a world of digital interactions, endless tweets, Facebook haikus, ebooks, I'm taking a stand for the analogue world. I'm feeling the writing on my arm, my writing arm and that's how I will write, with the knowledge

that I have etched out my statement of intent on my own skin. What's more meatspace than having something tattooed on the meat of you? Everyday, I write the book. It's there for ever, it's permanent. You can't throw it away. You can't dispose of it. You can't delete it. You can't cache it. It exists. When every word typed on Google is recorded on a server somewhere, this is the most important statement of them all, the physical manifestation.' I take a breath. 'Plus my dead mum was a really big fan.'

I stop talking and Charlie stares at me.

'Right, okay.'

He returns to ghosting out the tattoo on my forearm in marker pen. He's doing a great job of copying what's on the paper. I chose the font because it looks futuristic, like some signage from Tron.

'So,' I ask. 'Seriously, what do you think?'

Sick Charlie looks up at me and grimaces. 'Look, do you want this or not? Because we're about to be at the point where it's too late.'

He looks at the clock. It's nearly office closing time. Maybe he has a hot date tonight.

'Hot date?' I ask.

'You don't even know the half of it,' he says, not looking up from the copy job he is mimicking on my forearm.

Great, I think. I'm a rush job before he goes to get his end away. He doesn't care about this tattoo, whether its kerning looks

good or whether its execution is considered and thought out. I'm in the punter zone. I am to shut up and be inked. I look around the room. Aziz is nowhere to be seen.

'Did you see where my brother went?' I ask Sick Charlie.

'What?' He just looks at me and shakes his head.

Then I see Aziz at the door. He's outside, looking for a light for a cigarette. A girl walks past and he mimes to me that he's going to get a light off her. He winks as if the light is just starters for what he has in mind. He throws me a thumbs up and disappears.

'Ready?' Sick Charlie says to me. He holds up his machine and suddenly it occurs to me – I can't do needles. They freak me out. They make me pass out. They make me sweat. They make my skin slick with worry and anxiety. How did I not remember that needles were part of this whole thing? What was I thinking? I'm an idiot. I turn to the other side of the room and nod furiously, tensing my arms. Sick Charlie pats the area he's working on, strokes it and pulls at it. Which might be comforting but he's wearing rubber gloves. So the whole thing feels like a medical procedure. And the drill-drill buzz of the machine is whirring away, banging and banging and I can feel it, without looking at it, approach my skin. I can feel it hone in on the spot it's to attack and reconfigure for ever. I can feel it approach me quickly. Heat all up and down my arm. I can hear it pound and pound in its grooves and then connection – impulse, pow. It scratches furiously from side to side and I hazard a look. I take a peek, just a quick peek. I see it happening, all in reddening, dampening close-

up. So I close my eyes. This only focuses the scratching. I open my eyes and I see the apex of Sick Charlie's head as he squints and bends over my arm, working away. I'm nearly straddling him. I try to make my arm as loose and goose-like as I can. But all I can feel is the scratch-scratch-pinch of the gun and it's hard to concentrate.

Do we talk? I'm not sure of the etiquette. My dentist is monologue-happy, meaning he'll natter away with his fingers in my face. My barber, the sexy Swedish girl or her colleague, who is very tactile with the backs of other customers' necks, they can't shut up with their other clients, but me, I don't know what it is. As soon as I get in the chair, they clam up. They ask me a few awkward questions about how my week has been and I answer them amiably and ask about their weeks and they monosyllable me. Why don't they want to talk to me? Maybe they can sense that I just want them to ask me what I do for a living, so I can say 'Oh, I'm an author' coily and await their being impressed. Because that's part of the whole doing something creatively full-time and semi-successfully, you get to tell people that's what you do, and never qualify it with 'Oh, and I have a day job at the council, reconciling council tax receipts'. Nope, you're the creative thing and that's all. Barbers don't seem to care about that. God, it vexes me. I just want to show off. Why won't they let me show off?

I look down at my arm. He's not even finished the first 'E'. We're in it for the long haul.

There's not much you can do to inspire banter in a tattoo artist's chair, because you don't want to break their concentration. Eventually, the scratching becomes an uncomfortable irritant, rather than a painful blat-blat of needles. The thumping indie's more irritating than the irritating scratching on my arm. It's jolly. It's up-tempo. They sound young and happy. What the hell am I doing? Who gets their first tattoo at age 30? A guy who thinks he's younger than he is. That's who. It's okay for Aziz because it's just the sort of behaviour you'd expect from him. But squeaky ol' me? Nope. I barely stay up past 2 a.m. I've never done drugs except for the odd doobie toke that didn't take. I worry that this is a slip towards something more serious. I'll end up trying crystal meth. I'll buy skinny jeans. I'll start taking my fashionable self seriously, ditching my uniform of jeans and t-shirt for something more transient, like espadrilles. This is all wrong and it's too late. Because if I back out now, I've got the start etching of an unfinished tattoo and if there is one thing I'm consistent at, it's seeing shit through to the bitter end, even if I've decided it's a stupid idea since. What a complete tool. The scratching on the arm is constant until he has to move to a new area, which hurts because these new parts of skin have to get used to the procedure that's taking place. He never looks up at me. It seems like he's rushing. Is he rushing? I don't think he's rushing. Probably. How do you know? What is an appropriate amount of time to spend on a lowercase 'v'?

When Sick Charlie finishes, he gives me some saline solution

to use to keep the tattoo clean. He wraps it in cling film and says to me, 'Leave that on overnight, while the skin is still inflamed.'

'Okay, thanks, man. Good job, etc,' I mumble, trying not to focus on the irritated burn on my arm.

'Does it hurt?'

'Yes.'

'That'll pass. You slept through the worst of it.'

'This isn't the worst of it?'

'I could have done anything while you were asleep.'

I can see the letters exactly as I printed them out and I think, yes. Okay, that's dope. I like that a lot. I think I look amazing. I shake his hand, rather limply, because my newly tattooed arm is attached to the hand that shakes. And I say my goodbyes, struggle with getting my coat on, which is a shame because I'm hypnotised by the ink. All I want to do is look at it and get drunk. I open the door and I feel it coming. This is it now. My life is about to change. Oh yes. Tomorrow I will show strangers and loved ones and I will say, oh yes, it's because I write. It's an aide memoire to always be thinking about literature. It's a kick in the teeth reminder that I am a writer. And it's a good tune, I will say. People will inevitably ask, do you like that song by Elvis Costello and I will say it's one of my favourites. It's not. I like it. But it's not one of my favourites. Depending who they are, I'll say it was my mum's favourite.

I leave the tattoo studio and phone Aziz. It goes straight to voicemail. The same stupid message he's had since we were kids.

I leave him a breathless message saying how amazing my arm looks. I feel bloody alive, I think to myself. I was sceptical at first but now it's here and it's done and it's indelible, I feel like a fucking rock star, and I'm already a writer. What more could I want? This is definitely going to make my life change, I think to myself. There's no way it cannot.

aZiZWILLKILLYOU episode 4 Aziz vs Teddy [posted 10 September, 14:02]

Tomorrow I leave for New York, people. I leave to go find the man who inspired this image here.

You know? My last holiday was never, right? When does a man like Aziz have time for a holiday? Answer: everyday should be a holiday. So ... time to hit the road, innit. Time for adventure.

I got a bow tie tattooed on my neck and now I'm off to go find the boy with the bow tie tattoo. Know why? If I think I'm an individual and the internet thinks we're all alike, I'm going to go find my doppelgangers. All of them. I've found one and I need to see exactly how he fits the Aziz profile.

Does he like sandwiches?

Does he think life is for the living?

Does he eat everything with his hands?

Has he had a threesome?

Will he have a threesome with me and some girl, so we can create some sort of infinity pool effect on a spitroast?

Is that disgusting?

If it is, is that okay, because we all know why you visit this blog, right?

Will the world implode if 2 doppelgangers have a threesome?

All these things need answering. I'm off to find my

doppelganger with the cool-ass tattoo, find out exactly how that tattoo came to pass and I am going to show you the world, shining, shimmering, shameless.

Stick with me kid. We'll go far.

Comments are disabled for this blog.

History:

Meeting strangers off the internet – Google Hayley Bankcroft – Twitter Hayley Bankcroft – Google images Kitab Balasubramanyam – Facebook

I wake up from a dream where Aziz follows me around a shopping centre with a toothbrush and toothpaste, telling me it's time to brush my teeth because my breath smells of chutney.

I listen to Aziz singing to himself from bedroom to shower to kitchen to bedroom. I walk into the kitchen and switch the kettle on. I open the fridge. There's no milk.

I sneak a look at the communal iPad, left on the kitchen table. He's left his browser open on Teddy Baker's Facebook profile.

Teddy Baker's profile avatar is a close-up of his face, which, sans shit-eating grin and sunglasses doesn't look so much like Aziz. There's no obvious reason for why this brown guy has a white name. Bow tie aside, he looks ordinary, solid, just like one of the guys.

He lists his likes as 'vigilante justice, weapons, Megadeth, PVC, abattoir politics' but that's it. The rest of his profile is sparse to the public. He has 'liked' Taylor Swift and the NRA. I hope ironically.

Aziz catches me from the doorway peering at his laptop. 'You fraping me, bro?' he asks.

‘Frape ... what a lovely reappropriation of the word “rape”. Because outside of Facebook, making it look as if your friend is saying weird stuff is pretty much exactly what rape is.’

‘Mate, it’s just LOLZ.’

Aziz started off saying LOLZ in conversation because he thought it was funny – I had told him about Cara once Skyping me, me making a joke and her saying wearily, ‘Oh ... LOL, etc.’ Aziz said she was a linguistics genius. Now it’s become a grating habit. I’ve long since given up trying to get him to stop.

‘Yeah ... tell that to a rape victim,’ I say and leave the room to brush my teeth.

‘If I blog about the trip, do you promise to read it?’ Aziz asks me over breakfast. ‘So you can follow my adventures?’

‘You’re still going away then?’

‘I’ve called the tag “The Boy with the Bow Tie Tattoo”. You know I have to go.’

‘Catchy,’ I say dismissively. If he goes, who’ll look after me?

‘Will you tweet about it?’

‘You hate Twitter.’

‘I don’t hate Twitter. I’ve just got too much game for Twitter. Who cares about breakfasts and live-tweeting reality television. I just want people to read my blog. This is a writing thing. I want your respected followers, the writers and editors and whatnot, to know what I’m up to.’

‘Why would those ponces care?’

‘What? Don’t all your illustrious boring literati peeps like

laughing?’

‘Not if it’s over some tattooed hooligan stalking a stranger off the internet. I’m a serious novelist now. Only serious novelist tweets.’

‘You’re right. I’ll use lots of metaphors,’ Aziz says, thumping the table.

‘Who cares what they think?’ I say, knowing in my heart of hearts that I care and thus wouldn’t want to associate myself with a bro/lad challenge for fear of loss of credibility points from the spurious few who bestow them.

Aziz’s bow tie tattoo is cartoonish. It’s huge. It covers the whole of his neck. He has chosen a thick red, like it’s the filling of a Jammy Dodger, like it’s jam, in fact. It covers up the scar, which probably makes it look darker and richer. His skin is smoother and newer in that part of his neck. It’s a proper dinner party bow tie. He looks like a clown on his day off.

Aziz grabs my arm and stares at my tattoo nodding furiously. He’s done this 3 or 4 times this morning. He tells me repeatedly to Facebook it, tweet it, Instagram it. I say no. I don’t want any of my family to see it. Or Rach.

Rach would have hated me getting a tattoo. Her and my dad. I feel like I’m 14 again, a rebel, a maverick on the edge with nothing left to lose. She has a tattoo of a rose on her foot. She got it when she was a student and regrets it. She avoids wearing flip-flops to ensure no one can see it. I once joked about getting a matching one and she punched me on the arm, hard. She’s not

the boss of me anymore. And I always thought the tattoo was cute. I'd trace it when she was asleep. The game was to not wake her up by tickling her.

Meanwhile my family rule Facebook. It's become their standard method of communication. When I first joined up, I was indiscriminate about adding people on sites like Facebook and Twitter. You never knew who you might stumble across: girls you liked, people you went to school with, possible networking opportunities. Also, I liked the idea of amassing numbers of people. It was addictive. Like heroin. A numbers game heroin. I got more discerning when the influx of my family arrived. When Dad joined up, and started adding middle-aged females and tagging me in his posts to them as his 'son', and I got a glimpse of who he was dating beyond abstract retold stories, I actively started looking at other sites my family hadn't adopted. I love Vine.

There's no way they'd let this tattoo slide. They interact with my every status update. Even with them on a family list, with restricted viewing, I know them – they're too good, they'd find me and my tattoo and tell my dad. Even on the internet, you can still feel like an 11-year-old naughty boy.

Aziz puts his bowl in the sink. 'Right,' he declares. 'I need to get ready for New Yoik. What happened to you last night anyway?' I look at his back. I have minutes to make him stay. I have a reading tonight. I need him there. I haven't done anything except go to the pub and the shop and the toilet. This is actual

‘outside’ business. I can’t breathe. I look at him.

‘Nothing, man. Absolutely nothing. I left the tattoo studio with the express intention of showing people my ink. I tweeted a picture of my arm wrapped in cling film.’

‘You didn’t Facebook it though?’

‘Nope. In case Dad saw it.’

Twitter was a safer haven in that my family was far from the zeitgeist, even though, counting all extended Indian relatives, I was related to enough people to stage an invasion of a small country. I deleted all the emails I’d received in the last few hours and prepared for my new life. I saw a Facebook message from my namesake asking ‘Add?!’, which I ignored and prepared myself for a night out I’d never forget. I ignored it because I felt guilty about not accepting his request. Dad called. I sent it to voicemail. Listening back to the message, he sounded drunk, saying something about ‘life being a journey’ – a misquote from what his brother had posted on my Facebook wall. Maybe they crib their Vedic quotes from the same website.

Going out with cling film on your arm doesn’t have the same impact as having a living, breathing tattoo to show. So, last night when I left the tattoo studio, instead of going to bars with my sleeves rolled up, I went to try to find Aziz and ran into my friend Mitch, who was always at the same pub every night, sitting at the bar, reading paperback fiction written by great middle-aged American men. Mitch admonished me for getting a tattoo.

‘Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?’ he said. I smiled.

‘Good to see you, Mitch.’

I met Mitch at a book reading I didn’t know anyone at. I was going out most nights and reading the same passage that would form the opening chapter of my book. I was anxious and hungry then. Mitch approached me afterwards and offered to buy me a drink. He gave me some editorial advice on my book, which I thought was pushy, but he did have a drink for me in his hand. Since then, he’s always been around, very supportive. Mitch thinks the end is nigh and the backs of his ilk will be the first against the wall.

‘But’ – he likes to remind me – ‘I’m the last generation of actual fighters. Any nerd tries to replace me, I’ll box his ears.’

‘It’s been a while,’ Mitch said, blowing hair out of his eyes. ‘Where have you been? Post-break-up solitude?’

‘Something like that,’ I replied, shrugging. As my arm lifted up, Mitch saw the contour of my tattoo.

‘What have you done? Is this your post-break-up statement? A tattoo? You cliché. You’re an idiot,’ he said. ‘Nay, a blithering wannabe-trendy idiot.’

‘Yeah, well ... my brother made me do it.’

‘Brother? It is all go, isn’t it?’ he said. He paused. ‘Did you see the Samuel Beckett YouTube thing I put on your wall? It’s hilarious.’

‘I was busy dude, sorry.’

‘That’s you all over, Kit ... you have a book out and you think you’re Samuel Beckett. You’ve changed.’

Mitch believed in only maintaining real relationships online. His Facebook friends were family and friends he knew. He was nothing like Aziz, who encouraged me to be a numbers whore to help spread the word about my work.

‘Bruv, truss in an Aziz,’ Aziz would tell me. ‘The more friends and followers you have, the more interactions you create. It’s all about interactions.’

Mitch was just offended I would let people in on my private life.

‘Sorry, Mitch,’ I said. ‘I very rarely go on Facebook. It’s become a quagmire of familial oppression.’

‘Why have an account?’

‘Because my family might be the only people who ever buy my book,’ I said, laughing. I looked around the pub. It was loud. There were quite a few drinkers. It felt okay being out. Just fine. I laid out the statistics for Mitch. ‘I have 843 Facebook friends, I am related to 207 of them, am good friends with another 234 of them, leaving 402 people I am acquainted with. The numbers don’t add up. That’s a lot of interactions, a lot of posts, a lot of Mafia invitations. So sorry I missed your Ginsberg thing.’

‘Beckett,’ Mitch corrected me. ‘Wait. You have 234 close friends? I don’t think I even know 234 people in the entire world.’

Mitch is my favourite person to hang out with apart from Aziz because they represent opposite ends of a spectrum. I’m either destined to be an over-confident buffoon like Aziz or a curmudgeon like Mitch. He is balding but still carries a comb in

his blazer pocket. That vintage attitude is why I like him. I may find the concept of hankies revolting, but I'm glad for him having one. He's Friendster in a Twitter universe, dial-up in a web 2.0 second life. He is my meatspace. Mitch likes to talk about the good ol' days. I've missed him these last few months.

'That's cos you're a barfly.'

'Very true. But 234 people?'

'Maybe I need to cull some people,' I admitted.

'You definitely do,' Mitch said and shook his head. He went outside for a cigarette.

I could easily get rid of 400-odd people, I thought. I could reclaim my space. I could hide the 'add' button too. Make it harder to approach me. The only 3 requests in my 'add' folder were 3 people I didn't know or have mutual friends with. And the only 2 people in my folder labelled 'pending requests' were Kitab 2 and new-to-Facebook Rach. *Now* she wanted to be friends. I'd left her hanging.

Mitch came back, stinking of fresh cigarette to add to the dull ache of old nicotine ingrained in his sports coat. 'The reason I hate modern life,' he declared, loud enough for those around us to hear, sermonising, 'why I love books, is all this bullshit you're saying ... that's what we're reduced to, isn't it? Etchings and imprints ... Connections used to be important. Now it's all selfies and sandwiches on Twitter. Now the very meaning of the word, it doesn't mean shit. Associations have some weird cultural capital now.'

‘Innit,’ I said, to purposely undercut him.

‘Did you get a friend request from Rach?’ I nodded. ‘You know she has a new boyfriend?’

‘You’re Facebook friends with Rach?’

‘Oh, yes. Dunno why you don’t go out anymore.’

‘She dumped me. She said because I was a self-obsessed depressive.’

‘She does have a *joie de vivre* you don’t really do ...’ he said, downing the rest of his pint and signalling for another 2.

‘I’m going through a lot of stuff, man.’

‘No need to act like a bore about it.’

‘Anyway, what’s your problem with Twitter?’

‘I don’t “do” Twitter. It’s all pictures of sandwiches and misspelled signs, no?’

‘Only for those who don’t use it properly.’

‘That’s what your feed is full of ... Anyways, I hate how we’re all diminishing circles of actual friendship.’

‘What?’

‘All your followers and all your Facebook friends know your every movement. Your real friends know what you’re like. Where’s someone who knows both?’

‘That used to be Rach. But then she hated it when I was always online.’

‘Look at her now. She can’t get enough of the stuff.’

‘She’s a social animal,’ I mumbled. ‘Just another content queen.’

When I got home, I Googled Mitch to verify how off-radar he was. It didn't take many search results to discover Mitch had a secret blog that no one knew about, called 'The Weird Shit People Say to Me'. Of the entries, 3 could be attributed to me. I don't mind.

'I'm really excited about this trip,' Aziz tells me as we're sitting in his room. 'I packed your camera, for the posterity.'

'It is effectively yours. You use it all the time.'

'How else can I document my lifestyle? No one would believe me otherwise.'

'Just keep it,' I said of the unwanted present Dad bought me Duty Free when he returned from a singles holiday to Prague last year.

'Yeah, you can't frame a decent shot.'

'Decent framed pictures do rule the world.'

'If only I could Instagram some of those sexcapades. The world isn't ready.'

Aziz has packed enough underwear for a week, but only 3 t-shirts, because they're his coolest. He bought a black vest that resembles the one Teddy Baker's wearing in his photograph. He and I debate the word wife-beater. He ends it by telling me to man up, which irks me into a sulk. I then ask whereabouts in New York Teddy Baker lives.

'Well, it says Brooklyn on his account,' Aziz says, lifting his suitcase up and down like he's weight training with it.

'Wait, you didn't message him?'

‘Nah, man, that’s part of the surprise.’

‘You’re going to just turn up? He’ll think you’re weird.’

‘Part of the challenge is getting through the awkwardness and getting to be best friends,’ Aziz says, downing his tea.

‘How do you know how to find him? You know New York’s pretty massive, right?’

‘Dude, give me some motherfrickin’ credit. I Googled him. I found his Facebook, his Twitter, his Foursquare and his LinkedIn. I know where he works right now. I can see where he checks in on Foursquare or just follow his Twitter. Mate, I’ll find the guy. All I have to do is turn my wi-fi on.’

‘And your data roaming off. I ain’t helping you with another mobile phone bill.’

‘That was different. That was phone chat lines.’

‘Yeah, I’m not helping you pay another mobile phone bill because you’re too much of a dick to use your phone wisely.’

‘Fine, anyway, stop making this awkward for me. I was excited till I spoke to you. You know, Kit, you’re such a hangover depressive. You just gotta smiley face up. Smiley face up.’

Aziz points at me. I force a smile.

‘Yeah. Sorry, man.’

‘What’s your 5-point plan for your new tattoo? It’s new tattoo day. Today your life will change, just a little bit. And it’ll be fucking awesome.’

‘I dunno, get some breakfast, do some writing. I got a reading later. Whatever.’

‘Okay, so have you made a list of fit and female acquaintances you can impress with your tattoo? Have you made a list of places people might approach you and say, wow, that looks cool. Is that Hayley going to the reading?’ Aziz raises his eyebrows at me, waving air glasses up and down.

‘It’s not just for pulling girls. Is it?’ I say. ‘And yes she is.’

‘And now you’re finally single.’

I panic. I show him my arm. ‘Should it be so red?’

I show Aziz my arm. There are some inflamed red rings around the tattoo. He dismisses it. ‘Just put some moisturiser on it. It’ll be fine.’

Sick Charlie has given me nappy rash cream to quell the burn so I put that on. I’ve expressly been told that moisturiser isn’t great and petroleum jelly is worse. Aloe vera or baby rash cream is best for soothing 2 hours of skin rubbing. It burns a little. Just like an inflammation. It’s fine.

We hear a car horn beep twice outside, signalling the arrival of Aziz’s cab I called for him. I don’t want him to go. Last night was the first night I’ve not hung out with him in 6 months. Who’s going to keep me entertained? He wants to go. I don’t want him to go. I could ask him to stay. He probably won’t stay. He’s doing this for my good. Stop distracting me. Give me time to write. He clutches me and gives me a long slow cuddle. We have this thing where you hug and the first one to feel awkward or break the cuddle for the sake of practicality loses. Currently I’m losing 172–4 to Aziz. But I hold on because he’s my brother and I feel

protective over him and he's an impulsive funny man and he's off to do something slightly stupid but I respect his desire to see things through.

And hell, at least he doesn't sit there and over-analyse for an inordinate amount of time. Except he's still holding on and I'm worried the cab will leave without him and we'll have to wait for another one and he'll miss his flight and it'll be because I didn't let go in time. I pull away.

'You better get your cab, dude.'

Aziz smiles, crosses over to the chalkboard next to our fridge and changes 172 to 173. Damn it. I've been hustled.

'See you man,' he says.

'Please take care and don't do anything stupid with a bunch of strangers you found off the internet,' I say, grimacing.

'Read my blog,' he says, throwing his hands out and waving them jazzily at me. 'I'll be back soon.'

'Come back with both your kidneys.'

'Promote my progress on Twitter.'

The cab beeps again.

'Keep your passport in your pocket at all times.'

'Blog comments are always welcome too.'

'Just go.'

'I'm going.'

'I love you very much, Aziz.'

'I know.'

The cab beeps its horn again and Aziz picks up his Eastpak

and my suitcase and heads to the door. Instead of watching his cab pull away like a proper surrogate dad would, I go to the toilet and stare at myself topless in the mirror, trying to ingrain the new 'me' into my mind's eye. I spend the next hour with my phone trying to take the best casual selfie of my tattoo for Instagram. Outside a car keeps sounding its horn before eventually leaving.

aZiZWILLKILLYOU episode

5 Aziz vs Stalking Prey

[posted 11 September, 16:10]

Word up homeys, it's your boy Aziz. Welcome to my new blog challenge – meet The Boy with the Bow Tie Tattoo – my doppelganger. So pay attention closely to the breakneck speed with which I do questionable things with questionable people. Because that's what life's about. Living questionably.

I am revitalised, blaaads, like a bottle of mineral water or whatever. Revitalised. Revitalising.

There I was, on the hunt for the Boy with the Bow Tie Tattoo. Just like that Swedish guy in that book where he's looking for some stripper with a dragon tattoo or something. I don't know. I never read. Well, I do – and my main man, Kitab has sent me off with some books, but I haven't got time to read them. I am on one tip only. One mission. The Boy with the Bow Tie Tattoo.

I'm gonna skip the part about the flight because who wants to know about what films I watched (Limitless aka Shittyless, and Rango aka No, Mate, Just Go – thanks for asking), what the food was like (I'm Indian, I grew up on thalis and plates with compartments, what can I say?) and how much I slept (not at all, man's buzzin'!). But I will tell you one thing about aeroplanes ... if you spend the departure lounge time eyeing up buff girls and

hoping you get to sit next to them so you can be all like, 'hey hey hey' and they'll be all like, 'wanna meet me in the bathroom', IT WON'T HAPPEN PEOPLE. You will end up next to some fat dude who is mister elbows and he's borrowing your window, leaning over you and dipping his tits in your complimentary white wine, or some old lady who'll take her shoes off and put her stinky feet up on the seat under her like it's her manor. You gotta put that out of your mind and you will end up next to a horny travelling goddess. Trust Aziz. It's foolproof. I know. Cos I ended up sandwiched next to some fat dude all elbows and wouldn't let me borrow his window and some old lady who took her shoes off and tucked her stinky feet under her on the seat. Every now and then. I'd feel her big toenail catch on my jeans. My jeans! What the hell? Or WTF as you kids like saying.

Acronymns. MIAWFOA. Man, it's a world FULL of acronyms.

So, I landed in New York, and I got through customs after having some LOLs with the customs guy. Because I like to put my terrorist face on, get all screwface and serious and see what he asks me. And the dude was like, Aziz, is that a Muslim name? And I was like, hell naw, man ... Just because I appear to be from the Indian sub-continent that immediately makes me a Muslim? COME ON. Asia's got more countries than America's got states, check yo'self, racist fool – what? That is a geographic fact. And eventually he let me through.

I could not wait to get to a wi-fi signal, so I could check in with

Teddy Baker and see what was going off in this dude's life. It was cold, man. Like cold-cold. And I was braving it with my jacket unzipped and my shirt opened just a little to show my badass bow tie. I can only wear shirts now cos they go with my fly-fly bow tie. Anyway, I keep getting away from it. I was bussing to get to a wi-fi. Plus I was ti-ti.

#titi #wifi #azizinnewyork

And then, it kinda just opened its legs and ejaculated all over me from a distance. There it was – New York, New York. And I was like, dude, this city is majestic. I love this place. It's full of everything – tall buildings, vulnerable girls trying to make it in show business, Spider-man. I was on the subway next to some dude who was writing battle raps on a yellow legal pad and 2 girls talking about some guy's choad and I got all excited so I grabbed my phone out and did a data dump. Eff you roaming charges, I am a man on a mission. Roaming this world, looking for the best adventures only your boy Aziz can have.

So I did a data dump, and seriously, all my emails are about stupid fucking bullshit on Facebook – I have one Facebook mission, get my friend Steve's mum to unfriend me. GET. THE. MUMS. OFF. FACEBOOK. Steve's mum just likes everything I do and adds all these stupid applications to my wall about flowers and she has asked me a question about 'my secret love' and that's all she does on Facebook. I met her once, at Steve's engagement party and now she thinks we're BFFs so she just adds an endless stream of bullshit to my Facebook. Anyway, so I

checked into Twitter after my disappointing email scan-through and I see Teddy Baker's account. I'm wondering whether I should start @-replying him stuff just so he can see me and get prepared for Aziz-ma-geddon. I might go to the Statue of Liberty and pose for the same photo as his now infamous avatar, but you know, Instagram it with the Earlybird filter, just to make it classy, and make it my avatar. Cos Teddy's avatar on Facebook and Twitter is now just a picture of his face, and without the sunglasses and world-beating grin he doesn't look as much like me, which is a bit disappointing. But it's all about the tattoo, guys. You know? I'm all about that tattoo.

His Twitter said that Teddy was at work but I followed through a conversation he was having with a Twitter user called @justiceforpigs and they were going to meet up at 7 p.m. at a bar in the East Village, and both had to bring things for the other, like Teddy owed @justiceforpigs a book and @justiceforpigs wanted Teddy to see this new outfit he'd bought. Who knows? Maybe they're lovers. I will find out, blog fans. You know why? I'm going to some bar in the East Village at 7 p.m. Tonight. This is happening.

There are 9 comments for this blog:

Anonymous user: LOL

Geraint365: SRSLY? You're a stalker. WTF.

AZIZWILLKILLYOU: Yo, Geraint, if that is your real name, fuck off my blog if you don't like it.

Geraint365: Duuuude, I was joking, innit. Calm down.

AZIZWILLKILLYOU: Safe, blud. Strap in.

Milky_Sorez: This is exactly the problem with the internet. Over-enthusiastic fuckwits like you who can't write. Get over yourself hombre. This is shit. Who gives a fuck? Like, 2 people? And I've listened to your Mixcloud sets. Heard of dubstep? No, I didn't think so. Seriously, this is worse than the worst thing on the internet.

Anonymous user: LOLZ, AZIZ YOU LEGEND.

Gustave_the_First: This point seriously puts human rights into question. Aziz, I've only just come to your site because I was alerted to it on Twitter. Legal issues aside (I'm a lawyer), you are a despicable human being and I hope you get arrested for harassment.

AZIZWILLKILLYOU: WTF, CTFO, MIAWFOA.

History:

[We Love Books Bitches – Google](#)
[How to do public speaking – Google](#)
[\[291\] – Twitter \[12\] – Facebook](#)

I'm walking down my high street and I allow myself to feel good. I never feel good. I never allow myself to enjoy anything. If something feels good, I worry about it going wrong or the next thing to go wrong. The worst thing I can do is feel optimistic, because that's akin to arrogance.

But today, I allow myself to feel good.

Everything about this day smells of possibility and chance. A smell of breakfast takes me to a new café I've not noticed before.

The newsagent stocks one vagrant copy of the *New Yorker* seemingly just for me. A girl smiles at me as she gets off the bus. I get a tax rebate. For the exact amount of the cost of a new pair of Nikes I saw on the internet. It's going my way today. I catch myself in the mirror because once I get back to the flat, despite the autumnal chill outside, I wear a t-shirt and stick the heating on so I can see my tattoo.

I'm doing a book reading later that night at a bar in Shoreditch. We've been asked to read our favourite party anecdote, so I've prepared something about a night I spent out walking the canals with Aziz where we planned to find freaky sex parties on boats and failed.

I pack up what I need to read and some books to sell. I walk outside. It's freezing. I am braving the cold so there's more chance people can see my new ink, so no need to layer up. But it's freezing. I crave hoodie. I crave thermals. I crave warmth.

I walk down the high street, against the contraflow of returning commuters, victorious in their ability to survive another day at work. I wonder if they've achieved the same amount of work as me, except with shielded screens and covert clicking back onto spreadsheets: watched YouTube videos, snacked, clicked through every single social network available; replied to emails as promptly as possible to indicate work efficiency and manage a total concentrated work effort of 55 minutes or so. We all spend our working days looking forward to our next meal.

My phone rings. It's Rach's number. I ignore it. She calls again. I let it ring in my pocket. Undeterred, she calls me again. This time, my impulses can't let a ringing phone go unanswered. Must connect. I answer.

'Can't you speak to me now?' She sounds pissed off for being ignored. The first time I hear her voice in 6 months and she sounds angry with me. Nothing has changed.

'No, I'm out. I'll call you tomorrow,' I say.

'Out, well, that's good at least.'

'Glad you approve.'

'No, I just think that's a really good thing, you really needed to ...'

‘Is that why you called, Rach? To have a go?’

‘No,’ she says. ‘I was just thinking about you. I wanted to check you’re okay. I worry about you. And nobody’s seen you. I worry about you being on your own.’

‘Well, I’m not on my own.’

‘Oh. Good. Who ...’

‘Look. I’m fine,’ I reply. ‘I don’t need your worry. I’m a fully functioning adult.’ I hang up the phone.

I have an @-reply on Twitter. It’s from Hayley. It says: ‘See you in a bit. I’m running late. Looking forward to it whisky buddy.’

I tweet her back: ‘Pre-pub-dutch courage. Join me if you can?’

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