



AHMER BASHIR

Within a mile from Bradford City Hall, where political upheavals such as the Salman Rushdie book burning have been photographed, Ahmer discovered his love for books and storytelling inside a toy room in Ward K2, St Luke's Hospital.

Ahmer graduated with a Major Script Prize in Southampton and taught screenwriting at college before setting up a writing circle near Titus Salt's Mill.

Ahmer's live storytelling has been sponsored by Wakefield Literature Festival and Leeds Pride. He first penned Nayil in *A Letter to Mummyjee*.

Ahmer writes meaningful children's stories that reflect diversity in Britain.

About Diary of the Halal Kid

Fourteen-year-old Nayil Firdous wants to be in the school play. Mummyjee won't let him act or chill out with friends after school. Nayil worries he'll never have a 'proper friend'.

Mrs Bird, the drama teacher, sets him a challenge to note people's behaviour in a diary.

Naanajee dies. Mummyjee goes to Pakistan.

It's the holy month of Ramadan. Nayil is grieving. But when Tommy turns up at school, and sends his heart racing, Nayil finds himself improvising every day to new situations for his 'proper friend'.

Maybe Mummyjee will never find out he's acting?

DIARY OF THE HALAL KID

Chapter One

I have no friends. Not at home, not at school. But I take a deep breath to dance like I don't care.

I am the wind.

I am the sea.

I float my arms as sailing wings.

The music stops.

Everyone stops. We are listening to our breathing over distant echoes from other classrooms, sweating our buttons off.

They're ignoring me.

This is Studio 2. At the end of every drama lesson we do a dance exercise. Then we sit on the benches in the spectator area, so Mrs Bird can do her 'Picture this scene in your mind' moment.

Dinesh and Lisa sit beside the dickhead. Backstabbers smile at me as if they are saying, *Give us the dirt on Lisa and Dinesh.*

The lights go off.

I sit on a bench at the back.

On my own

Talking to a backstabber hurts you later.

When Mrs Bird draws the long curtain over the tinted window, it becomes so dark you can't see your fingers. Dinesh used to say it gave him the creeps.

We all look the same in the dark, worrying that we are nothing without friends. Dad would say, 'We are breathing shadows worrying about what we can't have. We make ourselves real by talking.'

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They won't talk to me.

Allah, please can you get my friends to forget what I said? Just do that thing you did, when you created the universe. Say, 'Be' and wipe it from history, innit?

'We are actors when we behave for others,' Mrs Bird says, softly, moving from left to right, without any sound from her shoes. 'Think about a moment when you have acted to please someone. How did you decide what you did? How were you feeling?'

I'm done thinking about it. It's given me a headache.

Someone taps their shoe on the ground.

A sniff.

A cough.

A bench creaks.

A giggle.

More giggles.

Why is it that lads act silly when Kyle sits with Lisa? Lisa won't want me in her GCSE group next year. Drama is ruined. For ever.

'We are beautiful human beings,' says Mrs Bird gently.

This is the moment after the silence.

'We perform considerate behaviours. This Easter, I want you to make notes about behaviours. Observe those around you ...'

The bell erupts so loudly, bums jolt benches. Ringing vibrates inside my ears. Fluorescent lights buzz on yellow.

Shoes scrape as everyone files towards the stairs.

'9AQ have a great Easter! Kyle and Nayil stay behind,' shouts Mrs Bird.

I sit back down.

Dinesh picks up his school bag from the bench. He walks down the steps. Doesn't look in my direction.

I get this sinking feeling inside. I want to shout at him, but I watch him step through the double doors and out of sight.

Mrs Bird comes closer. Her hair is an afro these days.

'Now then, Mr O'Brien and Mr Firdous?' says Mrs Bird.

Facing the wall, Kyle grips his strap and adjust his bag higher on his shoulder.

Mrs Bird closes the door, leaving Lisa standing outside.

‘What do I always say about swearing?’ asks Mrs Bird.

‘Swearing is only tolerated when it’s not personal,’ I say.

Kyle looks sharply.

I walk down the steps off the spectator gallery.

‘I thought I had lovely boys in 9AQ. I’m disappointed.’

‘Sorry Miss.’

‘Not to me Nayil.’

Allah blessed Kyle with chocolate brown hair. If he smiled more, people might notice his dimples. ‘Kyle, I’m sorry,’ I say.

‘I’m not.’

That look Kyle gets in his eyes when you piss him off, it’s like he wants to chop you up with a meat cleaver. It wouldn’t surprise me if he becomes a mass murderer.

‘I didn’t start it –’

‘He called me a dickhead. He’s an immature twat!’

That word hurts me even more than the other one he called me earlier.

‘Kyle! I want to hear an apology, so we can all start our holidays. Or do you want to tell Mrs Calderdale why detention is deserved?’ Mrs Bird folds her arms.

Kyle O’Brien’s lower lip always shakes when he’s angry. He pulls it inwards towards his teeth. Right now, his mouth stretches sideways into a smile.

‘All right, I’m sorry.’

I reach forward to shake hands.

He doesn’t take my hand. The door flies open. In the corridor, he puts his arm around Lisa and takes her away, glancing back to see if I’m pissed off.

Dickhead.

‘Miss. I’m not putting drama down as a GCSE choice. What’s the point? I’m not doing drama. Dat’s dat.’ I walk back up the stairs to get my bag. I feel so tired, I sit down.

Running shoes. Scraping, sliding shoes.

A girl screams. Boys laugh.

Doors slam.

I watch Mrs Bird, putting all her files into her box. Her face is bright pink. She looks like I’ve ripped a hole out of her.

‘Sorry Miss.’

‘It’s not like you to swear,’ she says.

‘He called me a stupid Paki, Miss.’

She sounds tired, ‘Why didn’t you come to me?’

‘Because ... Miss, what did you mean ... all people are acting?’

Mrs Bird puts her bag on her shoulder and lifts the box. ‘We’ll chat after the holidays.’

‘D’you mean what you said?’

She stops. ‘Always.’

‘I’m tired of acting for other people,’ I tell her.

Sighing, she puts her box on the table by the door. And comes up the spectator gallery to sit near me, wafting sweet, flowery perfume which my brother used to talk about. She tucks her cream skirt neatly underneath her legs.

All is quiet.

‘It’s not like you to fall out with anyone.’

‘I haven’t done nothing Miss.’

‘That’s a double negative. What does it mean when you put two negatives together?’

‘It means I’ve done something. Is it fair Lisa doesn’t want me in her drama group?’

‘Actually, I think it is a responsible decision. Don’t you? Kyle is her boyfriend.’

What does she know?

‘There’s plenty of people in the class,’ she says, smiling.

I can’t tell her Dinesh is sucking up to Kyle by doing his homework. Or that people don’t call me names when I’m around Lisa. And now they will!

My eyes heat up. ‘To be fair, I don’t need anyone.’

My skinny, long hands. Why can’t they be fatter like all the boys?

‘Nayil. We align our understanding with others ... by explaining,’ she says.

‘I did. But Lisa asked me again today. Lisa says, go up to Kyle and smack him.’

Mrs Bird’s smile disappears.

‘I told her to go spin on it.’

Mrs Bird frowns. 'Why would Lisa say that?'

'Lisa wants me to play a jealous ex-boyfriend. She says if we fight, she stays popular. She loves being famous, you know.'

'I'm sure it's a misunderstanding.'

'Dad says Muslims can have bad thoughts in our heads, but we can't act on them.'

'Your dad is wise.'

That word that Kyle called me ... immature ... I need to act all grown up and dat.

I speak softer now. 'Muslims can call a dickhead a dickhead, but we have to make up with the dickhead by the end of the day. Or we go to hell. I'm not going to hell for no one Miss. Not for Lisa. Not for Kyle. That's why I said sorry. But he doesn't want to be friends with me. Because he's a dickhead, Miss.'

I totally sounded grown up.

'Don't worry. You'll have lots of girlfriends.'

'My mum says Muslims can't have girlfriends. You meet a girl. Then you marry her. And dat's dat.'

She laughs, straightening my hair with her fingertips, smiling at me like a mum should. 'Life's more complicated. That's why you're learning drama.'

'Kyle's using Lisa and Dinesh. And Lisa is using me.'

'Do you think you're feeling ... slightly jealous?'

'Jealous of *who*? Kyle can have her.'

'You're a lovely boy. Someone will come along and sweep you off your feet.'

I don't know why, but I want to tell her. All of it.

'Can you keep a secret Miss?'

She looks at her watch. 'Well ... yes?'

'Promise Miss?'

'I promise.'

'Lisa and I were just acting.'

I'm watching her to see if she gets all shocked and dat.

'Acting what?' she asks, smiling wider.

'Lisa said my role was to be the best boyfriend this school has ever known. Every person's body speaks a language, you know. An actor gives proper attention where it's deserved, she said. She did a course at Stage 84. My mum

won't let me do anything except mosque, that's why I was rubbish. We did lots of different exercises, the copycat Mezzys-whatsit.'

'Meisner technique?'

'Th's'im Miss. I had to focus on Lisa like she said. We used that room under the stage which you said no one can use unless there's a show. We did lots of stuff in there.'

'You did *what* in my dressing room?'

'We practised until we sounded genuine. Every time people saw us making lovey-dovey talk, we'd already done two dinner-hours of rehearsing.'

Her eyebrows are tilted like they're about to take off. 'Why were you rehearsing?'

'Lisa was in trouble Miss. We had to make people think our relationship was beautiful to keep the guys away.'

She goes all still. 'What guys?'

'Boys followed her home. She was scared. Lisa's mum wanted to transfer her to another school.'

'Goodness. I didn't know.'

'I saw them Miss. It was Ash and Lanky.'

She moves to the edge of her seat to face me. 'Did you report it?'

'Wasn't up to me, was it? Lisa said no. I walked right up to them and I told them to go do one.'

'You should have told me,' she says, frowning.

'I'm not scared of being beaten up Miss, they don't know my mum. She smacks me all the time. I'm used to it.'

'Nayil!' she says.

Sometimes I forget white people don't understand Pakistanis. 'Winding you up Miss...' my face heats up. I didn't want Lisa to transfer. So, it was no big deal pretending to be her boyfriend.'

She tilts her head and does that voice when she wants to prove you're lying. 'Don't you think this will hurt Lisa? You had a beautiful relationship.'

'Swear to God Miss, Lisa knows. She said I shouldn't mind doing a good deed because that's what Muslims do, innit? Muslims and good deeds, are like bread and margarine. We can't eat bread without margarine because it's dry, you can't eat margarine without bread, because it's yuk. If you put dry and yuk together, you get love.'

Mrs Bird laughs.

I've always liked Mrs Bird. She laughs more than the other teachers. In Year 7, Dinesh used to go all nervous and shrink away when Mrs Bird came near him. I don't know why. She's never once looked scary.

'I ought to write that down, because it's good, Nayil.'

'Lisa wanted to be Meg Ryan in *You've Got Mail*. She wanted our first kiss to be perfect. Said I had to move in like Tom Hanks It's an awesome movie Miss, but it's boring. I was sick in her mouth. It was spag. It came from the bottom of my throat all sticky and that. We laughed her heads off and bogeys flew out of her nose. Then I was proper sick, Miss, But, the next day we did it in front of the whole school ... snogging. On the fifth table in the fifth row of the dining hall, which can be seen from from the balcony and through the windows. Maximum exposure.'

The lines on Mrs Bird's forehead disappear. Her jaw widens before words come out, 'So ... Lisa wasn't your girlfriend?'

'Now you get me.'

'I remember when you kissed,' she says, one side of her face smiling.

'Acting works Miss. We got well famous. People wanted to sit next to us. Bringing us gifts. We just acted it on the spot. What's that thing we call it? Improwhyzingit.'

'Improvisation?'

'That's it. That's what we did.'

'How far would you have continued pretending if Kyle hadn't kissed Lisa?' I sigh. 'Lisa's the only one who understands me, Miss. That's all I know.'

'Why were you angry?'

'Kyle swore at me.'

'Is that all it was?'

'Lisa's telling me if we fight, it will help us become best friends. How does it make sense?'

'Let it settle over the holidays. My goodness. Playing a role all year? To protect Lisa? Our very own Dylan O'Brien.'

Everyone knows Mrs Bird fancies Dylan O'Brien from *Teen Wolf*, she mentions him every day.

'We believe in the supernatural. My mum thinks our relatives are possessed by djinns. She's always burning these smelly sticks as soon as they're

gone. Our mosque teacher says our feet should touch the ground and our heads should think like the angels. Angels have wings of light you know. They're well hot. And I'm getting hot, have you seen my muscles? I work out Miss. Ever since I got famous, I use my brother's weights every night. I'd totally be a werewolf.'

Mrs Bird mumbles, 'Drama ... rivalry...love.' She stares at the far wall where the spotlights shine at the stage from.

'Do you know what, Nayil?' she says, grabbing my hand, she pulls me up. 'You have given me an idea. What a wonderful boy you are.'

She runs down the steps.

'Idea, Miss?'

'How to get the funding for the school play,' she says, picking up her giant velvet teacher bag, with the sewn flowers.

'I thought it was cancelled?' I ask.

She stops in front of me. 'We have seven hundred students at this school who believe you are a Romeo. Do you understand, Nayil? Drama is in your heart. It requires good craft to fool everyone. I want the same dedication in your homework.'

'I always do my homework Miss,' I say.

I know it's not true.

'Pay special attention.'

'Meaning what, Miss?'

'Try to spot secrets through people's behaviours. Every day, make notes about how people affect people.'

'You mean like a diary? I used to keep a diary, Miss.'

'Why did you stop?'

Yes. Why did I?

'Homework!' She smiles, 'Do you promise?'

'Yes Miss.'

I'm gonna keep that promise.

'Have a lovely Easter.'

'You too Miss.'

I follow her, so I can watch her running down the corridor with her ankle-length cardigan flowing behind her like a cape.

There goes the proper teacher of this school.