

WHISKY CHASERS

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Samir loves Joe's face. He studies it every day in class: a face as old as his own but already, in eighteen years, the cliffs and hills and odd proportions of its geography have been shaped by life's weather. Samir likes to observe the ever-watchful green eyes, hidden in their shadowy alcoves over the flat nose and cheekbones, and the heavy brow that scrunches up with Joe's moods – all those sculptural planes could have been carved by Easter Islanders. Then there's the pout of his lips, the pucker of their concentration or the twist of their anger. But most of all, Samir examines the thoughts as they cross the wide-open landscape of the face. Tries hard to read their cloud shapes from the merest shadow.

In class Joe is quiet, watching, but outside with his friends, his voice is loud and gruff and the words come flowing fast as streams; and he laughs roaring, water-falling chuckles and shouts primal animal cries. Alone in a sun-splashed space he will

practise his shadow-boxing, dancing with his silhouette against a wall and throwing combination punches, ducking, covering and weaving from the phantom jabs it flings back at him. He walks with a swagger, rolling his shoulders; and when he talks he throws his arms wide in wild gestures and listens beating time with a hand on a thigh or drumming the table with his fingers. He likes to tell everyone he's done it with girls, girls from other schools, girls from nightclubs, and women, older women, and a model off the telly. He probably has as well, or at least wants to. He probably wants them the way Samir wants him.

Girls are alien creatures to Samir, big slow languid things, round and doughy with breasts and hips, all udders and eyelashes. Not like Joe, with his skinny, sinewy body, whippet fast and beanpole thin. A boy with so much energy it snaps and crackles off him like static. Samir wants Joe for the truth he thinks he's missing. He wants the feel of him, his warm body under a hand, wants his heartbeat through soft cotton, his breath against a cheek. Even the name, he wants the name: J-O-E – those three oh-so-English letters. He wants those. They possess his mind like a song, a mantra, like the turn of the planet – everything revolves around Joe.

After school Samir works at the Co-op. Nothing revolves around the Co-op, except maybe the late-night drunks and the people who come in to buy multi-pack dog food. And Mr Habib, the Co-op manager, who makes Samir tie his hair back with an elastic band when he's on duty behind the till or when he's manning the cigarette counter. Sometimes, when the shop is empty, Mr Habib comes over and straightens Samir's name tag, with its one star, then he puts a heavy hand on each of Samir's arms and squeezes his non-existent biceps.

'There,' he'll say. 'Much smarter. You will move up the ranks!'

Fridays are the best days at the Co-op because they're when Joe comes in to buy his cigarettes. He doesn't look at Samir and

Samir tries not to look at him as he doesn't have his hair to hide behind (it's not that long really, when it's loose, just long enough to conceal his ears and his eyes).

This is what Joe says to Samir: 'Twenty B&H. Cheers, mate.' And Samir nods, takes his money and gives him his change and his cigarettes. They never acknowledge each other, even though they're in the same class at school.

Today, before Joe comes over, Samir sees him in one of those big curved mirrors that hangs above the drinks aisle. He is wearing a russet-coloured woollen jumper that's far too big and makes him look like a sad sack. When he thinks no one is looking he pulls a flat-faced bottle of whisky from a high shelf, lifts his jumper and tucks the bottle between his belly and his belt. He glances up and, seeing Samir watching in the mirror, licks his lips and rubs his belly. Samir smiles because it's almost like that children's game – can you do the two things at once?

On the way out Joe puts his coins on the counter and looks Samir straight in the eye. 'Twenty B&H. Cheers, mate.' It's a test. He wants to see what Samir will do. But Samir does nothing. Says nothing, just scrapes the money up as usual, checks it's correct and then hands Joe his box of twenty fags. Joe smiles and gives him a wink. 'Thanks, man.' He holds up an empty hand. 'And thanks for the five-finger discount.'

His shift over, Samir shelters outside the shop, watching the rain and thinking about Joe. He rubs his work shirt across his wet hair, but it doesn't seem to make any difference so he stuffs it in his bag. Water spurts through a hole in the awning, splattering the pavement beside him. It sounds like someone pissing. He puts an elbow on the fruit and veg stand: the metal's cold against his skin. He's glad to be alone with the rain; there's something calming about it. Inside the shop the strip lights flicker out, and Mr Habib comes to the door.

'Samir, you still here?'