

Jessie Hodges

There are Things We Must not Know

There had never been a cherry tree on the edge of the estate. Although Taara could remember skinning her palms on the bark as she pelted past Billy McGregor over the makeshift finish line, the patch of concrete assured her nothing could have ever interrupted this grey expanse. The walk from the station had felt like taking a route she'd memorised from a map but never seen before herself. Another Taara Ram, one who had taken up her place at Imperial and commuted daily from Tottenham Hale, would have been familiar with the labyrinth of construction sites. But the Taara who had run away stopped before the billboards, struggling to remember who in the community resembled this young white couple smiling happily in their £300,000 one bedroom flat. Though amidst her confusion, she had to admire the craftsmanship behind the advertising campaign. Not because the grainy image made the eyesore behind the fence any easier to look at, but because the editor had done a truly fantastic job of photoshopping out the nine other roommates required to afford the deposit.

A chill clung to the steps in block C. Even as Taara sweated from the climb to the fourth floor, she could feel the cold leaking through the sole of her trainers. The building she lived in now had a lift, and a carpeted staircase- one which did not create an echo from the breaths of the man coming up behind her. She turned, ready to press her back to the grimy railing in a move she could pretend was borne out of a polite willingness to let him pass.

“Taara?”

“Billy!” The embrace was automatic, so immediate it barely left time for her to register how different he looked from the skinny nineteen year old she'd left behind.

“God, you've changed. Amsterdam's clearly done you well.” The suggestive lilt in his voice as he pronounced *Amsterdam* made her smile.

“Can't pretend it's anything different to how we used to spend our time,” she replied drily. She noted the shopping bags in his hands. “I didn't know you still lived here.”

His chuckle came just a moment too late to deflect the awkward fact that she would have known, had she kept in touch- or visited even once in three years.

“Yeah-though hopefully not for long. I got promoted to sales exec last year, so I'm looking around for a place of my own.”

A ghost of the butterflies that used to leap around her stomach struck up again as she realised he was trying to impress her.

“Congratulations. Your dad must be proud.”

He nodded, effectively stalling the conversation, and she knew the friendly greetings were over.

“Taara...I really am so sorry about your Mum. I don't think any of us can believe she's gone.” His hand came up to squeeze her shoulder. “If there's any help you need with the funeral, just let me know.”

“Thanks, I think my Aunt’s dealt with everything. I-” She swallowed. “I should have come back sooner.”

“Well, no point standing on the stairs all day. Let me grab your bag.” And because he was Billy, he didn’t remark on the size of her luggage, too small a suitcase for anyone who was intending to stay longer than a few days.

“Do you want to come in for a tea?” He asked when they reached their balcony.

“I’d love to, but I’d better say hello to my Aunt first. Thank her for staying here to sort out the flat.”

Billy grinned, showing no evidence he’d heard her voice crack. “So maybe we can have a drink and some dinner later?”

“As long as it’s not microwaved bread again.”

“That was one time! I’m a sophisticated man now.”

“Finally got rid of the Spurs duvet cover?”

“Come round and see.”

As he closed his front door, she lingered for a second, thinking wistfully that there might have been another Taara who knew exactly what his bedroom looked like now.

Inside, Auntie Rosie had made herself at home. Not that Taara minded- the flat had not really been her mother’s for over thirteen years. During 2006, the walls had taken on a sponge-like quality, so that even after He could no longer walk through their door, 126 Church Street still remembered Him.

She sat in her old room, struggling over the blank paper that should have been a eulogy at least a week ago. Her mother’s life could easily be beautiful, but Taara had not inherited the rare strength that came in choosing gentleness. She was angry. It was unfair that her mother had battled dengue fever, lost her husband in a house fire, and then survived those two years with Him in this flat only to die of a heart attack at fifty. And though Taara knew the universe owed her nothing, believed in no consciousness which *could* owe anything, she did not understand how her mother had been allowed to live the last eleven years of her life in fear.

There had been things she had guessed over the years. Memories of whispers in the kitchen. Of Mr McGregor’s expression as he drove her mother to the hospital. She had understood that those guesses must remain unasked questions, that those silences eating their way through April 2008 were really secret *I love yous*. Though, this understanding had still not managed to stop the distance forming between them, feasting on the moments where her mother stared into space, locked in some inaccessible region behind her skull. These were the things she could not put in her eulogy. And the things she did not know how to describe her mother without.

The pen returned to its place in the desk drawer, and Taara knocked on Billy’s door to tell him she could not have dinner with him that night.

\*\*\*

“Jaden Keller contacted me this morning.” Auntie Rosie spoke quietly as she dished out the food. “He wanted to know if he’d be welcome at the funeral.”

“No.”

“Taara,” her Aunt coaxed. “He just wants to say goodbye. He can’t help who his father was.”

“I said no.” Water spilled over the rim of her glass. “It’s selfish, and I’m sorry, but I can’t have any reminders of *him* there. Not when she spent the rest of her life being afraid of him.”

“Your Mother-”

“Aunty. Please turn around and look at the dent in the wall behind your head. There are enough reminders of Owen here without his son too.”

It is true that saying the name will conjure a demon. Underneath the remnants of chana masala, Taara swore she could smell the silver Benson & Hedges Owen Keller smoked. Always Bensons, because although he was too skint to help with rent or bills or his son’s school uniform, somehow he was never short enough of money to switch to roll-ups. That night, as she lay awake in the dark, she was eight years old again.

But now her mother would not be there in the morning. There had once been moments outside the school gates where somehow she would not think about the dents in the plaster. Like clockwork: Mama had said not to worry. And so for a few hours, she forgot.

Anita Ram was often Mum- on the phone, or in front of Taara’s friends. But outside those gates, whispering alone together, she was *Mama*, the last syllable lifting upwards as if reaching for a taste of the Punjabi a five year old Taara had stubbornly cast away.

Lying there awake, she could not help but think of the scrawny boy Owen had brought to their flat on the rare occasions he had felt like having a son. The timid thing older than her but shorter, who had a Mum but no Mama. At first, Jaden Keller did not eat Anita’s cooking. But she understood that no one had ever noticed this boy long enough to make sure he ate his dinner, and forbade him from leaving the table until his plate was clear. On the last day they’d seen him, he’d bashfully asked for seconds. Now, with a sigh, Taara fumbled for the lightswitch and sent a curt email to the address her Aunt had scribbled on a post-it note.

It had been a long time since Taara had seen so many flowers. Everyone seemed to have remembered Anita’s love for horticulture, filling the hearse with so many wreaths that Taara almost forgot her mother’s dead body lay beneath all those petals. But barely any of the mourners knew what had become of Anita’s indoor garden. After Owen Keller’s death, she stopped watering the plants on the window sills, afraid that the police would knock and think the bright flowers too celebratory for a woman who had lost her boyfriend.

Outside the cemetery she spotted Jaden Keller. His dark hair was shaved close to the skin, so that from where she stood talking to Mr McGregor, it looked as if a fine layer of dirt had latched onto his head. He was polite enough not to approach her until the wake, although throughout the service she had felt his gaze on the back of her neck.

Up close, she saw that even though he was now well built, his face had not quite lost the pinched look of someone who had not had enough to eat growing up.

“Mr McGregor, this is Jaden Keller.” Spite forced her mouth to straggle over his last name. Mr McGregor attempted to hide the way his spine stiffened with a smile.

“I go by Jaden Wright, now,” he corrected meekly, shaking Mr McGregor’s hand. After the older man had excused himself, Jaden turned to Taara. “I was so sorry to hear about Anita. And I-I want to thank you for letting me be here today to pay my respects.”

“Can we talk outside, please?” Taara was aware of her mother’s nursing colleagues looking over in curiosity.

“I know I only saw her during those two years, but every one of those visits meant a lot to me.”

“Thank you, she would have been pleased to know-”

“Which is why I hate that I need a favour from you.”

“You being here is a favour from me,” she hissed.

“I need to know what really happened to my Dad, Taara.”

“He had an accident on the marshes. Like the police said. I don’t know anything else except that I’m not wasting another minute talking to you.”

She had almost stepped through the door when he spoke again.

“I’ve been lobbying the IPCC to reopen the investigation. There’ll be a chance in a meeting next week for one final push.” Taara wondered when the drawn child who sat at her kitchen table in silence had learned to make threats like this. Regretful, as if the pain he was prepared to inflict was something out of his control. “Just thought I’d ask if you knew anything before I went to that meeting. The police might not be as understanding as me.”

Her hand twitched on the door handle, ready to slam it closed with him outside. And then she remembered that Owen Keller’s death had been an accident. She did not know what had happened, only what the police officer had told them when he was eventually found. Instead she gave a sympathetic smile they both knew wasn’t genuine, and told him that she would happily divulge what she knew to the police, but sadly that probably wouldn’t be very helpful.

\*\*\*

After Billy had left her alone in the flat, she began repacking the things of her mother’s she’d been intending to take back to Amsterdam. Anita had kept the delicate gold chain Mr McGregor had dropped off on her forty-sixth birthday. It wasn’t real, but it was still too expensive; the initials engraved on the back of the small pendant made it far too intimate a gift for a neighbour to give. This was the sort of thing the police took note of. Taara pressed the metal to her lips before she flushed the necklace down the toilet, cursing Owen Keller for still finding ways to take things away from her.

Outside, Tottenham Hotspur F.C was celebrating its return home. The rebuilt stadium loomed over the pavement, a hulking mass of metal and glass that had been spat out by some architecture firm established a few hundred years in the future. As Taara sat on the scrap of grass outside the staircase, she could hear the high street swelling with football fans. Children in Harry Kane shirts trailing round their ankles. Locals crammed into pubs, drinking discounted Fosters from plastic cups. Middle class people who would piss and spit on the concrete before diving into the tube and laughing incredulously at the fact Spurs had bothered to return to that grotty place so riddled with piss and spit. When she saw the familiar figure walking towards her, Taara almost admired Jaden's resolve for venturing into Tottenham on a match day.

"Go home, Jaden. I'm leaving again for uni soon."

"When's your flight?"

"6:50. Yesterday." A worm was pulsating on the paving stone. Half of it still continued to squirm even after she moved her shoe.

"Looks like you've got some unfinished business here, then." A tentative smile, another step towards her, and then-

"He would move the dhania powder."

"What?"

She stood up and brushed off her jeans. "Your dad. He would hide the dhania powder just as she started dinner-and then we'd shovel down this flat, empty sludge for days after, because we couldn't afford to throw it away and make something else." Taara didn't realise she'd been goading a reaction from him until the vindictive spark of satisfaction blazed through her. "He'd put it back after. And she'd apologise over and over for being too stupid not to have seen it there the whole time. That's the kind of man he was."

"I'm not trying to pretend he was a good person."

"Can't you pretend he's a dead person?" Her voice did not manage to regain the same steadiness as before. "I do. Even when I freeze at the sound of shouts from down the street, or jump at the feeling of a hand accidentally brushing against me on a packed tram. I tell myself he's rotting in the ground even though I know he won't really be dead until I'm gone too. Can't you try leaving him dead?"

"Could you?With your Mum?"

Taara did not want the pack of tissues he was offering her. She did not want the soothing tone of his voice. What she wanted was to find more things to fire at him until his eyes were red too. It had never occurred to her before that moment that she might be growing into a callous woman. Somewhere along the way, some shoddy, homebuilt exo-skeleton had seeped inwards and bent her defensiveness into cruelty. As she stared down at Jaden's still outstretched hand, she could see the puckered scar from an old burn. Still red against his skin, the exact circumference of a silver Benson's butt.

“I don’t know what happened to him, Jaden,” she began softly. “All I can tell you are a few random facts I remember from that year. I know that every week, he picked up little ziploc bags from people on a houseboat. I know that on one night in April 2008, Billy McGregor came round for dinner because his dad wouldn’t be back ‘till late. I know that sometime in April 2008, Owen Keller drove his motorbike into the River Lee and drowned.” They were standing close enough for his breath to agitate the skin on her cheeks. “I also know that as a mechanic, Mr McGregor *often worked with brakes.*”

Shouts came from the sea of white and blue surging down the highstreet. Jaden nodded.

“I was ten. Young enough to be oblivious to any of it if the police ask.” Though from the look on his face, Taara knew her warning was unnecessary.

“They won’t.” He laughed, shaking his head. “No one’s actually gone near his file in eleven years. An addict gets washed up in the canal, still wearing his helmet and full of more booze than river water? Closed case.” And he had told the story enough times that the bitterness had melted away.

Taara blinked.

“Right. So what’s next?”

“Head back to Chelmsford. Try and pop into IKEA on the way and find the cot my girlfriend’s been raving on about. Maybe I’ll get some glow in the dark stars for the nursery. ”

She smiled. So this is what the living did. They found things to love even when no one had shown them how. They did not shut out what made them happy and run across borders in a pointless effort to beat the restlessness out of their bones.

“If you’d like, I’ll find you on Facebook. Send you a picture when she’s born?” His question hung in the air, more than a request to show her a photograph.

Another Taara sat bubbling underneath her skin, one who could finally admit she did not look forward to the idea of staying in Amsterdam after graduation. One who might save the number of the sheepish man in front of her.

A couple of hundred meters away, thousands of eyes squinted at the referee’s hand, waiting for the coin to finish falling through the air.