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Abbas thumbed the lighter in his pocket. The ridges of the sparkwheel met his callous like a familiar friend, a relief from the plume of nerves developing in his gut. How many joints can a lighter spark? Ironically, he realised, he'd never gotten through a whole lighter, consistently managing to misplace them in a high haze.

"Yo, you're on in five. You all good yeah? Can I get you anything?"

Shabazz's cousin was a brown Ken doll, the curve of his eyebrows plucked to a perfection matched by the line-up of his beard. For all his geometric prowess, he hadn't quite grown into his new Instagram bio – 'Co-host of the all new *Urban Waves* club night @SensationsHackney'. When Shabazz told Abbas about his cousin's event, he'd left out the name, aware of Abbas' aversion to anything that sounded as though it could attract social media influencers. Despite Abbas' open resentment for social media – "it's just an IV drip of porn and ads" – the sentiment revealed only half the truth. Since last night, 206 likes, 81 retweets and 55 replies featuring, for the most part, praying-hand emojis, had confirmed this.

"Yeah man, I'm good," Abbas replied.

"Thanks again for coming through, really means a lot."

"Say nothing."

Brown Ken imitated the lipless smile and blink-nod expression he had seen someone do at a family friend's funeral – his closest encounter with sincerity. Abbas returned his smile, both amused and grateful for his flawed execution.

The *Urban Waves* launch night was both overpromising and overpromoted. '*DJ sets as well as live performances spanning all urban genres – more than a typical club night!*' flyers had read. In hindsight, the event name was a stroke of genius – generic enough to justify the mismatch of *Balenciaga* and *Urban Outfitters* yet distinct enough for everyone in attendance to feel that it was others – not them – who had misread the advertised vibe. The patchwork was exacerbated by the fact that Brown Ken and his photocopy business partner had agreed to adjoin their event to an established but somewhat waning fresher-targeted night to satisfy the venue's minimum bar spend. *Urban Waves* was technically only in the small room, caught between the entrance and the main room. This generated a stream of bodies, cutting the already cramped space in two. An agitated, sobering cloud, fed from the main room, clung to the bar at the back wall. The opposite end however, where the modest stage had been set up for the *Urban Waves* performers, was relatively sparse. Still, when "Local underground artist MC Mongrel aka Abbas Kareem" was announced, cheers from *Shabazz-an-em* (as their group was referred to and defined) and other groups of Langton students and alumni made the gathering sound almost like an audience.

After an awkward introduction – graciously muffled by the clatter of voices from those indifferent to an MC Mongrel performance and the Afrobeat overflowing from the main room – the beat of *Edgeware Road Flow* played. Abbas pressed his thumb against the sparkwheel of his lighter, then began: "*I wrote this shit off the shisha and the hash / I'm mellow but if you beef I'll bring a cleaver to the clash*". *Edgeware Road Flow*, the first track Abbas had formally released, was one of his proudest, which spoke to the lack of progression in his passion. Before his recent hiatus, his main motivation for continuing to release music had quickly become the small-time fame he'd begun to amass in the London scene (which translated to big-time fame in Langton's chatty campus).

Abbas' MC Mongrel alias was birthed in his first year at Langton. With the help of Shabazz's expansive creative and entrepreneurial network (a stark contrast to *Shabazz-an-em*, who were for the most part weed-dependant sloths) Abbas had released a steady stream of singles, one mixtape and even a handful of music videos over the course of two years. In return, he reaped requests for performances, interviews with student newspapers, and, most importantly, a coveted blue tick. Most of his raps were an exercise in generic braggadocious flexing, with occasional bars that referenced his Iraqi heritage or his underprivileged South London upbringing. Since he was neither outspoken nor widely renown, his social media experience became a mild but steady, soothing buzz of admiration from supporters (not quite "fans" as he would sometimes refer to them conceitedly, and not, in any real sense, "followers" as Twitter and Instagram would refer to them irreverently).

Free Gaza Freestyle, a loose track Abbas put together in response to news of a catastrophic Israeli air strike in the Gaza Strip, would warp his blue light fix, eventually turning it toxic. The initial reception to this new politically charged angle was overwhelmingly positive, a flurry of popularity for MC Mongrel both online and on campus. Abbas responded fast; leaning into the conscious style, he slapped together *Liberty EP* – a range of generic-sounding protest raps lacking in journalistic nuance, which did not receive significant support. In fact, the social media reaction was Abbas' first taste of hate. But this was the right type of hate – hate from far-right trolls who get their kicks from playing brazen social media villains. It was clear, to Abbas at least, where that put him by contrast. Yet, in March, the same week he lost his mother, Abbas lost all love for the blue light drug, experiencing the wrong kind of hate in abundance.

His mother's face now appeared in the crowd. Lyrics died in his mouth, his silence falling abrupt against the ongoing beat. The makeshift bandage at the back of his mind began to loosen, leaking memories of a not so distant past. She turned her attention towards him fully now, her eyes filled with concern. A dream of home. Abbas blinked, as if waking from a deep slumber. The girl's face became her own again – not his mother, but still somehow familiar.

"Sorry. Sorry, got distracted for a second. Alright, we good. DJ, reload that," he crescendoed as he unfroze.

The remainder of the performance, despite his best efforts to feign fervour, was slightly flat, not helped by a visible concern that radiated from the faces of a few audience members. He made a concerted effort to avoid eye contact but, during his last song, allowed his eyes to glide over her swiftly. She was looking down, fixated on her phone (his embarrassingly obvious stare had made her uncomfortable). The outline of her lips and the way she'd done her hijab is what had triggered his hallucination. But he did know her after all. She had been part of the fourth-floor library furniture at Langton. Her candid yet subtly beautiful features and her deliberately lowkey demeanour had always made Abbas somewhat wary, unsure of whether she was modest or conceited in her elusiveness. He wasn't aware that she listened to his music, let alone that she enjoyed it enough to come see him perform. It irritated him that he couldn't collect due elation from that fact.

Abbas joined *Shabazz-an-em* outside the venue after the show, their animated praise doing little to raise his spirits. Still, he was distracted from the haunting that had been assaulted upon his subconscious mid-performance (he had become an expert at swiftly retying the

ragged bandage in opportune moments). Instead, he was now reminded of something more urgent – the Tweet.

A joint that had been making its way around came to Abbas. He casually stuck out a pair of fingers to receive it. Abdal frowned.

“You sure fam?”

“Nah, you’re probably right. Had a few drinks inside so probably shouldn’t cross-fade,” Abbas replied tactfully.

He knew that Abdal’s unease was a reaction to the Tweet. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to own the attention-dependence demonstrated by his Twitter relapse, the lie he had told, his urge, even now, to check for an update on notifications. He withdrew from the group and looked at the time on his phone. He unlocked it and rested his eyes on his home screen. Swipe left. Swipe right. Swipe left again. Home screen. And it did feel like home. A home that lay its foundations in a void. When the void became a chasm back in March, Abbas jumped out the window of his blue light abode to save himself from being swallowed whole. He lay in a foetal position, injured, helpless and high at the edge of his abyss, unable and unwilling to begin turning it, once and for all, into The Well of Zamzam using the shovels his father, his elder brother and even Shabazz would offer urgently. Eventually, the blue light abode resurfaced, and Abbas made his home screen his home once again.

In one fluid contortion of the thumb, Abbas opened Twitter, hit the profile button and viewed his misguided Tweet for the first time since he typed it. He scanned the numbers first – a new high score. He let the dopamine rush through him. Then he read what he had proclaimed to the Twitter-verse through last night’s dissociative yet frantic high:

My mum died of cancer in march. that interview was the same fucking week. So pls give me a break. Doctor said that shits multiplying inmy lungs too...pray for me

He read it about ten times, icicles grilling the back of his neck. Its atrocity consumed him. He’d sold an image of the same rot that had claimed his mother just to support his clout addiction. Still, his calloused thumb, hovering above ‘Delete’, now twitched towards the bell as it announced a brand-new notification.

@introversial

Replying to @MCMongrel

God has a plan.

He had heard that phrase many times, especially in the last nine months, so he wasn’t sure why it read so differently, so penetratingly. The statement reached beyond all fiction and presented a rudimentary, Newtonian dogma. The promise of a higher reason. He checked the profile. The larger view of the circular, mirror-selfie profile picture was a stamp of verification. It was her, the quiet fourth-floor hijabi. Abbas felt an impulse of some sort, but before he was able to decipher it, Shabazz approached him.

“What you saying my G, I’m here to collect my percentage,” Shabazz said.

“You’re good fam, you know I did the guy a favour,” Abbas replied.

“What do you mean? I just got you a spot on the elite *Urban Waves* stage. This makes *Wireless* look like a talent show – you know they turned down Drake yeah?” Shabazz grinned. His constantly jovial mood made his dependability pleasant rather than ingratiating. Abbas shook his head slightly and smiled. “Decent show though man, it was cold how you got the DJ to wheel up that track. You knew we wasn’t ready.” Typical of Shabazz to defuse awkward situations by assuming a light-hearted adaptation, rather than attempting overcompensating praise or a stale “You good yeah?”

“What can I say man, I keep people guessing.”

“You actually do. Mad slippery sometimes you know.”

“Slippery?”

“Yeah, like, erratic.”

“Well yeah, can you blame me?”

“Nah man, you know I get it. It’s just like, you got to leave the shit that drags you down and grab onto what pulls you up, you know?”

“Whatdyumean?”

“You know what I mean man. This Twitter bullshit. You know you don’t need that.”

“I don’t know shit. I’m just trying to float at this point, whatever that means. If there’s a plan, it’ll unfold itself.”

Shabazz said nothing. Abbas boiled. Shabazz’s sensitive, pragmatic aura bothered him and he wasn’t sure why. He didn’t want to be advised, consoled, pitied, tested, exposed or indulged. He wasn’t sure which of those Shabazz intended with his next remark, but it felt to Abbas like a fuck you.

“By the way man, I think we’re heading to Maroush down the road for some shisha in a bit. Want to join? Might be good to clear your head.”

Abbas held his gaze. “Nah man. I have lung cancer.”

The bare room had been maintained endearingly. A noticeboard was adorned with Charity Week fundraiser flyers and a meme playfully requesting brothers to keep the shoe rack tidy. The soft, carpeted floor, red, with rows of panels framed by gold and brown floral embellishments, contrasted the stark white walls. Under a shelf laden with twenty-nine ornately bound *ajzā’*, sat Mustafa, the room’s only occupant, cross-legged with the thirtieth open on the rehal in front of him. Just as he began to read, the door to the adjacent corridor opened, and Qasim entered the prayer room. They exchanged salaams.

“Did you catch that tall Iraqi looking brother leaving as you walked in?” Mustafa inquired.

“Yeah, why?” Qasim replied.

“Brother slept here overnight, I just came in and woke him up.”

“Oh. I’m pretty sure that’s that MC Mongrel guy you know.”

“Who?”

“You know that rapper who used to go here?”

“Oh yeah, that guy who said the shit about the letterbox thing and then dipped?”

“Yeah yeah, that’s the one. He had that interview with *Vice* where they asked about Boris’ burqa-letterbox comparison and he kind of said it doesn’t matter. Like, right after doing this whole political mixtape.”

“Guy’s an idiot.”

“Yeah. He’s a hashishiyyun you know.”

“Not surprised, he seemed hungover. Astaghfirullah, he must have gotten high and come here of all places,” Mustafa scorned, fingering the joint in his jacket pocket.

Abbas had become resolute the night before (for what he hoped was the first and final time as opposed to the umpteenth). He had been overzealous during his nightly ritual, but the high hit just right, soothing as he could have hoped. Alone in his room, he had removed his bandage, and let the bullet wound of grief air out. He re-read her reply: *God has a plan*. If there was indeed a plan, he would have to make himself accessible to it, he thought, as his thumb busied itself with its second favourite pass-time. The sparkwheel. That’s all that was needed, an ignition, a reach for the shovel. The rest would follow.

Abbas babbled this explanation for his religious impulse at Maryam unabashedly in the library café. He had found her in her usual fourth-floor spot and approached her.

“Hey, you got a minute?” he had whispered hastily. Nearby heads in the library turned. Some looked with contempt, some looked with compassion, most looked with mild annoyance.

She seemed less surprised at his presence than he had braced for. Though that was a mark of her nonchalant character, he interpreted it as a sign that he was doing something right.

“I was just heading down for some coffee,” she whispered back.

“Yeah, cool, that works,” Abbas said.

“I’m Maryam by the way,” she said in the elevator.

Now they sat opposite each other, a pair of non-strangers who had never spoken.

“So, you just kept praying two sunnah until you fell asleep?”

“Yeah.”

“And what did that do for you? How did it make you feel?” she solicited.

“I didn’t really feel anything to be honest. It made me feel like I was doing something good I guess?” he surmised.

“And then you woke up and came to find me? To tell me all this?”

“Yeah. I saw your reply to my Tweet. You said that God has a plan. I wanted to know what you meant.”

Maryam was aware that her hijab made her appear one of three ways to men. She could be an oppressed subhuman, something close to a letterbox (or, indeed, someone immune to empathy when seen as such). She could also be an involuntary spiritual counsellor for those that felt unique in their confusion, as this conversation proved.

“I don’t know, it’s just what I believe. Inshallah the plan is for your mother to see paradise and for you to get better. I will pray for that.”

The sensation at the back of Abbas’ neck climbed up to his scalp and temples. He held a long blink then said, “I don’t have cancer. I lied. I made it up for attention.”

Maryam’s brows shot up. She scanned the utterly lost and self-absorbed individual before her (who had clearly not even considered that she might have been at the *Urban Waves* event to support her best friend, not him).

“Oh... and did your mum really pass away?”

“Yeah, she did, that part is true. Actually... nah, never mind.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know whether you could tell but I spotted you in the audience last night and it made me bug out for a second because you reminded me of her.”

And there it was. The third possible way Maryam came across to all men she’d ever known – as their mother, or some kind of authority on love and morality.

“Shit, well I hope that wasn’t too traumatic for you,” she replied, distant but slightly crooning, reflecting the extent to which she now doubted the whole Tweet.

“Nah, don’t mention it. Just my brain malfunctioning.”

“I think I’ve got to get back to work Abbas, but like I said you’ll be in my prayers.”

Now it was her who was lying.

Abbas ambled along the frosted campus lawn as the late afternoon sun twinkled against the windscreens of parked cars in the distance. His pocket vibrated. He continued walking for a moment, his plan of disposing of his phone for good by the morning keeping him unphased. He checked it casually.

@introversial

Replying to @MCMongrel

Just so everyone knows, he made all this up for clout. He just told me.

Abbas sunk as the numbers soared. By the morning, the Tweet would surpass 200 likes and 100 retweets, and Maryam’s bantering ad-libs piggy-backing off the replies would earn her 36 new followers.