

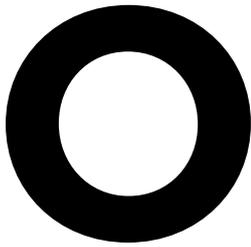
A Normal Man In A Not So Normal World

*An Encounter Near London's Southall
With a Man's Troubled Past and
His Ambition to Make Movies*

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY PRESTON MERCHANT





IN A WARM JULY MORNING, I boarded the London Tube to Boston Manor station. The southbound Piccadilly Line, represented by a Navy Blue line on my map, would terminate at Heathrow airport. My stop came a few stations before the line ended.

The people I had come to meet were waiting outside in a car, and after introductions had been made, we drove to a store to buy meat and beer for lunch. The man who was driving was in his early 30s. He wore a stylish shirt and dark glasses. His name was Aryian Singh, but he later told me that this wasn't what he had been named at birth. He had changed his name after he had come out of prison. When I questioned him about his job, he said he was working on a couple of film projects but didn't provide details. I noticed that there were small scars on his face. I later learned that a couple of them were from injuries inflicted by his mother when he was a kid—once, his mother had smashed his face with a milk bottle.

The man whose face I was now watching in the rearview mirror interested me. His name change and the reason for it wasn't what one has come to expect as a staple of Indian fiction about diasporic lives—Samiullah changing to Sam or a Madhu becoming Maddy, one pining for the neem tree outside his ancestral home and the other for her mother's cardamom-scented fish curry. In those stories, particularly those written in the US, the only crime a human seems capable of is forgetting to write a letter home. Or if there are transgressions they seem to have blossomed out of a fantasy spun out in a garden called a creative writing MFA programme. But Aryian Singh's story appeared to be different. Sitting in the backseat of the silver Mercedes E220, I imagined an entry into another life. Not one offered as homage to quiet domesticity but one lived in recognition of the reality of the street.

Singh lives in a modest, semi-detached house with his wife and a couple of boarders. There is also a dog in the house, a handsome German Shepherd named Simba. Singh's father, a large, taciturn man named Gurdev, was in the house that day. He had come from India as a teenager several decades ago and worked first in a factory that printed labels for bottles. He had also worked in construction, and as a cook, making chicken tikka at a restaurant. He now began to prepare the chicken and fish that his son had bought at a Punjabi butchery on Uxbridge Road after picking me up at the station.

We were sitting around a tiny table in the kitchen, a few feet from the stove, drinking beer from tall glasses. Singh's wife was away, visiting her family, but he wanted to show me their wedding album. I saw from the photographs that the wedding had cost money; and the commemorative al-

bum came boxed in black velvet. It was while looking at the album that I noticed that Singh's mother was missing from the pictures.

The older man rarely spoke but his son joked with him, and teased him with sexual banter, and this surprised me. This was because the father, Gurdev, despite his many-decades-long absence from India, could still be mistaken for a man from Jalandhar. Gurdev was probably used to more deferential, patriarchal treatment. When I commented on their warm relationship, the son told me quite frankly that his father had been missing from his life for eight years. His parents had separated when he was young, and when he was 13 his mother gave him up to social services. He became a ward of the state, and lived in a succession of children's homes. He hadn't been in touch with his father, and rarely saw his mother. He was no longer attending school after he lost his home. He said he had been in trouble with the law. But one day, standing outside a children's home with a girl, he saw Gurdev visiting the house next door. "That's my Dad," he said to the girl, who thought he was joking. When his father came out of the house, he recognised the boy whom he had not seen for several years and asked, "Kiddaan? How are you?" The two have been close ever since, except for the long periods when the son has been behind bars.

Earlier, Singh had been telling me that when he was in the children's home, he fell in with the wrong crowd and started using drugs. Then I learned that around that same time he and two of his mates broke into a house—they had needed to use a bathroom. One of them decided to pick up a car stereo and jewellery but later they got scared and tried to return the stolen goods. They got caught. This was Singh's first scrape with the police but he and his friends got off lightly with a burglary warning.

I asked him when had he first gone to prison. Singh was sent to Stanford House in Acton at age 15, where juveniles were incarcerated for crimes that, if they had been adults,



RIGHT: In Southall, it's easy to shop for a Punjabi meal.
FACING PAGE: Aryian Singh: ex-con, aspirant filmmaker.

would have earned them a life sentence. The charges against Singh, for criminal acts he had committed when he was 14, included kidnapping, robbery, false imprisonment, and carjacking. After Singh escaped from this facility, he turned himself in and entered an institution in Feltham for under 21-year-olds, a place notorious for its high suicide rates. He was in prison for nearly two years and returned there again after nine months because he had committed armed robbery while he was out. What were the guns used? Singh seemed prepared to recite a list but stopped at “Shotguns.” He received a six-year sentence but was granted parole after three years for good behaviour.

Perhaps because he was describing events that had taken place more than 15 years ago, or more likely, because he was describing a person that he didn’t believe he was any longer, Singh spoke without embarrassment. In fact, there was an undeniable charm in his narration, balancing details of the horrors of prison life with evidence that he survived to tell the story. During his first stint in prison, he had escaped and, in the process, even managed to imprison in his cell the men who were supposed to guard him. I marvelled at his knowing how to make his bid for freedom but he grinned and said that if I had been locked up, I too would have known from repeated observation the right key on the guard’s belt that would open the prison locks.

The chicken that Singh’s father had made was spicy and very tasty. We ate it with thin slices of raw onion and salad. It was cool inside the kitchen and the men would step out

into the backyard to smoke. There were companionable silences, and then I’d get Singh to pick up the thread of his story. I became aware that Aryian Singh, with his devilish charm and roguishness, and also his ambition, reminded me of someone I knew, a fictional character who had inhabited my mind for three years. This was Rabinder, one of the leading characters in my own novel, published in India under the title *Home Products*. When we first meet Rabinder, he is in a prison near Patna, dreaming of owning a cellphone agency when he comes out. More than that, he wants to film a commercial for his product, using as actors his childhood friend who is now a Bollywood star. He wants the actor to be sitting alone in a cell, putting a phone to his ear and calling a woman who would be played by Manisha Koirala or Raveena Tandon. The woman’s lips would part to say something but the viewer wouldn’t hear what she was saying because of the sound of the music beating like waves on a beach. The song on the soundtrack, filled with yearning and promise, would be AR Rahman’s hit from *Bombay (1995)*: *Tu hee re, Tu hee re...tere bina main kaise jeeoon*. By the time the novel ends, Rabinder is out of prison and his head is full of ideas about films that can be made about Bihar. He collaborates with a popular director, someone who very much resembles Mahesh Bhatt, on a film that deals with migrant youth and terrorism and is called *Prithvi*, or The Earth.

After Singh came out of prison, he attended a 16-week filmmaking course at the Brighton Film School. He showed



me the script he had written as part of his diploma work: it was called *Loose Talk* and turned around a series of scenes in an interrogation room. Right now, he is more interested in a script that began to take shape in his mind three years ago while he worked as a chauffeur at Heathrow and other places. It is centred around a chauffeur whose resentment and rage are exploited first by jihadists and then by the intelligence services. The idea would be to make a thriller with twists and betrayals. When I asked him who he'd like to see act in the film, Singh said, "Anupam Kher and Robert De Niro."

That is Singh's dream but, at the moment, he is helping a rich relative sell double-glazed windows to businesses. It is impossible for anyone to foretell whether he will find work, or funding, as a filmmaker. If I were to be honest, I'd say that for me the real story was not in the imagined fiction about international intrigue but in the real details of Singh's own life. He told me that once when he was working in the prison canteen he heard a woman's voice that was filled with kindness. He went to talk to her and discovered that she taught writing in that prison. Singh told her that he wrote in his cell and he would like her to look at what he had written. She agreed. The teacher was very impressed, Singh told me, and helped defer his transfer to another prison just so that he could continue writing under her supervision.

Could I see what he had written for her? Singh told me that his older sister, Anita, probably had the file. He called

her and, sure enough, she had it safely stored. I took the phone from Singh and asked Anita, who was just about to leave for work at Tesco's, whether she'd mind reading me the opening lines of what her brother had written. This is what she read out:

I was born on May 21st, 1978.

I'm not anyone famous, nor am I saint or a devil.

But I'm someone you know.

Everyone who punishes knows who I am. Everyone who receives punishment knows who I am. Everyone who loves, everyone who hates, everyone who wants, everyone who needs, they all know who I am.

I'm a normal man in a not so normal world.

But then, what is a normal world and what is a normal man?

As Anita went on reading, in a calm voice, I found myself responding to the unadorned, bare poetry of Singh's prose. For years, we have read Indian writers who ventriloquise the voices of the underclass; in the diaspora, especially in America where I live, you won't find a single desi writer who doesn't have a university degree. It is a small, insulated world where everyone breathes the closed suffocating air

BELOW: Singh pumps iron at his home in Southall.

FACING PAGE: The Singh family's German Shepherd, Simba, gets a day out in the park.





In Singh's screenplay, the main character is an airport chauffeur, a post Singh held after his last stint behind bars.

of privilege. I thought, as I listened to Anita, that I was hearing a new, different kind of testimony as literature. Art in this case had been refined by experience. I asked Anita why she had held on to her brother's prison notebook and she said to me, without hesitating, that reading it had reminded her of all the things in her life that she had either forgotten or tried to forget. She had possibly been talking of her childhood, of her parents' alcoholism, or even perhaps her first marriage, to an Indian man who dealt in heroin and had employed her young brother when he was a teenager.

After our phone call, I asked Singh what had gone wrong between his parents. He looked up at his father, standing beside the stove, and asked him in Punjabi if it was okay for him to tell me. The older man said yes. Singh said that his mother had come from India as a little girl. When she was older, her father took in lodgers in their house in Southall, and she fell in love with one of them. Singh's grandfather didn't like this and asked the lodger, a young migrant from Punjab, to leave the house. A marriage was arranged between the young girl and Gurdev but it was a loveless relationship. His father started drinking, and then his mother did too. Their home just fell apart. Then, strangely, his mother accused Gurdev of having sexually abused their children. He was arrested and taken to prison. It was only when Anita and Aryian told their maternal grandfather that their mother had forced them to make their statements to the police that the case was dropped and Gurdev released.

Singh had spoken of his mother without affection; in fact,

he blamed her for some of what had gone wrong in his life. Yet, in one page of his journal, which I later saw, he had written with sympathy about the tragedy of his parents' marriage and, more particularly, of his mother's fate:

The sadness of my mother, being taken away from her childhood sweetheart, forced into a marriage, bearing children to a man she hardly knew, probably never loved and seeing no future for herself...whilst for my father the confusion of his wife's strange behaviour, coping with her resentment for his family and living everyday with the constant mood swings of his wife.

As a writer, Singh had no doubt done what he had accomplished with his name change. He had invented a new self, not in the sense of fabricating a tall tale, but instead shaping a coherent story of what had made and unmade him. That is why I valued this story as much, if not more, than the story he was trying to tell about a chauffeur, though I wished him success in bringing that project to fruition. After all, who doesn't like danger, and delight in watching thrillers? I myself experienced a small frisson of delight when, in the car on the way back to my train, Singh rubbed his eyes tiredly in response to a question I was asking and said, "Well, I have left that life behind. But even now...I could make a call and men would come and take you to an empty room somewhere. They'd tie you in a chair, pour petrol over you, and set you on fire... But I have learned to control my anger. I don't let anything get to me." ■