

*Please note that this book contains themes of eating disorders, self-harm, suicide, drug use, attempted murder and sexual assault.*

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YOUR  
TIME  
IS  
UP

SARAH NAUGHTON

 SCHOLASTIC

# MISS ZAINA ABBOUR

## RECORDED INTERVIEW

Date: 27th June

Time: 12:23

Location: King George's Memorial Hospital

Conducted by officers from the Met Police

ZA: Are they OK?

POLICE: We've had no more updates as yet.

ZA: Well, how long before you know?

POLICE: I'm afraid you'll have to speak to the medical team. Now, for due diligence, we acknowledge that you're not in any fit state to be interviewed, but the nurses said you were insistent—

ZA: Is he dead?

POLICE: For the tape, please clarify who you mean, Miss Abbour?

ZA: It doesn't matter. I need to tell you—

*(ZA cries out in pain and raises hand to head)*

POLICE: I think we'd better leave this until you're feeling better.

ZA: No! You need to know what really happened!

POLICE: There really isn't any rush. What's important is that you—

ZA: No! I have to tell you now! Because otherwise he

will, and he planned this out so well you'll believe him.  
Sit down. SIT DOWN and listen!

POLICE: It's all right. See, we're sitting down. We're listening. Now, let's just take it easy and start at the beginning, shall we?

ZA: At the beginning? Fine. Let's start there.



# The Exam

6:30–8:30

Zaina's face has turned from red to puce, the blood vessels in her eyes are bursting and she hasn't even got the breath to cry for help; she can only make choking, grunting sounds and stare blindly at the white tiles, wondering if she's going to die.

And then the retching finally stops. She flops back against the bathroom wall, feeling like she's about to pass out. Smacking her head on the toilet bowl and ending up with concussion would not be great for her exam focus, so she concentrates on her breathing and eventually the dizziness passes.

She hauls herself to her feet using the basin. In just

three hours her A-levels will be over. The toughest paper of the most difficult set of exams she will ever take. She can't even imagine how she will feel afterwards, what she'll do with all that time stretching ahead of her like a vast empty ocean.

The Zaina in the bathroom mirror regards her dully, the scraped-back hair emphasizing her sunken cheeks and hollow eyes. She has her father's hair, straight and black – glossy when it's washed but flat and lank if she doesn't pay it enough attention. She has his nose too, and the olive skin that turns yellow when it doesn't get enough sun. Currently, where it isn't flaking, it's breaking out, but on the positive side the disaster of her appearance is an excellent way to ward off any unwanted distractions by way of male attention.

Resting on the plastic shade of the strip light above the mirror is a Gillette razor. It's starting to rust in the damp atmosphere, but no one can bring themselves to throw it away.

She depresses the toilet flush and the little threads of bile that were all she managed to produce slosh away. There was nothing to throw up because she hasn't eaten for nearly twenty-four hours straight, partly because she's



had no appetite and partly because that would have meant wasting precious revision time.

There's a tentative knock at the door. "Zai?"

She sighs. Her mum's probably panicking that she's bulimic.

"I'm fine," she croaks.

And she is. She never makes herself sick deliberately, or self-harms, or anything else in the angsty teenage-girl playbook. It's normal to throw up before an exam. She's read about sports stars doing it before matches.

"Thay," the baby says.

"Yes," Mum replies to Zaina's baby sister. "Zai's in there. Tell her to come out and have some breakfast."

"Kickass," says the baby.

The baby's attempts to say "breakfast" usually make Zaina smile, but not today. "I'll be out in a minute."

"OK."

Zaina can hear the unhappy hitch in her mum's voice. She feels a flash of irritation for her mother, who has no idea what it's like to feel real pressure. When she isn't looking after children she's stacking shelves or tidying jumper displays or doing whatever other menial job fits in with school hours. All her twittering about Zaina working

too hard is because she doesn't have a clue what you have to do if you actually want to *achieve* something. To make people proud.

When she opens the bathroom door there's a flurry of movement as her mum dashes back to the kitchen to pretend she hasn't really been watching for her daughter to come out.

Stepping over the shoes and toys that litter the cramped hallway, Zaina follows her. The kitchen is a mess, as usual. Dirty crockery and cutlery crowd the small table and the toaster is marooned in drifts of crumbs; her younger brothers are capable of making themselves food but apparently incapable of clearing up after themselves. The sight of the butter-smearred knives and splats of Weetabix do nothing for her appetite.

"Nearly done now," Mum says with faux brightness. Her hair is looking particularly firework-esque this morning, with fuzzy corkscrews shooting off in all directions. With her streaks of grey and worry lines, she looks too old to have a baby. She had Zaina when she was twenty, and then, instead of rectifying that mistake by dumping Zaina in a nursery and going back to college, she and Dad went on to have three more children, the

last of whom, Heli, was no more than a barely discernible clump of cells when her dad received his diagnosis. The clump of cells in his own body would, it turned out, grow even faster than Heli did. Three children would have been way more manageable for a single mum.

She feels guilty as Heli comes toddling in and clamps her arms round Zaina's legs. She could never wish her baby sister hadn't been born, but it clearly wasn't sensible to bring a fourth child into a two-bedroom flat, even if you weren't about to become a widow.

Picking her up, Zaina holds Heli listlessly as the baby bats her face with a sticky palm.

"I'll do you some breakfast," Mum says. "What do you fancy?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You have to have something. I could make some porridge."

"I haven't got time for porridge."

"You won't be able to concentrate on an empty stomach. How about toast and Nutella?"

"That's not going to help me concentrate either." Zaina sighs, dumping Heli back on the floor. "I'll just get a massive sugar high followed by a massive low."

Her mum's smile droops.

"Sorry," Zaina says, sinking into a chair. "I'm just a bit stressed. Toast and butter would be great."

Mum comes over and kisses the top of her head. "In the grand scheme of things, they really don't matter. You're going to be fine, whatever happens."

Zaina grunts. Clearly exams *do* matter, otherwise they wouldn't be doing them.

While her mum makes the toast she scrolls through flash cards on her phone, breathing deeply and slowly to quell the panic that's tightening her intercostal muscles and making her stomach ache even more than throwing up did.

$$\sin(A+B) = \sin A \cos B + \cos A \sin B$$

She knows the syllabus back to front and upside down. She's done every Paper Three that has ever been published, and if she didn't score full marks (which she usually did), she would go on one of the apps and do question after question until she'd cowed the offending topic into submission.

She's ready. Hopefully readier than Ylsa and Chanelle at any rate.

She ploughs grimly through the toast, flicking the cards as she goes – the Newton–Raphson Method, the

trapezium rule, discrete distributions. Mum brings her a glass of orange juice but she pushes it away; she doesn't want to need the toilet in the exam. Her phone alarm warns her she needs to leave in ten minutes. The bus usually only takes thirty to get to college, but she's giving it an hour in case of bad traffic. Abandoning the toast, she gets up from the table.

Out in the hall she checks her pencil case for the umpteenth time – ruler, compasses, pencil, sharpener, protractor and the all-important scientific calculator. Then she closes her eyes and lets what passes for silence in this place wash over her. Above her she can hear Mrs Praed's television, to her left her brothers are blasting each other on the PlayStation, and in the bathroom the shower is dripping. There is one sound missing. Her dad would always insist on having Radio 4 on in the mornings, because it was “educational”. Though Zaina wasn't sure what she had ever learned from it, aside from the theme tune to *The Archers*.

Mum comes out. “All set?”

“Yep.” She wants to get going now, but she'll have to submit to an embrace or risk hurting her mum's feelings again. Mum walks like an old lady, limping up the corridor as if everything hurts, and puts her arms round

her daughter. “I love you, sweetie. We all do. And that’s all that matters.”

Zaina allows herself to be hugged but she doesn’t respond to the ridiculous platitude. If love was all that matters, then Mum wouldn’t be sobbing down the phone to the mortgage people.

Her mum pulls away. “I know you’ll probably want to be off with your friends straight afterwards...”

*Friends?* Zaina thinks.

“But let me know how it goes.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Good luck, baby. Just do your best.”

“Ood duck,” echoes Heli.

Zaina gives the baby a half-hearted wave, then leaves the flat.

She trudges down the seven flights of stairs to the ground floor and steps out into the morning, shielding her eyes from the glare. It’s already hot. In an hour’s time, when the sun has fully risen, the exam hall will be unbearable.

When she gets to the bus stop she finds that the display board has stopped working. Opening the app on her phone, she discovers, with consternation, that the 114 isn’t

due for sixteen minutes. Good job she left herself plenty of time. It's just past seven fifteen and even if it takes the full hour to get to college, she'll have fifteen clear minutes before the exam actually starts. People have even been known to come in late if they've had a problem with transport, but Zaina can't think of anything worse than starting an exam in a fluster like that.

It's impossible to focus on the flash cards as her eyes keep darting up in search of a red shape in the distance. Over the road is the stop for buses coming the other way, from the direction of the college, and also the hospital. The newsagent's behind the bus stop still hasn't replaced the cracked window she fell against after returning from one of the final visits to her dad. It's still covered with cardboard, like the dressing over a wound. Stressed and sleep-deprived and weak from lack of food, she almost passed out as she'd got off the bus, but someone was there to hold her up then. If she faints now, she'll just crash-land on the pavement.

After sixteen minutes and still no bus she starts hyperventilating. She's going to miss the exam, and then the absolute maximum percentage she'll be able to achieve is 66.6 recurring, which will probably be a B or even a

C, which means she won't get into a uni, which means she won't—

The 114 sails round the corner.

Light-headed with relief, she hops from foot to foot until it pulls in, then pushes on before the old lady who was waiting before her. The lower deck is busy so she heads upstairs. There's a fetid smell in the air, and the expressions of the passengers, staring at their phones or fanning themselves with rolled copies of the *Metro*, are uniformly miserable.

A couple of seats near the back are free and she sets off towards them, grasping the poles for balance as the bus jolts forward. One of the free ones is beside a slumbering homeless man. His clothes are filthy, his hair and beard are matted, and she realizes, as she comes level with him, that he is the source of the smell. Her eyes move to the other free seat. The girl sitting beside it smiles and shuffles towards the window to make the space bigger.

Zaina sits down next to the homeless man.

Taking out her phone, she opens the flash cards once more, but it's hard to concentrate with the man's snoring and the sensation of a gaze on the back of her head. She has been studiously ignoring the girl beside the other free



seat for over a month, deleting the pleading messages and tearful voice notes, blocking her on socials. What's done is done. Some mistakes you can't come back from.

Competing with the snoring, the penetrating voice of the Tannoy now crackles into life to announce the next stop. Putting her headphones in and finding the playlist she uses as white noise, Zaina starts revising.

*If two lines are perpendicular, what must their gradients equal when multiplied together?*

The same as a best friendship when one of the parties betrays the other. Zero.

She gets through several hundred cards without a slip before a flash of white outside the window makes her look up. They are passing a large poster advertising veneers: a tanned man grins at her with incisors so white they are almost blue. She has never seen the poster before. And then she realizes that she doesn't even recognize the street they are going down.

She yanks out her earphones in time to hear the end of the fatal announcement that the bus is on diversion. Oh God, why didn't she listen? She could have got off and taken the train. She risks a glance behind her and exhales. Poppy is still on, so they must at least still be going in the

right direction. Sensing her gaze, Poppy looks up and tentatively raises her hand. Zaina looks away.

The unfamiliar streets crawl by and then the bus grinds to a halt behind a bin lorry. The traffic is busy now – it’s seven forty-five already – and there’s no space to overtake, so for the next fifteen minutes they stop and start, stop and start, and the only thing that picks up any speed is Zaina’s heart. Staring at her phone, she watches the seconds and minutes flick by, despair descending upon her like the crushing jaws of the bin lorry.

And then, just as she is considering hammering the emergency exit and sprinting the rest of the way, the lorry turns down a side street, the bus accelerates forward, and the college rises into view like a beautiful square concrete phoenix.

Then she realizes it’s not really eight fifteen. It’s only five minutes past. Since the exams began, she has been setting her watch ten minutes ahead to avoid panics like this. Just as well, because her legs are so wobbly when she disembarks that she has to lean on a lamp post and take some calming breaths before she can even think about walking the last hundred metres to the gates. Descending behind her, Poppy hesitates, as if considering whether

to wait for her, then wisely decides against this and walks away.

According to the huge banner fastened to the railings, *Franklyn Roberts Sixth Form College achieves the best A-level results in the borough*. At the end of Year Eleven, her mum thought she should stay on for sixth form rather than move to Franklyn – all her friends were there and it was only a twenty-minute walk from the flat – but she was overridden by her dad. Ninety-seven per cent of Franklyn students get into their first choice of uni, and if you don't pick Oxbridge or a Russell Group, you have to explain yourself to the head.

As she passes through the tall metal gates she glances right, into the car park. Ylsa's white Range Rover is one of the only cars there. It glitters in the sunshine, slewed across two spaces. So, at least one of her academic rivals has arrived in plenty of time and won't begin the exam trembling with adrenaline. With her glossy blonde hair, designer clothes and cosmetically enhanced pout, Zaina didn't consider Ylsa as competition when they all joined, but she's been getting steadily better results over the past two years and is particularly good at exams. Unlike Chanelle, whose nerves often get the better of her and she

underperforms. Fortunately. It's a mean thought, but the other two probably feel the same about Zaina.

With the A-level exams limping to their conclusion, the college is eerily quiet, and as Zaina heads for the main building, she disturbs a seagull picking at the litter that has piled up against the corner of the science-block porch. It screeches at her in outrage and flaps off in the direction of the art block at the far end of the campus.

Taking a deep breath, she enters the main building.

Behind the reception desk, Mrs Hatcher, who normally wishes them a beaming good luck on exam days, is on the phone, her expression serious. As Zaina passes, the tail end of the conversation drifts across to her.

“I will certainly let you know if she turns up, yes. Like I say, she was definitely in school yesterday, so I'm sure she's...”

Zaina's stomach lurches with the sudden conviction that she's forgotten her calculator. Her heart doesn't beat for the full four seconds it takes for her to swing her bag off her shoulder and check. The calculator is there. Of course it is.

Pushing through the internal door, Zaina hurries down the corridor to the other end of the building, ignoring

Poppy scurrying past in the other direction. It's only twenty past eight. She still has ten minutes.

Taking the stairs down two at a time, she enters the locker room. She takes out her pencil case, water bottle and the long ruler from her rucksack, then stows the bag in her locker. Ylsa's locker, number 435, is next to hers, and she can see the shadow of her white Mulberry handbag through the grille at the top of the door. Chanelle's is number 76, further down, by the door; the cord from her rucksack dangles from the closed door. Looks like Chanelle made it in good time too.

Feeling eyes on her, Zaina turns round and her gaze locks with a pair of glinting eyes on the other side of the glass doors that lead to the playground.

Mortified, her cheeks flush. Nero Adams has just seen her checking out Ylsa and Chanelle's lockers and he, of all people, will know why, but a tinge of rage slices through her embarrassment. He's smoking. After her dad died, she made him swear to quit, but like everything else that passed between them that vow clearly meant nothing to him.

His lips curve into a smirk as he raises the cigarette to his lips, exposing the smartwatch on his wrist, the one he

got for Christmas last year and was so thrilled with. He breathes the smoke out and it curls around his face, like his hair used to before he had the savage crop that makes him look so much older and meaner.

She doesn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he has her attention, but she can't seem to drag her gaze away.

He looks good. His skin has a bronze glow, so he must have been out enjoying the sunshine, maybe making up for all the time spent in hospital cafes with their fluorescent lights that gave you an instant migraine and the limp, damp sandwiches that were probably responsible for multiple admissions for gastric disorders. It's the memory of *that* Nero that almost makes her return his smile, but she manages to bite her lip in time.

The spell is broken when a phone starts to ring. It's coming from one of the lockers at the other end of the room.

Turning away, she slams her own locker door and fastens the padlock, then spins on her heel and marches out of the room. Jogging back up the stairs, she gulps down oxygen to try to lower her cortisol levels. She really does not need this kind of stress.

Behind the reception desk, Mrs Hatcher is now frowning down at her phone, but as Zaina approaches she doesn't raise her head to wish Zaina luck or tell her she's a star or utter any of the other warm and fuzzy platitudes the secretary usually comes out with, which for some reason don't annoy Zaina as much as when they come out of her mum's mouth. The door to the right of the reception desk leads to the stairs up to the assembly room, where the exam will be taking place. They need a big room because lots of people take maths. It's the most sensible choice of A-level, as her dad told her when she expressed a tentative interest in art. It opens doors.

She opens the door to the stairwell.

Everyone else is already there and she joins the back of the queue straggling up the stairs, fortunately separated from Poppy by another latecomer. There are twenty or so of them, all displaying varying degrees of nervousness. Some are murmuring and grimacing at each other, others gnaw their fingernails or kick their heels against the wall. A couple shield their eyes from the bars of dusty sunlight falling on them from the tall window like the spotlight of an interrogator.

She is gratified to see that Ylsa, first in the queue, is

pale under her beige make-up. She's twisting hanks of her long blonde hair round her fingers and, judging by the strands clinging to her Chanel jacket, has been doing so compulsively for some time. Zaina heard on the grapevine that Paper Two hadn't gone well for Ylsa, so she will need to ace this one to have any chance of getting the top maths score in the year. Which is, of course, what Chanelle and Zaina will be aiming for too (Chanelle because she's obviously got a fetish for Oxbridge, and Zaina because of the promise). Ylsa's dad runs a very successful construction firm (there are rumours he's a gangster) and Zaina suspects that there might be some parental expectation going on there too: a working-class dad who'll never be accepted into the society his money gives him access to, making sure his daughter will. She was privately schooled all the way from nursery but switched to a state sixth form to have a better chance of getting into a top uni. This is another reason Zaina, whose secondary school was put in special measures twice in the seven years she attended, wants to thrash her.

There's no sign of Chanelle, but in front of Zaina, panting as if they've only just got here too, is Chanelle's partner Saff. The pair have been going out since before Franklyn but had



the mother of all rows at Emily Blackwater's party in May. Chanelle might still be a bit wobbly about that, which may affect her performance. Hopefully.

Zaina digs her fingernails into her palm. *Don't be such a bitch.* If she bases her own success on other people's failure, then she's not going to get anywhere.

Mr Peters comes through the red door at the top of the stairs. "Everybody OK? No last-minute panic attacks?"

There are grumbles and groans.

The teacher grins. "You're all prepared; you'll be absolutely fine. And if you balls it up, don't worry – they're hiring at Maccy D's over the road."

Zaina smiles. The young maths teacher is one of her favourites. Firstly because his master's degree is from Harvard and, secondly, because he's fun and supportive. Also, he looks a bit like Harry Styles.

Her smile flicks off when Nero comes through the door and tramps up the stairs to stand behind her in a waft of cigarette stink. He stands deliberately close, probably to try to make her uncomfortable.

"Mr Peters?" she calls. "Smartwatches aren't allowed, right?"

"Correct. Anyone got one on?"

She turns her head towards Nero, drawing Mr Peters' gaze. The teacher comes down, holding out his hand, the fingers twitching. "Sorry, Adams. No looking at porn in an exam."

Any other kid would have got a stern warning, but all the teachers like Nero.

"Sorry, Sir, totally forgot." He hands the watch over without even glancing at Zaina, and she wonders for a moment if she got it wrong. Maybe the smirk in the locker rooms was just a smile. Maybe he wasn't standing too close, maybe she's just being oversensitive.

Whatever. It doesn't matter either way. This is probably the last time she will ever see him. And the tiny twinge this acknowledgement produces in her chest is like the lingering tenderness of a bruise, or the scratchy cough that hangs around after a chest infection. A reminder that you really don't want to pick up that pathogen again.

The door at the bottom opens again and she glances round, expecting to see Chanelle looking pale and harried, but it's Mrs Hatcher. She waddles up the stairs to Mr Peters. "Miss Zita's running late," she pants. "Lost her pass apparently, and she needs it for the car park."

The students glance at one another and there are a

couple of surreptitious fist pumps. Miss Zita is a witch. Last year she accused a boy of looking at another student's work, so his paper was cancelled and he didn't get the grades he needed for uni.

"Can you kick things off on your own, Jon? I could help at a push, but I really need to man the door."

"No, that's fine."

"You won't be able to escort anyone to the toilet before she arrives."

"No cheaters here, Gloria," Mr Peters says loudly. "Right, kiddos?" He cranes his neck at the class, who murmur that they are perfectly trustworthy.

"OK, well, Miss Iggle is in her office in an emergency." She turns and waddles back down the stairs.

Mr Peters glances at his watch, then places a hand on his chest and closes his eyes. "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more, or close the wall up with our English dead." Then he opens the red door.

They begin to file through.

A bubble of hysterical laughter swells in Zaina's chest. This is it. It's happening.

The assembly room is large and bright, thanks to the line of windows running along the right-hand side,

looking out over the science block. Because of these, on a very hot day the room is stifling and the girls have all learned that it's better to wear trousers than risk spending the exam sitting in a puddle of sweat. All except Ylsa, who favours miniskirts that skim her peachy buttocks.

They file in through the door at the side of the room and each student heads straight for their desk. They've done this twice before and know exactly where they should be sitting. They're used to the idiosyncrasies of the chair and desk, the way each creaks or wobbles, and the students either side of them.

Because of her surname, Zaina is usually at the very back of the room, directly opposite the door and beside the last bank of windows. Picking her way between the other desks she sees her candidate card tacked neatly to the corner of her usual spot.

There's another student in this year group, one she takes chemistry with, whose surname is Able, and in those exams she and Nero are not beside one another, but Enrique Able doesn't do maths, and as she sits down, Nero slides into his own seat beside her, close enough that if they were to stretch out an arm their fingers would touch. She slides the band out of her hair and lets the dark curtain

fall down between them. She has no desire to have him in her line of sight while she's working, though, as Mr Peters arranges the spare pens and paper on the invigilator's desk, she snatches a sidelong glance at him. He is frowning down at his paper.

So, the boy who never worries about anything, who thinks the world is one big game for him to have fun playing, is worried about this exam. She tries to feel a sense of *schadenfreude* but muscle memory gives her another twinge. He really wants to go to Lancaster, and their offer has stipulated an A for maths. She ought to be pleased at the prospect of him screwing up and having to make do with Middlesex. Crushing the treacherous flicker of compassion, she unpacks her pencil case and lines her stationery neatly in the right-hand corner of the desk next to her water bottle.

Between Zaina and the front of the room is a sea of heads: pale, dark, shaved, rainbow-coloured. Pressed against the uncomfortable plastic chairs are bony backs and fleshy backs, many shirts already damp with sweat. Three rows ahead, in the desk to the right of Poppy's, Ylsa is still plucking at her hair, but a desk near the front on the left remains empty.

Where is Chanelle? A last-minute toilet break? If so, she's cutting it fine.

Her eyes dart to the door, willing it to open, and for Chanelle to come tumbling in. They will exchange sour smiles and Chanelle will hurry to her desk and fumble with her pencil case, knowing that Ylsa and Zaina are praying for her to drop everything and have to go crawling about on the floor. But that's the way it should be.

The door doesn't open.

There's a soft squeaking from the front of the room. Mr Peters is writing the times of the exam on the whiteboard behind the invigilator's desk. On the wall above the board is an old-fashioned black flip clock. The bold white display reads 8:26. A couple of the students are dyslexic and will get extra time, but for the rest of them the exam will end in exactly one hundred and twenty-four minutes, or (quick maths) seven thousand, four hundred and forty seconds.

Plenty. She inhales. *A paper never takes that long.* She exhales. She'll probably be done way before the end. Inhale. And might even have time to check her answers. Exhale.

The clock flips to 8:27.

“Can you please fill in your names and candidate numbers?”

There is a quiet scritch as the students answer the easiest question that will be posed to them this morning. Zaina takes the lid off her pen and shakes it to get the ink going. The shaft slots perfectly into the calloused dents in her fingers. As she writes her name and number the last rustles die away and a silence falls. All eyes are on Mr Peters, who has gone very still, his gaze fixed intently on the clock.

8:28.

She runs her forefinger over the gold inscription on the side of the pen: *To Zaina, from Daddy*. She must be the only person in the whole room using a fountain pen, but it has never let her down so far, and she put a new cartridge in last night.

8:29.

The air thrums as twenty teenagers count down the seconds in their heads.

As Mr Peters' lips part, the hairs rise up on Zaina's forearms.

“OK, everyone. You may begin.”