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LIKE A BROTHER

NATHANAEL LESSORE

HOT
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BOOKS

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1

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For my cousin Elena, who gets to watch her kids grow

1

THE FUNERAL THAT GOES WRONG

I always thought funerals were sad, grey events, with dozens of people holding black umbrellas in the rain while a coffin is slowly lowered into the ground. In the films, there's a grieving mother, and one scorned descendant who stays and talks to the deceased after everyone's moved on.

But maybe funerals are different in South London, because I can already tell that today is going to be one highly calamitous affair. The funeral that goes wrong. He was in an induced coma for some time, so people did have time to say goodbye to him beforehand at least. My uncle Greg was in a coma for four days after he slipped in the shower and smashed his head off the tap. We visited him in the ICU, and I remember wondering if

I squeezed the pouch of his IV drip, would it make his cheeks bulge out like a cartoon? I was young. My uncle Greg survived, this isn't his funeral. This is the funeral of Hussein Krishnan, some random ancestor who married my dad's aunt once removed and twice put back, or something. Strenuous link, but here we are.

Lara's godmother is giving us a lift to the cemetery, because my parents are already there arranging flowers. When she turned up, she was hunched over the steering wheel, wearing dark shades and mopping her nose. My first brush with grief.

Now we've been in the car for ten minutes, the awkward silence occasionally broken by the godmother's sniffing.

'You OK, Josephine?' I adjust my voice to just the right level of care and sympathy. From the back seat, my sister reaches forward and gives Josephine a comforting squeeze of the shoulder. I had no idea Josephine and Hussein were tight like that. Like, yeah, they crossed paths at a few events, but I never saw them chatting.

'I'm OK, dears.' Josephine squeezes Lara's hand right back. 'It's just, something awful has happened.' Well, yeah, something awful usually precedes a funeral. 'We lost Tiddles last night.' Damn, two bereavements in one go? Josephine's going through it, boy. Wait. What kind of a name is Tiddles? Oh God, that doesn't sound like a

human name, does it? 'He was the b-best cat we could've ever been blessed with.' She starts sobbing, but huge, deep sobs that sound like they're coming from a giant who climbs beanstalks. 'W-we found him under a car this morning. B-but because of his arthritis, he must've dragged himself over with his two front paws,' she wails as she quickly reenacts his last moments before grabbing back hold of the steering wheel.

Now I know she loves that cat, sounds like it was part of her family. But I'm not gonna lie, it's taking every fibre of my being not to laugh at that reenactment. I'm pouting really hard, because I know that if I open my mouth to comfort her, I'll just start howling. What actually sends me is a quick glance behind, and the flicker of a grin on Lara's face. I snort. Thankfully Josephine doesn't notice, and I'm able to disguise it as a genuine snuffle.

I roll down the windows to let some of the awkwardness out, and concentrate on the buildings and people going past. If I look at Josephine or Lara, I know I'll laugh. When we do eventually pull in to the cemetery, there's already a few groups gathered and making their way to the crematorium. We thank Josephine for the lift, but she doesn't move from her seat. She needs a minute to compose herself.

As Lara and I climb out the car, I notice her do a long

sigh. These things aren't always easy for her, so I say we should stick together.

'Apple crumble,' I say encouragingly, our code phrase.

'Apple crumble.' Lara nods and takes a deep breath.

More cars arrive in the gravelly car park, and we know we're gonna have to engage with random family members. A few of them call out straight away, glazing me with their big greetings, smiling and waving despite the reason we're all here. I make chit-chat while Lara hangs around behind me.

'Hello, young man,' my dad's uncle says as he passes.

'Hi, Harrold.' He doesn't even look at Lara. Harrold is such a goofy name. Harry is fine, but Harrold? Harrold be thy name?

'Did I see you holding hands with a girl last week?'

He grins.

You did, you know you did, you honked your horn when you drove past.

'Yeah.' I'm rubbing the back of my neck, all nonchalant.

Lara silently rolls her eyes. She never rated Zoe, said Zoe acted like West Ham but moved like Tottenham.

'Is she your girlfriend?' My uncle waggles his eyebrows.

'Nah, it was just a couple of dates,' I tell him.

'Hah, you young people, with your dates, and your jawlines, and hairlines, and metabolism.' His lips go inwards and he shakes his head, all nostalgic.

‘How are you doing anyway, Uncle?’ Subtle change of subject. ‘Hussein’s passing must be pretty tough. You got any fond memories?’

Harrold gives me a soft smile, I learned ages ago that grown-ups love talking about themselves. Mum always says I know how to chat to people – she says that charm is a very useful tool for navigating the world, and it’s important to make people feel special. Harrold lets out a theatrical sigh, as though he’s just remembered we’re at a funeral. ‘So many memories.’ He shakes his head with GCSE drama levels of sorrow. *Name one memory*, I wanna tell him, but it’s not that deep.

‘Eww, that guy’s got issues,’ Lara whispers the second Harrold’s out of earshot. She always knows what’s up – and she’s not afraid to call it out. I can back it, but I’m personally not here for the smoke.

‘For real,’ I say, but only to her. My phone buzzes just then. It’s Savio, he’s running late as usual.

‘Ask him if he remembered my fizzy water.’ Lara grabs my arm. She doesn’t drink still water, it’s weird. The one Spanish phrase she knows is *agua con gas*, which means ‘water with gas’. After a plate of lentils, I call her ‘Lara con gas’, because of her blast radius. Savio’s voice is loud enough through the phone that I don’t even have to put it on loudspeaker.

‘Oh, hello, hi, hello, hey, hi,’ he begins with his usual

greeting. ‘You guys there already?’ My mum’s always telling him he’d be late to his own funeral. This is probably just him practising. I wonder what my funeral will be like. What picture would they use? The one from when we went ice skating for Savio’s birthday, and I got that girl’s number at the vending machine? We both got Bounty bars, so I balanced mine on my head, then told her there was a bounty on my head.

Maybe someone could write an obituary with a list of all my accomplishments on display. Spelling wouldn’t be top of the list. Fact, I can’t think of any right now, but by then I might have done stuff.

‘Yeah, we’re near the crematorium,’ I tell Savio. ‘You close?’

‘Hey, Sav,’ Lara jumps in. ‘Did you get my gas water?’

‘Gas water?’ he replies. ‘Chile, I got *sparkling* water. Gas water is what happens when you fart in the bath on the weekends.’ Damn. Why did he specify weekends? These two have the weirdest banter. ‘Owais, what’s the vibe like?’ he asks me. I look around at all the dark outfits and sombre faces before replying.

‘Bit funereally,’ I tell him. How’s he asking me the vibe like this is a rave? Making me use the word ‘funeral’ as an adjective. Or a verb, I’m not sure which is which.

‘So, no jazz-hand entrance?’

‘Not today. Maybe save them for something more

appropriate, like a court appearance, or a hysterectomy.'

He says he's nearly there so we end the call and walk to the steps of the crematorium, a smallish stone building with a goofy-looking chimney beside it. A few cousins come over to join us and they're all saying hi to me and we're catching up, it's nice. I notice Lara take a step closer to me for safety. She's kind of the weird kid. Like at family gatherings when we were younger, she had a book of 101 frog jokes that she'd go round reading to everyone, like how you never see a frog with a book, because he's already ribbit. She loved that one, and the one about doctor frog and his hopperations. The adults humoured her, the cousins not so much. As for me, for the longest, she was my annoying little sister, and that's how I treated her. But then something clicked when we became teenagers. She hasn't always had it easy in the ways I have – I've never found it hard chatting to people, not even new people, but I get that it's not that simple for everyone. Thankfully, she hasn't held it against me and now she's my favourite human.

'Hi, Owais.' My cousin Isabella comes in for a hug. Her perfume smells like C-list celebrity. It's not quite Vera Wang (which is a hilarious name, btw), but it's whatever celebrity bracket Michael Bubl  exists in. Isabella gives Lara a big, forced smile and delicate touch of the arm. 'Hi, hun, how are you?' She doesn't wait for an answer.

'Owais, make sure you get the balloons from my mum later, she's been seriously stressing something chronic.'

'Will do,' I reply. In honour of Hussein's life, someone had the bright idea of releasing a hundred blue balloons. It's standard practice at funerals: someone old, something new, something chronic, blue balloon. Because nothing says 'I'll miss you' like meaningless sky pollution.

We're climbing the stairs to the crematorium now, and through the sea of people I can just about make out my dad helping with the flowers, standing with some donny. I squint to make out who it is but then someone behind us is calling me and Lara.

'Savio!' Lara dashes over to him, no doubt grateful for a familiar face she can actually chat to. Sav is our cousin from my mum's side, so he doesn't really know that many people here, but he came for moral support.

'Yo.' I give him a quick hug. 'Glad you're here, man.'

'I wouldn't miss it for the world, Three.' He pats me on the back.

'Three? I'm literally in a black suit, how's it a three?' He does this annoying thing where he rates our outfits on arrival, and whatever number he picks is your name for the next few hours.

'I told you not to wear trainers with a suit, bro.' Great, of course Lara takes his side.

'Seven's right.' Savio nods as Lara subtly fist-pumps

in celebration next to him. 'You dress like a straight guy of a certain time.' I'm not even gonna pretend to know what that means.

'Did you bring my sparkling water?' Lara asks. Sav rummages through his little satchel that lives on his person. Inside he's always got his demister, a handheld fan, a tub of Vaseline, hand sanitiser, an extra phone charger and a signed Mariah album from when him and Lara waited seven hours in the rain to meet her and both caught pneumonia. He says he carries it for luck, but I think he carries it to flex.

They've grown pretty close over the last couple years. Savio's sixteen and, like Lara, he hasn't always had it easy. They understand each other in a way I maybe don't. But I'm glad they've got each other.

'I love that you drink this now, it's very European.' He hands her the bottle of sparkling water.

'I know, right? Owais keeps mocking me for it.'

'That's because it's nasty,' I tell them.

'You're nasty,' Savio shoots back.

'It's water with bubbles.' I'm just being that guy right now. 'Tap water is free. Still water is cheap. And then you've got this abomination, it's like water with unnecessary autotune. It doesn't need to be exciting, you just need it to hydrate. As human beings we're made up of water, not water and bubbles.'

‘We need oxygen, oxygen adds bubbles.’

‘I’m pretty sure carbon adds the bubbles,’ Savio points out to Lara.

‘And I guess carbon is relationship material,’ I tell them.

‘Huh?’ Lara is thrown way off.

‘That’s why they call it carbon dating,’ I reveal as the punchline. They both stare at me, blank face. Savio tells me we need a separate funeral for that joke. Their negative reactions are almost as funny as the actual punchline, I’m so here for it.

‘You know what, fair.’ I shrug.

Over by the main event, well-wishers are making their way into the funeral. My parents are at the top of the stairs now, that guy still with them. I can’t place him; he looks familiar, but then again, all our family does. The dude gives my dad a rough pat on the shoulder and leaves him to go inside. My parents exchange a look.

Then Dad spots us and grins. In our family, he’s the heart. Role model goals, people are always flocking to him, he’s got that kind of charisma where not being loud makes him a safe space. Mum says I’m already taking after him. He’s the talker, knows everyone, everywhere, all at once. Going into Camberwell with him is a nightmare, we always bump into someone. Old colleagues, or people he went school with, or the guys in that Greek bakery that sit around watching sports, the

Somalis in their coffee shops, the cockney key makers who reminisce about ol' what's his face whose son works in summink or other.

We walk up the steps and greet my parents as if we didn't see them just this morning. Mum's almost as much of a yapper-yapper as Dad, but with her it's phone calls. She once called me for so long, I fell asleep for twenty minutes, woke up, and she was still going. If my legs had the same stamina as Mum on the phone, I could run to Mars and back. They have a factory in Slough, near Maidenhead, it would take several hours of straight running.

She gives me and Lara a quick hug, while Savio gets a particularly long squeeze. It's like the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, when Dorothy's like, 'I'll miss you most of all, Scarecrow', and the others are just standing there like, 'gee, thanks'. Why him and not the others?

'How's your mum?' My mum asks him, like she's not constantly on the phone to her sister. Poor Savio, every time he comes over, my mum's always got something to give to his mum; food in Tupperware, random electronics, popcorn machine, ice-cream maker, just random junk that Savio traffics between the two of them like an Amazon driver who doesn't drive.

'Shall we head in?' Dad asks.

2

DUST TO DUSTY

We join the last drabs of people making their way into this massive room. There're two rows of church benches with a huge coffin at the front. Somehow it seems so much bigger in real life. My parents have helped set up the room beautifully, and people keep turning round to tell them what a wonderful job they've done. We're all sat on a row together, and I can't help thinking this would be perfect for doing the Mexican wave. Maybe not the right time or place, but it rarely is.

The ceremony starts with someone giving a speech, talking about what Hussein meant to all of us present here today. How much of a sweet, loving pillar of the community he was, and how dearly he'll be missed. Across from me, I hear sniffles. Josephine, inconsolable

about the death of her cat. She's hiding her tears behind a large pair of dark sunglasses, and members of Hussein's family are comforting her, rubbing her shoulders for moral support, while mourning the *actual* star of the show. Beside me, Lara is quietly filling Savio in on our awkward car journey, and he's holding in his laughter.

After the first two speeches, someone gets up to do a short reading from Hussein's favourite book. This part gets pretty emotional, because it was his favourite bedtime story, and he'd read it to his kids when they were afraid of the dark. People are wiping their eyes, hugging each other, and there's a hollowing silence as it finishes.

Then a pair of purple curtains are pulled around the coffin, and I guess this is the part where it gets cremated and turned into ashes. We're told by his sister that he was a big John Lennon fan, and the song 'Imagine' will play as we say our final farewell. But she has trouble fumbling around with the iPad that's supposed to play the song, and loud, inappropriate jungle music starts blasting through the speakers instead.

People gasp as a Caribbean accent shouts, 'Wine, wine, wine pon it, mi gyal gon wine pon it, wine pon it like kingdom fire.'

Even Savio lets out an 'oh God' while the lady frantically prods the screen. Mum literally covers her

ears, and Lara's trying real hard not to laugh. Eventually my dad gets up to go help, and John Lennon mercifully replaces the song that was just playing. Which, to be fair, was kind of a banger, just totally not funeral friendly. The vibe shift gives everyone emotional whiplash.

'Mum, what's the opposite of dignified?' I ask under my breath. She shushes me and nudges me with her handbag, but I can see the corners of her mouth twitching too.

After the song finishes, and the coffin disappears, we all trudge out. Some people have their arms around each other, some are whispering under their breath, asking what happens now, and the rest of us keep a respectful silence as we make our way to the car park.

Seems like the plan is to go to some pub near Surrey Quays, have a drink and some nibbles, then release the balloons in Southwark Park. Savio's getting the car with us, he's gonna sit in the back seat in between Lara and the ghost of Josephine's cat.

As we're waiting by the car, different family members are coming over, telling me how much I've grown, asking what I'm up to in life. More random uncles greet me playfully, they love a little back and forth.

'Yes, big man,' one of them says. 'You see the game last week?'

'I saw the result,' I reply with a cheeky grin. 'But

where did you finish in the League? I'm short-sighted, I can't see that far down the table without my glasses or a pair of binoculars.'

Beside me Lara and Savio are having their own dead chat with some cousins.

My uncle gives our conversation a key change, and starts asking me about school. 'You're, what now, fourteen? Fifteen?'

'Yeah, thereabouts.' I rub the back of my head.

'What's your favourite subject?' I shrug in response. 'Sixth form is just round the corner. You know what you wanna do after?'

'Reselling old Pixar films. Hopefully I'll be able to keep *Up*.' The joke lands like a sack of lead. I turn my attention to the cousins' conversation. The same ones who ignore Lara when she's by herself can't wait to come have a chat when Savio's here. Not being from this side of the family somehow makes him a bit exotic. But mainly they flock to him because they wanna be seen as allies, or have a gay bestie for the afternoon. He told me once how icky it makes him, and how he's nobody's gay anything. I don't mind being his straight bestie when we're chilling off with his friends, but I'd hate to live every day with people treating me as a side character or an accessory. He pointed it out to me that so many girls treat him like a handbag; someone to chill with for the day, take pictures

for Snap, and keep the chat superficial, and somehow work their other gay friends into the convo and say 'you should meet so-and-so, you'd totally love . . .' and so on. Since he brought it up, I've seen it happen a million times with a million different girls. He tolerates it, because it's just about better than aggressive homophobia.

We're sidetracked by my parents coming over, with the guy my dad was standing with earlier, the dude who looks really familiar. He stands there, straight face, and gives one sharp nod in our direction. It finally dawns on me who this guy is, seconds before my dad makes the introduction.

'Do you guys remember your uncle Serge?' Dad says.

His brother. We haven't seen him in years. Dad never really talks about him, or his childhood at all for that matter. Serge is like global warming, like, I know he exists, but I've never seen him with my own two. All I know is the brothers were raised by their grandparents, and the minute they were old enough to leave, Dad moved to London where he met my mum and never looked back. Serge became a businessman and pretty much disappeared. Dad said he used his French to go buy property in Ivory Coast where it's cheaper. I didn't know he was back here in the UK. I wonder if my dad did, before today.

He's much shorter than my dad, and much darker too.

But they have similar eyes. I can tell because Serge has one of the most intense stares I've ever seen. He looks me and Lara up and down, then his eyes linger on Savio, who gulps.

Serge looks serious, I know this man has never been ticklish. Maybe being successful has made him a type of way, I dunno. Dad's still pretty playful.

'You've grown,' he tells me. I want to say, 'You haven't,' but he doesn't exactly strike me as the most bantiful character. Plus, he looks like he could throw me into the sun like a javelin. He turns his attention to Lara. 'You were a baby last time I saw you,' he tells her. Why are his eyes narrowed, it almost feels like he's accusing her. She shifts uncomfortably next to me. The seed of awkward silence is starting to sprout, so I jump in.

'Baby is also the name of a small bee,' I reply for my sister, pretending the gaze was still on me. 'I guess we were all babies, at some point.'

'Yes, that's right,' he addresses me again. But he doesn't say anything further. He looks at Dad and folds his arms. Looks like this glorious reunion has come to an end.

'Cool, yeah.' Dad seems taken aback by how brief that whole interaction was. 'Your mum and I have things to discuss with your uncle, so we might be late to the next venue.'

'We'll save you a balloon,' Lara tells him bravely, tongue firmly in cheek. Mum smiles at the silliness and follows my dad and Serge to their car. The second they're far enough away, Savio dramatically turns round to us.

'Well, that was extremely uncomfortable.' He claps his hands together. 'If all your dad's family is like that, it's no wonder his backstory is so non.'

'Mum's family isn't perfect either,' Lara claps back. 'Who's that aunt with the gammy foot?'

'OK, firstly, that feels disablist, and secondly, she does not have a gammy foot. It swells up in the heat,' Savio replies.

'Swells up in the heat? Is her foot a loaf of bread?' I say to him.

'She has deficiencies.' He throws his arms up in protest.

'Yeah,' Lara says. 'She's deficient in feet that are the same size.'

'Don't judge unless you've walked a mile in her mismatched shoes,' I tell my sister.

Josephine finally gets back to the car then. She takes us to the pub, where most of the family are sitting around at reserved tables. Everyone's chatting away happily, kids are running in and out of the pub garden, and some G has even brought samosas. I sit in a corner with Lara, whose social battery is dangerously low, and Sav brings us over three glasses of orange juice. Lara immediately

scoops all the ice cubes out of her glass and plops them into mine. She hates when her drinks are too cold, and I prefer lots of ice in mine. Synergy.

‘So I just asked, and all the samosas have meat in them,’ Savio tells Lara. He’s been a vegetarian his whole life, and she’s on her third month of no meat. I see the benefits, to the planet, to the human body, and all that, but in a world where hot wings and Honest Burger exist, I don’t stand a chance as a veggie. I just have to hope that if reincarnation is real, I don’t come back as a KFC chicken, the blind ones in a tiny cage that have five extra wings poking out their face. Sometimes you can almost taste the arthritis. Which is why you have to smother them in BBQ sauce.

‘You want a Ryanair sandwich instead? It’s made out of rye and air,’ I say with a smirk.

‘Yeah, yeah, make your jokes.’ Savio side-eyes me. ‘I’ll be eating my own ice cubes for ten years after you die, which is on average how much longer vegetarians live compared to neanderthals like you.’

As the afternoon turns to evening, there’s a lot of talk about going to do the balloon release, long before it actually happens. That’s the thing about my dad’s side of the family, nothing ever happens when it’s supposed to. My mum’s side are so organised; an event like today would’ve come with an itinerary. My dad’s side don’t

even know the meaning of the word. They'd probably think an itinerary is some sort of Apple product, they be stabbing at a screen like, 'Owais, my iPhone works, but my iTingerwary is frozen'.

It's only by the time the sun starts cooling that people are finishing their drinks and passing balloons around. There's just one problem. Uncle Harrold is in charge of the helium cannisters, and he's only brought enough for fifty balloons. Some people have already begun making their way to Southwark Park, where they're expecting to release *a hundred* balloons.

'This is like when our broke school couldn't afford textbooks, and we all had to share, like, one between two,' I joke with the others.

'Yeah, your uncle's a square wheel.' Savio sighs.

'For real.' But the problems don't end there. As we approach the park entrance, I can tell that something's off. People are gathered outside the tall gates, some are trying to peer through the fence. Turns out the park closed at 7 p.m.; it's almost twenty past right now and everything's chained shut. A few adults start making frantic phone calls and formulating a plan B. There's a green area across the road, with a couple trees and benches for some of the older heads. It's just annoying that it's on the main road, not exactly secluded. Savio says it's better than nothing, and he's right.

Everyone heads over, gathering on the small patch of grass by the roaring traffic. I can't see my parents anywhere, which is weird, but I guess they were there for mains. By now, it's windy and getting dark, and we all wanna call it. One of Hussein's kids attempts to give another speech, but he's drowned out by a passing lorry.

'This is becoming a joke,' Savio mutters.

'Becoming?' I reply with a grin.

Someone finally begins a countdown to the balloon release. All fifty of the originally intended hundred. The countdown gathers momentum, we're all joining in. As a family. A group, a collective, united to honour the long life of a loved individual, with a symbolic gesture that we're all participating in.

'Three . . .'

'Two . . .'

'One . . .'

And just as fifty balloons are released into the air, a large gust of wind blows them straight into the tree behind us. Not a single one makes it into the sky, they just dangle in the branches like broken puppets. A couple people try doing a round of applause, but it peters out pretty quick.

After a few seconds staring open-mouthed at the tangled balloons, Lara says in a small voice next to me, 'It's what he would have wanted.'