

ONE

Disquieting Times

Lucy Parker-Patel remembered a saying from her younger years her father, a comparative religion lecturer, shared with her: “Believe nothing,” he told her. “Question everything.”

Although he didn’t clarify, their shared curiosity and easy communication created a unique bond, and she knew he was alluding to something more. The mixed-race girl questioned everything in forensic detail, much to the chagrin of her teachers and less curious peers.

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Lucy gazed at her tired reflection in the mirror. Strange questions whirled in on her. The pressure of adolescence weighed heavily on her, and the thought of skipping school and hiding away was a tempting escape. But her mother’s persistent shouts from the bottom of the stairs jolted her out of her reverie. ‘Alright! Alright! I’m coming down now, Mum.’

Lucy shuffled over to her window and hauled back her faded pink curtains, revealing a thin, silent curtain of drizzle that dulled the shifting pastels of dawn. Then, with a heavy sigh, she leaned her forehead

against the cool glass of her window, trying to force her mind into blankness.

The start of a new week usually filled Lucy with anticipation; however, in recent weeks, her passion waned. She thought about school, and a weary sigh broke over her uneasy features. Years of achieving the highest grades in the brilliant teenager's classes had instilled a sense of duty in her logical abilities. But now, as she struggled to gather the resolve to get dressed for school, she couldn't help but question some of her teaching, particularly religious studies: *How can any of it be true?* The seventeen-year-old couldn't shake the emptiness that hovered over her. She washed her face, groping for the feeling that hung in her mind as an empty shape. She could neither fill it nor reject it.

Lucy cringed as she slipped into her new grey school uniform with its blue piping. It hung shapelessly about her thin, nervous body as she arrived, bleary-eyed, in the kitchen to the sizzle of thin bacon slices and the aroma of instant coffee. A warm bubble of maternal affection briefly soothed the gnawing in her stomach as she popped a quick kiss on top of her mother's head. Like her father, Reginald, Lucy towered over her mother, Aaral, a handsome

woman of fifty, no longer slender but still attractive in her soft feminine way.

Lucy sat next to her younger brother, John. She strained the corners of her mouth up into a smile but doubted it came across as sincere.

John's eyes, glassy with caution, turned to say something, but Lucy held him silent with a stony stare and a barely perceptible movement.

The siblings finished their breakfast quietly, said goodbye to their parents, and strolled the short distance to wait for the daily school bus. They clambered on board, mumbled 'morning' to the driver, and sat near the front, almost on autopilot.

Lucy heard some rowdy pupils laughing, joking, and messing about. The weight of distinction clouded her face: *Why am I not like them?*

~

After a short, noisy journey, the teenagers arrived at the imposing sight that was their school. Franciscan monks built it in the early nineteenth century, at the height of the Gothic Revival period. The school, set on the bosom of a hill, sat brooding with silent authority over the Rural landscape in the small northern town of Bradstock in the county of Newshire.

Lucy entered the English classroom, greeted Miss Martin, and slumped into her seat next to her best friend, Fred.

‘What is it?’ Fred said when her eyes remained sullen for too long.

‘Nothing!’ Lucy snapped, clenched her teeth and turned to the tall, pointed-arched window.

Miss Martin’s small grey eyes glared at the teenager over half-moon reading glasses. ‘Quiet, Lucy!’

In her early forties, the school’s charismatic English teacher, Miss Martin, a short, compact woman of formidable intelligence, had long recognised the mark of genius on the forehead of Lucy’s petulant young face and took her under her wing.

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Lunchtime had John’s stomach churning at the smell of overcooked vegetables as he entered the school refectory. The cook, a large-faced woman with red hands and massive arms, smiled kindly and asked him what he wanted for dinner. He directed a timid finger at the pallid dish of cottage pie, declined the vegetables, and sat with two of his friends.

Lucy came in later, sat beside a window by herself, and opened a book.

John smiled as sunshine fell through the tall gothic window on his sister's delicate but broody profile. He excused himself to his companions, headed over to Lucy and pulled up a chair, searching her remote face. 'Whatever's the matter? Has something happened?'

Lucy's book shut with a slap of long, impatient fingers. 'Nothing. I don't want to discuss it!'

Lucy's amiable brother absorbed her sting and tried to continue as if he hadn't understood it. 'C'mon, Sis, let's go outside, and you can tell me what's happened. I hate seeing you like this.'

'Oh, John, I didn't mean to be so, so ... you know. But you must keep this matter to yourself.'

'Okay,' John moved closer, his voice barely a whisper. 'Don't worry.'

The siblings shivered at the sombre, solitary yew tree at the corner of the playing field on this late January day. Lucy's long, dark hair streamed behind her as she braced against the thorned wind that raced down from the north, numbing her hands and face.

'Look, Sis, a hawk!'

The bird sat imperiously on a lower branch of the yew, looking all around. The hawk's big spaniel eyes shone damp in the winter sunshine, like dark-brown marbles embedded in a splendid chestnut crown.

Lucy's head spun ninety degrees upward over her shoulder. 'Where? Where?'

The hawk turned to face her, eyes impenetrable, then fled on supple, anchor-shaped wings towards Bradstock Town, swooping low over the playing fields before soaring high into a bright, hazy winter sky. Lucy chased the hawk across the sky with her eyes, then opened up like a spring flower as her shoulders lowered a touch. Lucy's body quivered, and she stared at the sky. She knew something had changed in her, something extraordinary—nature in the raw, nature's evolution. 'So beautiful!'

'Yes.' John breathed as the predator's cloud-biting crossbow shape diminished to a mere dot in the breaking clouds.

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A sudden torrent of hailstones pricked the siblings' fresh, young faces, and they sped back to the refectory and found a quiet table well away from the others. The room murmured with eager students' chatter, plates' clatter, and cutlery's tinkle. A tall third-year boy flicked a vegetable at a group of first-years while his friends let loose gleeful bursts of artificial laughter that bounced around the walls.

John saw the faintest movement in Lucy's mirthless smile; he leaned forward over the table, his shoulders level with his chin, eyes intent. 'So, what's up? Is it that thing about the idiot calling you a half-caste again?'

John's older sibling moved in on his slight frame and held his dark-brown eyes. 'No, although the image of that boy still hangs about me like a sneering shadow. It troubled me this morning—sometimes I wish I could reach inside myself and pull that image out!'

'Oh ... I wish I'd been there; I would've punched him in the chops! Most people are prejudiced about something, though, Sis—he's just an idiot.'

A slight grin softened Lucy's tight face. 'True, John. It's not that, though. It's ... It's society. Society's just crap all fucked up! I find it difficult to believe anything I'm taught, especially in religious studies; the entire subject's so full of contradictions. That hawk reminded me of how majestic nature is and how it keeps evolving. I felt something deeply profound.'

'Yes, you glowed for a while after that. I thought I'd imagined it.'

'It's like I'm tasked with finding a better way. I know that sounds ridiculous and arrogant, but I've had these dreams where ... where ... I-I should ... I'm not

sure; maybe divinity is tied up with evolution and the Quantum World or the Universe. I'll talk to Dad.'

John ran a restless finger along his frank lips and began arranging the saltcellar, pepper pot, and sugar bowl as if playing chess. 'Hmm, divinity and the Universe? That sounds a bit grand. But you used to love the church. So, what's bothering you?'

'Well, it's mostly religious studies. Given what we've learned from modern science, most of it seems impossible.'

John banged the salt cellar against the pepper pot, knocking it onto the floor.

Lucy's presence reasserted itself with a quick, impatient narrowing of her eyes. 'Are you listening, John?'

'Yeah ... yeah, it makes little sense to me, either.'

'The other thing I'm having trouble with is this: our religion claims to be the one genuine faith and worships the only true God. How can this be true if other religions claim the same thing? Surely, if there is only one true God, we must all worship the same God?'

'I'm not sure what the answer to these questions is, but I understand where you're coming from. Everybody says you're the brightest student in the

school, so it will probably be you if anyone can find an answer.'

'That's very kind, John ...' Lucy lapsed into amused silence, a faint hue colouring her cheeks. 'And there's another irritating thing,' Lucy finally blurted out. 'The way men run society along patriarchal lines. In fact, men have made a proper mess of the world. Look at all the wars, inequality, and racism. —We still get racist taunts at school, remember! What about the mistreatment of women and starvation in developing countries? Men get paid for what they think, not what they know. You're okay, and Father's a kind, intelligent man. Remember this, John: we're fortunate to have such decent, understanding parents. But from what some girls tell me, their fathers are unthinking types with little respect for women—I've read some real horror stories! With their kinder natures, women must take a more active role in society if the world is to improve. Women have at least the same intelligence as men. I'll never let a man control me!' Lucy suddenly paused, grinning at her own impetuosity.

'Hey, steady on! At least you didn't include Father and me.'

'Well ... you know. Perhaps I'll study other beliefs and find out what they believe. I can't accept these

beliefs without seeing what the other faiths say—is any of what they say true? Maybe I’ll become a feminist!’

‘Oh. A feminist?’ Said John with a tiny grin. ‘Are you sure what one is?’

‘John!’

John retrieved the pepper pot, placed it beside the salt cellar, and gazed into his sister’s eyes. ‘I’m surprised you’re so agitated; it’s not like you. But, if it’s any comfort, I’ll always support you in whatever choice you make.’

Lucy flopped back in her chair, and a slow smile pressed her warm cheeks up, revealing an even set of snow-white teeth that appeared almost too large for her mouth. ‘Well, John, thanks for listening to my rant; it was a relief to talk.’

John looked at her and suddenly thought her face had an expression of truth; she seemed less restrained, more human—not so hemmed in by shadows. ‘Anytime.’

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Over the next few days, Lucy looked more like her old self. She had always been a prolific reader and loved nineteenth-century books. By age fifteen, she had devoured works by Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and

the Bronte sisters—Jane Eyre was her particular favourite.

Later that week, John saw Lucy with a pile of books under her arm coming out of her room. ‘What are you reading?’

‘Oh, just a few books on different religions and philosophies; you wouldn’t be interested. It’s a bit—’

‘Humph! How do you know?’

‘Wel-ll. ...’

John continued with a shrill, angry insistence, ‘God, you can be so smug and annoying! You’re not the only one with deep thoughts, you know! You’re not the centre of the Universe, Lucy.’

Pricked to amusement, Lucy burst out laughing and said, ‘Sorry, John.’ She kissed him impulsively on the cheek with the merry vitality that made her so irresistible and fled down the stairs, grinning.

John huffed, shook his head, flustered, but couldn’t stop smiling even if he wanted to.

TWO

Bradstock Park

John noted Lucy had become more and more secretive of late. He knocked on her door, but there was no answer, so he tried the door handle, found it open, and stole into her room. His eyes widened, and his chin dropped—the room was untidy for Lucy, and her desk was an absolute mess, full of scribbling on scraps of paper. She had mountains of books piled against the walls, draft assignments and Post-Its scattered everywhere, and her wastepaper bin appeared ready to give birth! Intrigued, John determined to find out what it was all about.

Lucy's door swept open, and she pushed past him—vivid with excitement. 'What are you doing in here, John!'

John fell back; his mouth jerked awkwardly and he avoided her gaze. He had never seen her so angry—almost threatening spontaneous combustion. Then, black and blue with embarrassment, he stammered, 'I-I only wanted to see what you were up to today and ask if you wanted to do something. I didn't mean to pry; I didn't think you'd carry on like that!'

'Well, what do you expect?'

The pair froze, mortified when their father broke the awful tension. 'Food's ready.'

The siblings sat down for breakfast, their faces solid with irritation. A coating of ice settled on the entire room, a thick layer on John. He didn't move for a good minute except for the flare of his nostrils. The pair remained awkwardly silent, but a shadow of remorse fled across Lucy's elfin features.

Ah, thought John, so she regrets her fiery explosion?

Their father joined them at the table. Curious hazel eyes peered through a pair of round, rimless glasses. 'You two seem rather glum. What have you planned for the day?'

Before John could open his mouth, Lucy broke in. 'We're going downtown.'

'Well, don't get into any trouble and be back in time for dinner.'

'Father,' Lucy said.

The middle-aged man washed the firm tone from his voice. 'What is it, my darling daughter?'

'I would like to speak to you and Mother next Saturday evening about some questions I have of a personal nature. Would eight o'clock be convenient?'

Reginald wrinkled his aquiline nose, and something uncomfortable flittered across his eyes. 'You don't have to be quite so formal, Lucy, but yes, eight would be fine,' he replied, leaving the table with many questions swimming around his head. ...

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John finished his breakfast and went upstairs to his room, with Lucy's sting still ringing in his ears. He

adored his older sister, especially how she was so protective of him. An image of her slapping a boy who called him a “Paki” scurried through his young mind. Although the memory filled John with abhorrence, Lucy’s reaction sent a surge of warmth through his body. He grinned, turned on his computer and reflected on his sister’s more enthusiastic behaviour. Her outward detachment masked a tremendous intellect with a caring, generous nature that wanted to make the world kinder. Lucy had an uncompromising moral compass and was desperate to make a personal statement about the point of existence. John recalled her byword: “I want to go to my grave with my soul intact”.

John opened his Facebook page and continued his reflection: Some students think of Lucy as weird; her dress is plain and unadorned. She wasn’t like other girls—not sentimental or obsessed with boys. Knowledge and spirituality had a hand in everything she did. It conflicted the inner landscape of her mind between religious feelings, science, and freedom for women. A vision of his father’s surprised expression at some of her more vocal outbursts made John smile and chuckle.

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Later, there was a gentle tap at John’s door—it was Lucy, with embarrassment still on her face. ‘Sorry for snapping at you, John; these disturbing thoughts are just ... you know. I shouldn’t take it out on you. I’ll try not to do it again.’

John shifted on stubborn feet. A deep sigh of apathy escaped his wide mouth, and a thin veil of resentment shaded his words. ‘Okay, it’s okay.’ He always acquiesced to Lucy, not because he was easily influenced but because her clear olive-green eyes and presence were overwhelming. ‘You’re always so intense, Lucy. I’m on your side. Don’t take everything to heart. Remember, others have their own ideas and emotions, too. You take yourself too seriously sometimes.’

The brilliant teenager’s heart pinched. Lucy’s apprehension grew into a question mark as the silence lingered, causing the intense adolescent to hide her head in a stoop.

‘Anyway, let’s go for a ride on our bikes,’ John said.

Lucy’s youthful eyes widened and glittered. ‘Yes, yes, you’re right; I will try. Let’s ride to town.’

~

Lucy and John rode off towards Bradstock with the open, joyous confidence of puppies who did not expect to get hurt. They had a naively natural, modest sense of their value and as innocent trust in any stranger’s ability to recognise it. And so, the pair journeyed on this warm mid-February morning with the low, misty winter sun creating an otherworldly aspect as it glinted off the damp grass at the roadside. Fine threads of countless spiders’ webs glistening with a dewy sparkle spanned the taller grasses.

Enchanted by the scene before her, Lucy jammed on her brakes, causing John to swerve wildly. Oblivious, she caressed the tall grass. ‘Look, Brother; there are millions of spider webs.’

‘Yes, I can see that! But watch where you’re going; I almost hit you then!’

‘Okay, okay!’

John watched Lucy stoically for a while. *God, sometimes she makes such a fuss over the silliest of things.*

The pair arrived at Back Lane, a shortcut via Bluebell Wood. Although Bluebell Wood was its official name, they called it the Magic Wood for its ethereal nature: the gentle rustling of leaves, birds chattering in the trees, their conversations carried on the soft whistle of the wind.

At this time of year, a carpet of bluebells scattered with golden daffodils leapt up, which, when a breeze sprang up, put Lucy in mind of lines from William Wordsworth’s poem, “Daffodils”:

*“... When all at once I saw a crowd, a host,
of golden daffodils; Beside the lake,
beneath the trees, Fluttering and dancing
in the breeze. ...”*

They loved to play in the Magic Wood and ran wild among the great ancient oaks with their gnarled and twisted branches, imagining them wise and steady. The wood always lifted their spirits, and today was no exception.

Lucy became like a little girl again; her bright eyes became moist. She turned to her brother; her heart wriggled with delight, and she wrapped her arms around him. ‘Oh, John, I’ll never let anything happen to you.’

‘I know.’

‘C’mon, I’ll race you to Bradstock Park.’

~

The siblings arrived in Bradstock Town and entered the park to check on their friends. Lucy spotted Fred Sparks with a company of kids from their school, sitting on the steps of the old bandstand. Fred was a tall, quiet, unaffected boy with the kind of physique you wanted on your side. Lucy was the only one of his friends that dared tease him.

Lucy hurried toward her friends. ‘What are you guys up to?’

‘We’re just talking about stuff. You know how the world can seem cruel, or at least the part we’re aware of.

But what’s life about, anyway?’ said Fred.

A surge of frustration swept over Lucy. ‘Strange you should say that. I couldn’t agree more. It’s as if the world has become consumed by trivialities and social media, leaving little room for genuine human connection. The apathy and selfishness of our wealthy political leaders are beyond belief. They parade around with their stupid hairstyles and empty promises, catering only to their wealthy cronies while leaving the rest of us to suffer in the wake of their destruction.

Then, they retreat back into their money. The milk of human kindness seems to have evaporated into thin air.'

Pran, a gentle, undersized Indian boy with prominent ears, asked Lucy, 'Milk of human kindness, what's that?'

'It comes from Shakespeare's Macbeth, in a line by Lady Macbeth. The line is:'

"Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be what thou art promis'd. Yet do I fear thy nature; it is too full o'th' milk of human kindness' to catch the nearest way ..."

'It's not really about kindness. Lady Macbeth meant that she regretted her husband hadn't the ambition to take the throne,' explained Lucy.

'Blimey, you know a lot, Lucy,' Pran said.

'Only because it was my major project for English literature this year.'

Dismay flickered across Jane Johnson's round face. 'Never mind all that; whatever can we do?'

Lucy's eyes grew large with excitement. 'Another alarming thing is how we seem to be waging war against the planet and her inhabitants as if we're trying to subjugate her to our will rather than treat it with the respect it deserves. Maybe we should search for something better, perhaps kindness; we should concentrate on finding our own special way.'

I've been reading some books on different ideas; they have some excellent ideas, which may redress the balance, with any luck, anyway.'

~

Suddenly, a cricket ball hit Amy French, a nervous little girl, like a sparrow, making her stumble. A trickle of blood oozed from the side of her head and mingled with her hair. She stood there, groaning on spindly legs.

Lucy steadied her, pulled a handkerchief from her pocket, and mopped the side of the small girl's head. 'Are you all right, Amy? Are you all right?'

Amy trembled. 'What the hell was that?' She straightened up, dazed but otherwise okay.

Then, all eyes turned towards the direction the ball came from. Fred pointed to a dazzling red rose of a girl who stood in state over her crowd of cronies. It was Bridget Byron, the daughter of the local MP and billionaire financier. She was tall and graceful, with a complex, predatory expression set in an impossibly beautiful face framed by luxurious hair—the fine, unruly strands stirring in the cool breeze like liquid gold and copper.

With her were four of her cronies: Jake Prince, broad-shouldered, squat, with a round, flat face and a mouth resembling a slit in beige leather.

Simon Red stared at Lucy through brown, round eyes; they had no expression, but his big mouth was grinning; he had a short nose that turned up and wide, insolent nostrils.

Dhanvi Brown and Delna Ambrose were West Indians, lean and wiry-looking but solid and agile despite their slim builds.

Bridget strode towards Fred, cutting across the park with a bold, erect rudeness. Strangely, though, she had a curious grace of movement that was quick, tense, yet somehow touchingly feminine. She planted herself a meter away from Fred and insisted they return the cricket ball.

Fred Sparks braved the stare from Bridget's blazing electric-blue eyes, stood tall, and demanded to know why they had thrown the ball.

Bridget lifted her chin like she was about to sniff something unpleasant and pursed her full, pouting lips. 'What's it to you?'

'Amy's my friend, and I don't like bullies like you and your lot hurting small, vulnerable girls like her.'

Bridget laughed, icy laughter like a cruel slap across an innocent child's face. 'Huh! It was only meant as a joke—we were just playing.' Bridget's beauty, elegance, and annoyingly cool voice unsettled most girls. In contrast, most boys, impressed by her obvious outer beauty, become speechless or submissive in her presence.

'If that's a joke, I'd hate to see you do something nasty,' Fred retorted.

Bridget's voice became harsh. 'You really, really don't want that!'

Jake Prince glared at Fred but said nothing; a gust blew the boy's unkempt blond hair away from his face,

revealing a quiet, anguished question frozen in his cold grey eyes, adding to his appearance of deep-seated indifference.

Lucy twisted; her cheek muscles drew tight; she clenched her teeth but tried to calm the situation: ‘Let’s all stay calm, no harm done. Amy looks okay.’

Bridget’s surprise was revealed in the swift turning of her exquisite head on its long, slim stem.

The tall girls’ gazes locked. A strange cocktail of excitement and respect pulsated in the gap between them.

Bridget stiffened. ‘Who the hell are you, as if I didn’t know, Little Miss Brainbox, the weirdo! —Miss Martin’s little pet!’

Bridget’s snarl flooded Lucy’s ears, and she stepped back a touch. She felt the rapid staccato of Bridget’s heart—or was it her own? Alarm bells rang in every part of her body.

Her friends stood stock-still with wide, staring eyes. The air hissed with tension. Then, as John went to move next to Lucy, a punch from Dhanvi sent him sprawling.

Bridget and her cronies began attacking Lucy, John, and her friends when, seemingly from nowhere, a lithe, muscular Asian boy appeared in the middle of the melee.

‘Don’t worry, Miss, I won’t hurt them,’ said the Asian youth with assured serenity. His steady pose and tranquil eyes were in stark contrast to the breaking pandemonium all around him.

The Asian youth's muscles coiled, ready to deliver a whirlwind of devastation. Then, moving with tremendous speed, almost as if performing a dance, he disabled Simon Red, a large, fit youth, with consummate ease. Dhanvi Brown and Delna Ambrose gulped at seeing this, perhaps feeling a sense of panic about their chances. In that moment's tiny opening, the Asian boy punched Dhanvi's chest but prepared his right leg to block Delna's kick. Once inside their defences', the boy hit them with a blur of strikes to the chest and legs in a sequence of rolling strikes, each leading into the next and veiled by the one before. Once it began, there was practically no way to stop it apart from running away.

Delna and Dhanvi looked up from the wet grass, rubbing their bodies and legs in stunned silence.

'I have no wish to hurt you,' the young Asian said; his quiet words had an edge that suffered no room for a reply.

Before Lucy knew it, Bridget and her cronies ran away, shouting expletives. Lucy stared, marvelling at this Asian boy who moved so easily on strong, nimble limbs; she wondered, *who on earth are you?* But when Lucy looked into his eyes, she saw no fighter. Instead, the thoughtful teenager sensed a serene, trusting spirit at the bottom of those dark-green eyes. She went to speak to the boy, but he only bowed, then sped off towards town.

Lucy and her friends gaped in astonishment; the boy had shown a strength that belied his physical size.

He had taken on Bridget and her gang and won—almost single-handedly!

Shaken, the group pulled themselves together and went back to Fred's place.

THREE

Fred's Place

Lucy and her friends entered Fred's room above the garage he used as a gymnasium; bewilderment and irritation haunted their youthful faces.

'How on earth could such a pleasant start to the day end in such a horrible way?' Pran said.

There was a silent, swift exchange of glances between Lucy and her friends.

Lucy searched her friends' faces. Finally, her gaze fell on Fred's pleasant, endearing, if not remarkably handsome, face. 'Well, Fred, what the hell happened during the fight, and who was that Asian boy who came to our rescue?' Disbelief bleached her voice. 'He moved so ... so effortlessly; how, in all that's sacred, did he do that?'

A confused smile spread over Fred's wooden features. 'Yes, it was awe-inspiring.'

'We owe him, but where does he come from?' John asked.

'It was funny how Bridget and her gang ran off shouting obscenities, though,' the small Indian boy chuckled, but edginess painted pictures in his dark eyes.

Lucy turned to Fred. 'Fred, we must find out who the Asian boy is and speak to that Bridget girl to find her problem.'

Fred's face fell beneath a mop of thick brown hair. He moaned and groaned but complied almost immediately when Lucy started using her logic and charms on him.

The interplay between Fred and Lucy captivated John. *She can twist the big man around her little finger; he must like her a lot.* 'Well, you put up some real resistance there, Fred.'

Fred coloured, and his voice had a note of anxious sincerity that seemed out of place for such a large boy. 'Well, she's so difficult to argue with ... you know how difficult she can be.'

John smirked. 'I certainly do.'

Lucy tilted her head, piercing John with a glare, but the corners of her mouth shot up as if she was trying not to burst out laughing. 'Okay, John, we'll send you instead.'

John's schoolboy grin suddenly became infectious, and he crossed his arms over his chest. 'Oh, no, not me,' he said. 'I'm far too much of a coward.'

Lucy chuckled. 'Hmm ...'

Recounting the incident to their parents came up, but the consensus was that it would cause more harm than good. Finally, their plans restored calm, and the conversation turned to lighter matters.

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Lucy closed her bedroom door; the room had a terrible emptiness; it echoed with cold silence. She flicked off her shoes and flopped on her bed. Scrambled thoughts spun and closed in on her—*what a strange day.* Then,

as fatigue began overtaking her, she sensed the sluggish approach of the exhaustion she had never experienced while studying: the weariness that awaited her when her shadow engram fell. Lucy felt she was incapable of any desire except a desperate longing for sleep.

Lucy awoke and stretched the horrible dream from her muscles. The quietness of her room overwhelmed her as she fought to overcome the burning in her eyes. Bleak mental images of humiliation assaulted her as if it were yesterday. Then, finally, the boy's voice broke into her mind. It was on her first day at school. Lucy was eleven years old when she first heard the term half-caste:

“A short, red-haired, sixth-form boy came barrelling across the playground, his lunch box wedged under plump arms. Small, awkward feet on skinny, brown legs and knees like foals tried to leap out of his way, slipped, and tripped the boy; he sprawled on hard, unforgiving concrete.

The eleven-year-old's chin dropped at the sight of bright red tomato slices, cheese, and white bread strewn about the playground. ‘S-sorry.’

The boy got up, brushing crumbs off his pale legs. His freckles vanished in a red flush of anger; his bottom lip quivered, and his eyes, both the squinty one and the normal one, glared violently at Lucy. The youth looked so mad that she thought he would strike her dead. But the boy didn't hit her, not at that time. Instead, he pushed her to the ground and shrieked

through thin, petulant lips, ‘You stupid little half-caste!’”

At the time, Lucy did not understand what the word half-caste meant. Nor was she old enough to understand the horrors of bigotry and racism. Eventually, however, Lucy realised the boy meant it as something distasteful and ugly by taking every opportunity after that not to say but to spit the words at her. She felt the full force of every one of his barbs. When Lucy was older, she recognised the expression’s full meaning: it was pejorative with sneering undertones.

She learned the word “caste” has many meanings, none of which is good. For example, caste’s origin is the Latin “castus”, meaning pure, and the Portuguese derivation “casta”, signifying race. So, half-caste came to mean impure for some people in the United Kingdom who believed only white is uncorrupted; anything else would contaminate the genes.

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Again, a vision of the chubby boy’s spiteful face flashed before her. Was this really the moral example society worshipped now? But then, she supposed, they always had. It was only Lucy who ever questioned it. Lucy, who was bright and beautiful and smarter than them all. Lucy, who asked why girls wear skirts and not trousers? Why couldn’t women have the same jobs they did perfectly well during times of need? What difference was there between men and women? What if you didn’t feel like either? What if you were

attracted to both? Why, why, why? Until her parents and teachers went red in the face.

Lucy sat with her chin cupped in her hands, her eyes stared at her window streaked with rain, and her ears were disturbed by the nagging wind. She hoped with a restless interest that some glimmer of light would break the impenetrable blanket of the sky, but for a brief hint of that lost blue sky that had covered Bradstock yesterday, it would shine for an instant as a bringer of hope.

A fog of despair settled around Lucy's delicate shoulders. Oh, god, there must be a better way! I must find some conviction, not this soggy uncertainty.

