

## ACT ONE

## Scene One

*A Muslim funeral directors' in a small but racially fraught and divided town in the Midlands – present day.*

*There's a front room where clients are met, and a back room, where bodies are washed, prepared and viewed before burial.*

*The directors' serves Muslim clients for Islamic funerals, so there are passages from the Quran displayed on the walls, notably – 'TO HIM WE ALL BELONG AND TO HIM WE ALL RETURN.' However, an effort has been made to make the front room look comforting, with a sofa, rugs and fresh flowers, a kettle, teapot and mugs, and some biscuits laid out. It is a bizarre but not unnatural mix of twee English living room meets small community mosque.*

*The back room is by contrast white and sterile. There is a shower stall along with a few gurneys and coffins.*

*AYESHA is alone, preparing a baby's body in the back room, singing to herself – a song by Mehdi Hasan – 'Duniya Kisi Ke Pyaar Mein'.*

*ZEYD enters with some paperwork.*

ZEYD. That's old-school.

AYESHA. I'm an old soul.

ZEYD. News to me.

AYESHA. Was Mum's favourite. She'd sing it to me when I was little.

ZEYD. You should sing more. I like it.

*Pause – ZEYD continues working.*

AYESHA. Did you order the kafans?

ZEYD. Not yet.

AYESHA. We're almost out.

ZEYD. I know.

AYESHA (*holding a tiny one up – it's a shroud which wraps the dead bodies*). This is the last one.

ZEYD. No it isn't.

AYESHA. It's the last one in this size.

ZEYD. Well, inshallah we won't get any more babies today.

AYESHA. You better hope we get someone in – this month has been slow.

ZEYD (*blows his hands for warmth*). You think this bloody cold would be killing people off left right and centre.

AYESHA. You could put on the heating.

ZEYD. Alright, big spender.

AYESHA. It'll kill me if you're not careful.

*They go back to work.*

ZEYD. What do you think she would have been? If she grew up.

AYESHA. I don't know.

ZEYD. I think she would have been a politician.

AYESHA. Doesn't matter now.

ZEYD. She's got this little frown, look? Like she's concentrating. She'd be intelligent. Principled.

AYESHA. Nah, she just grumpy.

ZEYD. She'd be an ambassador for Muslims. Like that Malala. Only not so annoying.

AYESHA. No. She'd be a grumpy waitress. With a grumpy face.

ZEYD. Sure you're not talking about your own face?

*Beat.*

What's with you today?

AYESHA. Nothing.

*Beat.*

Babies. She's just a baby.

ZEYD. I told you I could handle this one.

AYESHA. So can I.

ZEYD. It was her time.

AYESHA. Why? Who says? It isn't fair.

ZEYD. We can't question Allah. How he chooses to challenge us. You don't know, maybe this was for the best.

AYESHA. How? How is this for the best?

ZEYD. Maybe she would have grown up to be – Evil. A really bad politician. Like a brown Theresa May.

AYESHA. She had her whole life ahead of her.

ZEYD. This is the life Allah planned for her. Anyway, what life? You want her to be a grumpy waitress.

AYESHA. I guess.

ZEYD. See? Our all knowing Allah has just saved the world from poor service. Some time in the future, someone, somewhere will order a plate of chips. And you know what they'll get?

AYESHA. What?

ZEYD. A plate of chips. And you know why? Because this baby wasn't there to fuck it up.

AYESHA *smiles but then quickly returns to her pensive state and they work in silence.*

Sure you'll be okay on your own if I go to Hamza's stag?

AYESHA. I'll be fine.

ZEYD. Sure? You seem a bit...

AYESHA. I'm fine. Really.

ZEYD. Because I can always...

AYESHA. No. You have a good time. Lads lads lads.

ZEYD. Worried?

AYESHA. About you? Please.

ZEYD. Never know, I might be a catch in Budapest.

AYESHA. Sure.

ZEYD. A dark and handsome prince amongst all those pasty goray.

AYESHA. I'll put an advert in the *Hungarian Times*. One of them what-you-call-its?

ZEYD. Like for-sale ads?

AYESHA. No stupid.

*Wracks her brain.*

Lonely hearts!

ZEYD (*suddenly hurt that she isn't more jealous*). You could pretend to care a little.

AYESHA. Come on, I trust you. Why would I be worried?

*Beat.*

So what should we get them?

ZEYD. As a wedding gift?

AYESHA. Yeah.

ZEYD. We just got money for our wedding.

AYESHA. So boring.

ZEYD. It's traditional. I thought you were old-school.

AYESHA. Shut up. Come on we should get them something useful. Like. A kettle.

*Beat – realising this is shit.*

Like, a really nice kettle.

*Beat.*

Like one of them ones where you can set the temperature.

*Beat.*

Okay fine. Money. We just – can't spare much, that's all. You know that.

ZEYD. Don't worry, he'll understand.

AYESHA *goes back to singing and tidying up. ZEYD glances down at the baby.*

I want one.

AYESHA. A kettle?

ZEYD. A baby.

AYESHA....

ZEYD. Don't you?

AYESHA. What if it... [dies.]

ZEYD. Inshallah, she won't.

AYESHA. She?

ZEYD. Always wanted a girl.

AYESHA. Well what if she becomes a grumpy waitress and then dies?

ZEYD. Not all girls have to be waitresses. I thought you were a feminist. Besides, we won't let that happen.

AYESHA. You can't promise that.

ZEYD. I can. Most babies don't die. Most babies live. Ours would live. And we'd send her to university. So she won't be a waitress or a funeral director. She could be anything she wanted.

AYESHA. Unless she dies.

ZEYD. Well, if she has to die, better she dies a baby, then hey? No memories.

AYESHA. I'll have nine months of memories. What will you have?

ZEYD. So you don't want one at all?

AYESHA. No. Not now anyway.

ZEYD (*silent at first, but then decides to press*). When then?

AYESHA. I don't know. Five years.

ZEYD. We've been married five already. I'm nearly thirty, I don't want to be one of those weird old dads where people think I'm the granddad.

*Beat.*

My parents are on my case you know. Mum's been knitting baby sweaters for years. And Dad told me to see a doctor if we were 'having problems'.

AYESHA. They should mind their own business.

ZEYD. Grandchildren are their business. And they're worried.

AYESHA. There's no reason to be worried. Tell them we're fine.

*Beat.*

ZEYD. Aren't you meant to be broody or something? You know, maternal pangs? Don't you get them?

AYESHA. No.

*ZEYD gives up. They work in silence again. Then ZEYD tries a different tack.*

ZEYD. Have you read *The Little Prince*?

AYESHA. What?

ZEYD. It's a children's book.

AYESHA. I've never seen you read a book.

ZEYD. Was before we got married.

AYESHA. Oh you've let yourself go have you now? Got no one to impress with your reading?

ZEYD. It's about this guy. Who meets a prince. And the prince tells him stories, becomes his best friend. The guy loves the prince really, but at the end, the prince dies /

AYESHA. Bored to death with his own stories.

ZEYD. No. Listen. You'll miss the point.

AYESHA. Sorry.

ZEYD. The prince tells the guy he's going to die, and the guy is obviously really sad. But the prince says – it's okay. It's okay because when you've stopped grieving you'll remember all the good times we had, and the memories will make you happy.

AYESHA....

ZEYD. What I'm saying is – what I'm saying is – better to love and lose than never /

AYESHA. I know what you're saying.

ZEYD. I know – this job, all we see is the sad stuff. The loss, the death, the worst bits. But there are good bits too. We could have that. And the pain – it's worth it, right?

AYESHA. I've got to go pick Mr Mohajir's body up from the morgue.

*Beat.*

Can you believe he finally went?

*Beat.*

Story is he was knocking one off to a Bollywood film, when suddenly – heart attack. Wonder what film it was.

*Beat.*

You know the rumour right? Apparently he had an implant – down there.

*Beat.*

So even though he's gone, his mister will be saluting you on the table.

*Beat.*

New one for us hey?

*Beat.*

ZEYD. Ayesha, I want a family.

*The bell in the front room goes and TOM enters.*

AYESHA. I'll go see.

*AYESHA heads towards the front room and sees it's a white man – TOM. Surprised, she beckons ZEYD to come with her. TOM looks distraught.*

*(Whisper to ZEYD.)* It's a gora.

*ZEYD takes charge.*

ZEYD. Hi there, how can I help?

TOM. I need to organise a uh funeral.

ZEYD. Okay.

TOM. A Muslim one.

ZEYD. Right. And who is the deceased?

TOM. My – friend. He's at the hospital. With the coroner – He just died. He's dead. He's...

ZEYD. Okay, sit down. Here. Ayesha, can you make some tea?

*AYESHA gets up to make some tea.*

Okay, first things first – have you registered the death?

TOM. No they won't let me, say they need to – investigate or something.

ZEYD. Okay alright, that doesn't take too long usually, okay?  
Don't worry. So you're not a relative?

TOM. No, he's my – my – friend. He's a Muslim.

ZEYD. Okay, sorry to ask, but did you – did you find the body?

TOM (*nods, nearly in tears*). Yes.

ZEYD. Okay, so when the coroner's done, you'll be able to register the death as you found the body.

TOM. How long does that take? Don't you need to be buried in twenty-four hours? If you're Muslim?

ZEYD. As soon as possible, but you don't worry about that.

TOM. I'm sorry. It's just all so. I don't know what to do. I've never.

ZEYD. You're a good friend, okay? A very good friend for coming here.

TOM. So what do I do then? Once I've registered... Where do I even go to do that?

ZEYD. The coroner will explain everything to you, okay? It'll be okay.

TOM. And the funeral?

ZEYD. So, with arranging the funeral, that's more for the family to do. Different Muslim families do things differently – depending on where they're from, if they're Shia or Sunni.

TOM. He was Sunni, I think. I think so anyway.

ZEYD. Okay, well, do you have his family's contact details?  
It's just so we can be in touch with them, see what arrangements they'd like.

TOM. I was practically family.

ZEYD. Okay...

TOM. He was my flatmate. We were close. I know what sort of arrangements he'd like.

ZEYD. It's just – we always deal with family, we need to make sure that everyone is involved

TOM. They don't want to be involved.

ZEYD. What do you mean?

TOM. I mean, he didn't speak to his family.

ZEYD. I'm sure they'll want to know their son has died...  
Arrange a funeral for him.

TOM. They know, they know he's died. They just – don't want to have anything to do with him.

*Pause. AYESHA has clocked what's going on and looks at ZEYD pointedly. She puts a cup of tea down in front of TOM.*

ZEYD. Your friend – is he local?

TOM. Yes. Up the road. Cheevelly Avenue.

*ZEYD and AYESHA glance at each other. ZEYD realises something's not right now too, but isn't sure quite what.*

ZEYD. How did he – uh. How did he die?

TOM. What's that got to do with anything?

ZEYD. Well, he must be a young lad, your age. And if they suspect it's a [suicide]... /

TOM. It was an accident. An accident. He didn't mean to do it. Just wanted to scare them. He took pills. Too many pills and they tried to pump his – they couldn't, there were too many and it was too late. We were happy though. We were, I know it. He couldn't have meant it.

*ZEYD has now realised what's going on.*

AYESHA. I'm sorry we can't help you.

TOM. What?

AYESHA. We're too busy at the moment.

TOM. But surely you're used to being busy. Surely you could... /

AYESHA. It's been a cold winter. A lot of the elderly have passed away recently. We just can't manage with another.

TOM. Please. I don't know where else to go, who else to speak to.

AYESHA. Sorry.

TOM. Sorry!?

ZEYD. What's your name, mate?

TOM. Tom.

ZEYD. Listen, Tom. Why don't you go to Freddy's. Frederick and Sons, other side of town. You know it? They'll sort it. They're really good up there.

TOM. But I came here because he was Muslim.

ZEYD. We'll give Freddy's a call. Tell them how to do it.

TOM. What? Why can't you just do it?

ZEYD. Sorry. If I'm honest, we've just got too many clients around these parts /

AYESHA. We're all booked up.

TOM. Please. He would have wanted it done the Muslim way. I don't even know what that is, but I know – it was important to him.

AYESHA. I'm really sorry.

TOM. Thanks anyway.

TOM *looks defeated, turns and leaves.*

ZEYD. Poor boy.

AYESHA. It was the right decision.

ZEYD. I know. I just wish we could have helped.

AYESHA. But the family...

ZEYD. I know.

AYESHA. There's no way.

ZEYD. I wish we could have done it quietly.

AYESHA. Nothing stays quiet in this town.

ZEYD. Do you think we could have spoken to the imam?

AYESHA. And said what? He'll know the parents.

ZEYD. I know.

AYESHA. This is my mum's business. I need to run it the way she...

ZEYD. I know.

AYESHA. And she wouldn't have wanted...

ZEYD. I know.

AYESHA. You keep saying you know but you don't sound like you do.

ZEYD....

AYESHA. I'm going to the hospital. See you later.

*Beat.*

Order those kafans.

AYESHA *leaves.*

## ACT TWO

## Scene One

*Lights up. In the funeral home. JANEY and AYESHA have just been out for a coffee, and return together.*

JANEY. Wow! Look at this place! It hasn't changed one bit!

*Beat.*

The custard creams! I genuinely haven't eaten a custard cream since I was sixteen.

AYESHA. Do you only eat posh London biscuits now?

JANEY. Oh yeah, each biscuit costs at least six pounds.

AYESHA. Well you better stock up.

*AYESHA offers her a biscuit.*

Go on, have another.

*They chomp on biscuits for a moment. JANEY sees a photo of ZEYD and AYESHA on the wall.*

JANEY. I still can't believe you married Mr Bum Fluff.

*(Giggles.)* Does he know we used to call him that?

AYESHA. No, and I want it to stay that way!

JANEY. I knew he liked you! Always hanging around you.

AYESHA. Stop!

JANEY. Fine. I just think it's funny, that's all. I should have known you'd end up together.

AYESHA. What's that supposed to mean?

JANEY. Nothing. I just should have guessed.

*Beat.*

AYESHA. Are you still in touch with anyone?

JANEY. From St Marks, hah, no. Are you?

AYESHA. Well most of them all still live round here.

JANEY. Right. I had a clean break I guess.

*Beat – she left AYESHA behind too.*

AYESHA. Fresh start. Lucky.

*Beat.*

JANEY. So you going to give me a tour of the back or what?

AYESHA. You still want to see it? You're so weird.

JANEY. You promised!

AYESHA. It isn't special... it's just – imagine a regular room – four walls, tiled. A sink. That's it.

JANEY. Oh come on! I'm dying to see it! Your mum never let us in there!

AYESHA. I know. The more she tried to keep the dead bodies from me, the more curious I was!

JANEY. Guess she just wanted to give you a normal upbringing. Without nightmares of corpses.

AYESHA *(laughing)*. It was a nightmare anyway! You were the only person mental enough to come visit! Everyone else thought our house was haunted! Remember?

JANEY. Oh I thought it was haunted too. That's why it was so exciting!

*Beat.*

Do you still live upstairs? With Zeyd?

AYESHA. Yeah.

*Beat.*

I want to move. Fresh start and all. But money's tight and Mum left us the flat. And we can't rent it out because – well who would want to rent a flat above a funeral directors'.

JANEY. You never know. Come on then, let me see the back room.

AYESHA. It's – private.

JANEY. So, it's just me.

AYESHA. I don't know if Zeyd would be okay with it.

JANEY. He's not the boss of you.

AYESHA. I know that.

JANEY. So what's the problem? Is there anyone in there? Dead, I mean.

AYESHA. No, but...

JANEY. Well then! Don't you own this place anyway? You make the rules!

AYESHA. Fine.

JANEY. Yes!

*AYESHA leads JANEY into the back room and flicks the lights on.*

Wow. This is – dull?

AYESHA. What did you expect?

JANEY. Dunno. Bit more. Drama or something.

AYESHA. Sorry to disappoint you.

JANEY. I've never seen a dead body you know.

AYESHA. You're lucky.

JANEY. Guess so. Are you used to it?

AYESHA. No.

*Beat.*

How's your mum?

JANEY. Out of the woods. But I feel like I should stay. Get to know her again, properly. As adults. But that woman – she's...

AYESHA. I remember.

JANEY. Right. Course.

*A beat – something in the past is being referenced but we're not sure what.*

I'm sorry I never got in touch. After I left.

AYESHA. It's fine.

JANEY. Are you still singing?

AYESHA. Not really.

JANEY. You were so talented. Why'd you stop?

AYESHA. Grew up, I guess.

JANEY. Remember we'd be in choir together? You'd get all the solos, and I'd stand at the back wailing like a cat on heat.

AYESHA. You were alright.

JANEY. I was awful! I was only there because I wanted to hang out with you!

*Beat.*

I always thought you were going to be like a singer or something. Never saw you doing this, for some reason.

*Beat.*

Come on, sing me something...

AYESHA. No, I can't.

JANEY. Yes you can.

AYESHA. It'd be weird.

JANEY. Why? Come on, serenade me... serenade me!

*JANEY hops onto a free gurney and poses inappropriately.*

AYESHA *laughs*.

Come on, I'm serious!



JANEY. Is that a bad thing?

AYESHA. No.

*Beat.*

Have I changed?

JANEY. Yes.

AYESHA. How?

JANEY. Well.

*JANEY sits up on the gurney and touches AYESHA's hijab – it is intimate, perhaps a first touch for them.*

This for one.

*Beat.*

And I don't know – you're just more serious. Grown up.

*Beat.*

And maybe – you seem a bit...

AYESHA. A bit what?

JANEY. I don't know...

AYESHA. What?

JANEY. I don't want to say...

AYESHA. What?

JANEY. Maybe... Sad?

AYESHA. Sad?

JANEY. Sad. Yes.

*A silence – AYESHA realises that JANEY isn't wrong.*

*JANEY lies back down on the gurney.*

What do you think being dead is like?

AYESHA. Well, we were taught, if you've been good in life – it's meant to be alright. But if you've been bad, sinful, we call it 'the torment of the grave'. Your grave, it closes in on you, and it's full of spiders and beetles and horrible stuff and it's the longest wait till the Day of Judgement. Even the animals can hear your screams.

JANEY. And people say atheists are bleak.

AYESHA. Depends on your perspective I guess.

JANEY. What happens on the Day of Judgement then?

AYESHA. Sentenced – to heaven or hell.

JANEY. Is that what you believe?

AYESHA. Yes.

*Beat.*

I don't know any more. What do you think?

JANEY. I think you're just gone.

AYESHA. I guess, for the people left behind, you are.

JANEY. You must miss her.

AYESHA. Every day.

JANEY. How did she... [die?]

AYESHA. Car accident.

JANEY. That's awful. I'm sorry.

AYESHA. The worst thing was – I'd seen her in here so many times. Living, breathing, humming to herself as she cared for all the people who came in over the years. But seeing her in here – not just dead but mangled.

*Beat.*

I couldn't wash her – what was left of her. All the bodies I'd washed, that we'd washed together, and I couldn't wash hers. Zeyd did it in the end.

JANEY. I thought about her a lot. She was always so lovely to me. Welcoming. The opposite of my mum.

*Beat.*

I'm sorry about how we left things, you know? Back then. About how my mum dealt with it? The bullying.

AYESHA. It was a long time ago.

JANEY. I'm really sorry.

AYESHA. It's in the past.

*Beat.*

And we ended up fine.

JANEY. I suppose so.

AYESHA. More than fine! You're a lawyer!

JANEY. A barrister, so the underpaid kind.

AYESHA. What sorts of cases do you do?

JANEY. Human rights, criminal justice, some of the terror cases...

AYESHA. So you defend them? The terrorists.

JANEY. Well they're not proven terrorists but often they've been unlawfully detained. Other times they're tried in what's called secret courts, supposedly for reasons pertaining to national security, but really can anyone actually have a fair trial if it happens in secret, and the government pushed this legislation through despite /

AYESHA. Janey?

JANEY. Yeah?

AYESHA. I need a favour.

JANEY. Oh. Okay.

*Beat.*

AYESHA. Zeyd and I, we're being sued.

JANEY. What for?

AYESHA. Well. This boy. He came in here a few weeks ago.

JANEY. Right...

AYESHA. He was – younger than most people who come in to bury their wives or children. So I thought it must be his parent who'd died. A convert parent or something, because he was white, and well, why else would there be a white man in a Muslim funeral directors'.

*Beat.*

And he says – he says his friend's died. Committed suicide we think. And his friend's a Muslim, but didn't speak to his family any more, so this English boy wants to arrange the funeral.

*Beat.*

Anyway, the dead boy well he's from the community, people would talk, gossip, and because of his reputation we'd be blacklisted. Our business would suffer. We're already up against it.

*Beat.*

So I say sorry, turn him away. Zeyd sends him to Freddy's Funerals, other side of town.

And then Zeyd even goes to Freddy's. Tells him how to do a Muslim funeral. The rituals and all, so the boy gets what he wants anyway, just not from us.

JANEY. Right. So?

AYESHA. Well, now he's suing us!

JANEY. I don't understand, why?

AYESHA. Discrimination.

JANEY. Well why did you turn him away? What was his reputation?

AYESHA. Well, it must have been his – his boyfriend.

*Beat.*

We don't know what to do. I thought because you're a lawyer you could help?

*Beat.*

Say something.

*Long pause.*

JANEY. I wanted a bit of a break from law, actually.

*Beat.*

It's partly why I decided to stay up here so long.

AYESHA. So you won't help?

JANEY. I'm sorry, I can't.

AYESHA. Just some advice, anything. We don't know what to do – we can't afford a settlement, and we can't afford a lawyer, and we definitely can't afford to lose the case.

JANEY. This isn't even my area really.

AYESHA. We don't have anyone else.

JANEY. I think I'd better go. Say hi to Zeyd. It was nice of him to go to Freddy's. Terrible to turn the guy away. But nice to do what he did.

AYESHA. Janey.

JANEY. I'm sorry but I really can't help with this. Anything but this.

AYESHA. Please.

JANEY. Bye, Ayesha.

*JANEY leaves.*

### Scene Two

*In the funeral home – front room. Music is playing in the background – something like 'Aaja' by Swet Shop Boys. AYESHA is cleaning with a broom or mop, and begins to sing/rap along to the song. As she gets more into the song, she starts to dance with the broom.*

*ZEYD enters but AYESHA doesn't notice.*

ZEYD. Ayesha? Ayesha! AYESHA!!!

*AYESHA cannot hear him.*

What's this – song?

*He clearly hates it.*

*AYESHA notices him and jumps, surprised and perhaps a touch embarrassed. She turns the music down.*

AYESHA. What are you doing creeping around?

ZEYD. What are you doing dancing around? Anyone could just walk in!

AYESHA. Was just – cleaning. Anyway we're closing up now.

*Pause.*

ZEYD. You seem happier.

AYESHA. Guess so.

ZEYD. Good to have the imam on side, isn't it.

AYESHA. Yeah.

ZEYD. Nice to hear you sing again. Dancing could use a bit of work though.

AYESHA. Oi.

ZEYD. It's okay. Maybe we could get dancing lessons together.

*He reaches for her and dances with her a bit unsteadily.*

AYESHA. As if we have time.

AYESHA. Don't let this upset you.

ZEYD. I'm not upset.

AYESHA. Yes you are.

ZEYD. No I'm angry. This is going to be us and them, again. Britishness, Englishness, integration.

AYESHA. We should apologise.

ZEYD (*shouting*). We can't apologise!

(*Quieter.*) Don't you understand? It's out now. The press know. Everyone will know. You think our clients will come back to us if we accept we were wrong? And now Freddy's thinks he can do Muslim funerals, we'll lose business!

AYESHA. Whose fault is that then.

ZEYD. How was I meant to know this would happen?

AYESHA. Look, they won't go to Freddy's over us...

ZEYD. We are a MUSLIM funeral home. I have three numbers on my speed dial. You. My mum. And the imam. We bury the dead. We bury their sinning dead, and we wash them, cleanse them. With our own hands. So our hands need to be clean. We can't be in bed with the kuffar, don't you understand?

AYESHA. We can't afford to lose this case.

ZEYD. We can't afford to apologise! Why didn't you ask Janey? She was always hanging around you back then. I don't understand why you won't speak to her?

AYESHA. She's a human-rights lawyer. She'll side with him.

ZEYD. But what about our human rights! The right to say no? Because it's against our beliefs, our religion? Doesn't matter what they say, homosexuality is a sin, Ayesha, and you know it. And that's how our community will see it.

AYESHA. But you said /

ZEYD. In our heart, we should remember what's wrong and what's right.

*Lights down.*

### Scene Three

*In the funeral home. ZEYD is in the front room on a laptop, while AYESHA is in the back room folding some towels and putting them away.*

AYESHA. Aren't you meant to be at a janaza this afternoon?

ZEYD. Asked Hamza to do it.

AYESHA. What? Why?

ZEYD. Didn't feel like it.

*A disapproving pause. AYESHA comes out to the front room.*

AYESHA. You should get off that. It's a waste of time.

ZEYD. Have you seen what they're saying?

AYESHA. No, we have work to do.

*Beat.*

Your parents rang. Wondering if we'll be coming round for dinner this weekend?

ZEYD. There's a petition to get us shut down.

AYESHA. They're worried about us. About you.

ZEYD. Tell them we're fine.

AYESHA. You could tell them yourself.

*Beat.*

Mona's grandfather's died.

ZEYD. Look at this: 'This case once again highlights how Muslims are failing to integrate into British culture and I hope the result will uphold British values of equality and democracy.' – this is our fucking MP talking. I'm British too. What about my values?

AYESHA. I need you to collect the body. Mona's grandfather?

ZEYD. Newspaper's saying some Muslims have put up stickers round the area too. Saying homosexuality is a sin and that.

AYESHA. Are you listening? He's at the hospital. Can you go?  
This afternoon?

ZEYD. It's a mess. Everything's a mess.

AYESHA. ZEYD!

ZEYD. Yeah yeah. Collection from the hospital.

*Satisfied he's got the message, but shaking her head frustratedly, AYESHA moves back into the back room, but ZEYD follows her, ranting.*

Why was he even in here thinking we'd help? Do you think it's a set-up? *Daily Mail* or something. Heartless Muslims, homophobic Muslims. Turn away grieving gay boyfriend. They always want to give us a bad name.

*Beat.*

Now that we've been in the paper, I bet loads of them will come in here, wanting us to do their funerals.

AYESHA. Please will you forget that nonsense and be at least slightly useful?

ZEYD. You didn't come to bed last night.

*Beat.*

AYESHA. I was doing some work and fell asleep down here.

*The door opens and JANEY enters. ZEYD peeks out.*

ZEYD. Here we go, look, it's already started.

AYESHA. What?

JANEY. Hello?

*ZEYD steps out into the front room.*

ZEYD. Come right in, love, we're a Muslim funeral directors', but we don't discriminate. We accept all races, faiths, colours, creeds, genders, sexualities. Come right in, I'll make you a cuppa.

JANEY. Uh, is Ayesha here?

*AYESHA steps out too.*

ZEYD. I can help you. We do all kinds of funerals, like I said, we don't discriminate.

AYESHA. Zeyd...

ZEYD. If a rhinoceros walked through that door, we'd do a rhinoceros funeral.

AYESHA. It's Janey? Remember her?

ZEYD. Oh. You changed your hair. Looks – nice.

JANEY. Thanks. Your beard filled out alright too.

ZEYD (*touching his beard confused and self-conscious*). What?

AYESHA. What are you doing here?

JANEY. I wanted to speak to you.

ZEYD. Actually we wanted to speak to you too. You're a lawyer right?

JANEY. Yes.

ZEYD. Well, I don't know if Ayesha's told you, but we're involved in this court case.

*JANEY looks to AYESHA, confused. AYESHA looks to the floor.*

Or maybe you saw it in the paper?

AYESHA. Zeyd...

JANEY. Yes I did.

ZEYD. Anyway, we were wondering if we could ask for your advice on it?

*There is a long awkward silence.*

Because it's freedom of religion, isn't it? That's our human right, right?

JANEY. Your freedom of religion extends only so far as it doesn't trample the rights of others.

*Silence.*

AYESHA. Zeyd, why don't you collect Mr Khan. I'll speak to Janey.

ZEYD, *first indignant then disappointed, leaves.*

Sorry.

*Beat.*

JANEY. How've you been?

AYESHA. Fine.

JANEY. I've seen your case in the papers. Seems to be causing quite the stir.

AYESHA. Yeah – I'm trying not to read it. But we're getting hate mail, phone calls, all kinds of shit.

JANEY. I'm sorry.

AYESHA. It's okay, I'm still alright, but Zeyd's taking it pretty badly.

JANEY. I'm leaving.

AYESHA (*shocked*). What?

JANEY. Mum's better. But we're fighting all the time. Over everything. *The Archers*. *The Ten O'Clock News*. The difference between organic and free-range eggs.

AYESHA. Oh.

JANEY. Being back here. It feels like home, but not, you know? Like I'm a foreigner in the place I was born. You know what I mean?

AYESHA. I can imagine, yeah.

*She's a British Muslim – of course she knows what JANEY means.*

JANEY. And I miss London. It just sucks you in. I was a Londoner from the second I got on the Tube to go to work on my first day. My head in someone's armpit.

*Beat.*

And I don't know what it does to you, but you start to think the whole world is like that. A melting pot of cultures, unified by suits and mobile phones, commuter woes and house-price grievances. And you know that falafel is Palestinian, and your Muslim mates can only eat halal meat, but can also go to that kosher place up in St John's Wood. And you feel like you've got super powers, like you've cracked it, and the answer to war and hate, racism and homophobia, and the clash of civilisations is just to become a Londoner.

*Beat.*

And now I'm back here and it's home, but it's like – a – a – twilight zone, like suspended in space and time. The same prejudices, the same divisions the same small-minded small-town backwardness that I'd hoped I'd left behind.

AYESHA. Well. If your mum's all well and fine now, you really have no reason to stay amongst us 'small minded, small-town, backward' people.

*The air is thick with hurt.*

JANEY. I didn't speak to her for years you know? After I told her I was a lesbian.

*Pause – this lands with AYESHA.*

I came out first year of uni, and she – well she refused to believe it, refused to accept it. She wanted the big white wedding, the son-in-law, the grandchildren. She was embarrassed. Didn't want me to tell Dad either, as if he would blame her parenting. Like he had any right to given he'd abdicated all parenting responsibility.

*Beat.*

And when I brought my girlfriend home, she kept asking what 'my friend would like for tea' or where 'my friend' would like to visit. And then Mum had the gall to ask her – in front of me – if she had any nice men in her life. And when my lovely polite girlfriend, said no, you know what my mum said?

*Beat.*

## ACT THREE

## Scene One

AYESHA *has come to meet TOM on a park bench.*

AYESHA. Thanks for meeting me.

*Beat – TOM is silent.*

I asked to meet you because I wanted to apologise.

TOM. Took your time.

AYESHA. I was waiting for the right moment.

TOM. Four months after he died?

AYESHA. I'm sorry.

TOM. Well. Apology not accepted.

AYESHA. I know.

TOM. What you did. Disgusting.

AYESHA. I know.

TOM. Apologise. What good will that do. None. Nothing.  
Nothing.

*TOM lifts his cup to his mouth but it shakes uncontrollably in his trembling hands. He gives up, puts it down without taking a sip.*

*AYESHA notices this, proceeds more kindly, more honestly than we have ever heard her speak before.*

AYESHA. You must be in a lot of pain.

TOM. You think?

AYESHA. It's rare that we get in anyone as young as you and your – your friend.

TOM. Boyfriend.

AYESHA. Boyfriend. Most people. They're either older, or they were sick for some time. They're expecting death, you know. It's a bit easier that way maybe.

*Beat.*

But sometimes, we get the heart attacks, or the car crashes – the ones when you don't expect them. They're different.

*Beat.*

It's not just grief is it. It's – it's something else.

*Beat.*

TOM. Is that it? Is that your apology done?

*Beat.*

Or did you expect me to forgive you?

*Pause.*

AYESHA. I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive myself.

TOM. You know the irony of it all? He would have forgiven you. I never will, but he would have.

*He laughs.*

That's the kind of person he was. Better than you. Better than all of us.

*Beat.*

You know, a few weeks before he died, I came home from work and found him at home with this old man. I mean, the man must have been about eighty at least. And Ahad had come across him, just wandering around on the street crying. He was confused, there was something wrong with him, his mind. Not all there. Talking nonsense, sometimes even shouting. And anyone else would have walked a circle round him. But Ahad – Ahad brought him home. Gave him a cup of tea, some toast. Tried to find out who he was, where he lived. And it turned out his wife had just died, but he didn't know

who to call, or what to do. He just looked so – lost. Hopeless. Like he wished he'd died with her.

*Beat.*

That's the kind of man Ahad was. The man you refused to wash, to bury.

AYESHA. What we did /

TOM. What you did should have been condemned in a court of law. It should never have turned into some nonsense despicable legal game, hidden away and settled out of court. It should have been public. For everyone to see – wrong and right. What you did was wrong.

AYESHA. I want to make things right. As best I can.

TOM. It's too late. He left me. How can anything ever, ever be right again.

*Voice breaks.*

Time fucking heals. Time only numbs if you're lucky.

AYESHA *rummages in her bag and brings out a notepad. She opens it on a page and hands it to TOM.*

What is this?

AYESHA. I'm going to send it to the local paper. With your blessing.

TOM *glances at it.*

TOM. Read it.

AYESHA *is hesitant.*

Go on. Read it out. I want to hear you say it.

AYESHA *takes the sheet of paper.*

AYESHA. It uh says. It says: 'We are deeply sorry for our mistake and the pain we have caused. We would like to make it clear that Al-Asr Funerals is open to any and all members of the community.'

TOM. The case is all settled. Why now?

AYESHA. Atonement.

TOM. Bit short isn't it, for atonement. Let's see it again.

AYESHA *hands the pad over.*

Got a pen?

AYESHA *fishes a pen out of her bag. TOM gets to work on the sheet of paper, crossing things out, adding things in. When he's done, he slides it back to her.*

AYESHA. 'We deeply regret our decision to refuse a funeral for Mr Ahad Ilyas on the basis of his sexuality, and we are sorry for the pain we have caused his partner Thomas Gibbs.'

*Beat.*

His family won't want him to be named like this.

TOM. They abandoned him, so their opinion no longer counts. Carry on.

AYESHA. 'We would like to make it clear that Al-Asr Funerals is open to any and all members of the community irrespective of sexuality.'

TOM. There's more.

AYESHA. 'Furthermore, we urge the Muslim community to practice tolerance and acceptance of the LGBTQ' – what's Q for?

TOM. Queer.

AYESHA. 'LGBT – Q – Community.'

*Beat.*

This is what you want?

TOM. Yes.

AYESHA. We can't say this.

TOM. Well then. We're done here.



AYESHA. Please. This case has riled the community enough. I can offer an apology, just about, but tell them to accept it? Never. They'll never see it as anything but a sin.

TOM. Ahad used to say that the God – the Allah – he believes in, would never create him this way, make him love in the only way he knew how, only to condemn it. That would be a cruel God, and his Allah wasn't cruel.

He'd made peace with it. With Islam.

And he thought, in time, others – other Muslims – would too.

AYESHA. You don't understand this community.

TOM. This community killed my boyfriend!

*A silence.*

And that should never happen again. Ever. To anyone.

AYESHA. Okay. Okay I will.

TOM. Okay.

*TOM turns away from AYESHA. He's done with her. But she continues to sit beside him for some moments in silence.*

AYESHA. There's a prayer in Islam which we say when someone dies: Inna lillahi wa inna ilayhi raji'un. To Allah we all belong and to Allah we all return. It helps me. Sometimes.

TOM. Thank you.

AYESHA. He must have been very brave. To leave his family. Be with you.

*This is the first time TOM begins to soften.*

TOM. Yeah he was.

AYESHA. Did he tell them the truth? About you?

TOM (*nods*). He was a terrible liar, so he had no choice really. And he thought that the world was a good place. He really believed that. How many people do you know like that? That actually think this world is a good fucking benevolent place?

Who can see kindness in the most wretched evil fucking people.

*Beat.*

He really believed they'd accept him eventually. And he waited and he waited, until – I guess he couldn't wait any more.

AYESHA. Did his family come to the funeral?

TOM. Just his sister. She was always okay with him. Sort of. She says her parents want to meet me now. It's changed them apparently.

*Beat.*

I meet his sister sometimes though. It's nice, we talk about him.

AYESHA. Does it help?

TOM. I'm scared to stop talking about him.

AYESHA. Tell me about him then.

*Pause.*

TOM. He fucking loved Bollywood, that man. The dances, the drama, the moustaches, and saris, but the songs especially. He'd sing them sometimes. I'd wake up to it some days. Smell of coffee from the kitchen, and the sound of him singing away. Wish I'd recorded it now.

*Beat.*

I wish I had appreciated every second of every day with him. He was my world.

*TOM collects himself, makes to leave.*

Thanks for – that. The statement.

AYESHA. My husband won't like it. But – if it makes a difference.

TOM. You know. Ahad thought that the only way to change people's minds – to make them value love over religion –

was to make them realise we're just like them. If enough daughters and sons and brothers and sisters and husbands and wives came out, they'd have to accept us eventually.

*Beat.*

But it meant an army of the afraid standing up, and coming out. And as far as he could see in this town, it was just him, just him alone.

*Beat – maybe TOM touches her hand.*

We all need to be brave sometimes, Ayesha. Or else, nothing will ever change.

TOM leaves.

*Lights down.*

## Scene Two

*At the funeral directors'. AYESHA is alone, praying.*

ZEYD crashes in noisily, sees her, glowers, but says nothing as AYESHA continues to pray.

AYESHA ends her prayer, folds her prayer mat, and drapes it on the end of the sofa.

ZEYD, annoyed, picks it up and folds it away in its place.

ZEYD. Ibrahim's coming over to help with his dad's ghusl.

AYESHA. Okay.

ZEYD. Are you ready?

AYESHA. Yes.

ZEYD. Did you get the green form?

AYESHA. Yes.

ZEYD. Where is it?

AYESHA. Where they usually are.

ZEYD. Well who knows what other big changes you might decide to make without consulting me.

AYESHA. Do you want a cuppa?

ZEYD. No.

*AYESHA clicks the kettle on.*

*ZEYD disappears into the back room.*

*ZEYD removes some towels from a shelf and lays them on the side.*

*AYESHA sits on the sofa with a sigh. ZEYD peeps out to look at her. She has her eyes shut.*

*(Gruffly.)* What's wrong with you?

AYESHA. Headache.

ZEYD. You don't need to stay.

*The kettle clicks off. AYESHA pours herself a cup of tea.*

AYESHA. What about for the janaza?

ZEYD. You don't have to come.

AYESHA. Sure?

ZEYD *(shrugs)*. I asked Hamza to help.

*His phone beeps and he reads the text.*

Ibrahim's on Asian time anyway. Why don't you go upstairs, lie down.

AYESHA. Okay.

*AYESHA gets up to go.*

ZEYD. We made the money back.

AYESHA. What?

ZEYD. With this last one. We can pay the mosque back what we borrowed. For the settlement.