



STEPPING RAZOR
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Everyone called him Razor because he was so sharp even his words could cut you. His cusses slid into your skin and left pink scars. (When I saw my first girl naked I was reminded of something he said to me once, after he had cussed a woman and then she had kissed him: I have forgiving lips.)

So it was dangerous when he made me his runner. Even in those days it was all good. People would smile at me and wonder what I had that he liked and that he made me his boy. Just me, eleven years old, and his crew. Razor was sixteen and the others about the same. I saw them mash up some skinheads in West Brom one day. I remember watching as Razor pulled off his sharpened kara and cracked it on his face and nose. The skinhead looked at me and for a second his face

was not of malice and Nazi, but he was a small boy frightened. The sound of fist on his face was a dull wet thumping. I thought of my mother and said in my head; that white boy has a mum, too.

Of course it helped that my Uncle Kully was sorting them out with stuff. Razor had some deals with him. They helped each other and that helped me. I even dressed different when Razor took my side. New trainers, jackets. Jag, Smoot and all my mates basked in the glow of being chosen by the danger man to be his friend. It smouldered off me like a nice stench, all that kudos and badness.

—What you got there?

—Cigarettes.

—How many? You're going to get arrested carrying cigarettes in a black bin liner like that.

They were for Razor and I was transporting them. Smuggled to be sold in the pubs in Newtown. I was eleven so nothing would happen if I was caught because I was juvenile.

—You have to stay away from him. He's a waster. His whole family are wasters.

—I'm just doing a favour.

—Stay away from him. Your dad finds out you messing with that bad boy he'll skin you. I know your dad. I'll tell him what you're doing.

Kamlesh was like that, poking his nose and thinking it was his job to lecture. But do you know how easy it is to buy off holy men like him? It is this easy.

—I give you two packets of cigarettes if you shut up. You didn't see me.

—You got Marlboro?

—Only Lights.

—Come on then. Give me three.

—I'll tell Razor. This way I tell him he counted wrong that's why they're missing. And Razor will cuss you so don't say nothing. Take two. You didn't see me.

—I didn't see you.

He tears off the wrapping and sparks up, Mr Holy-Righteous-Man. That's how Indians are, ready for baksheesh and corruption. It is easy to make yourself invisible in Handsworth if you are blessed by Razor.

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When I think about it now, it is like white ants running and scurrying through my brain. I am jumpy and nervous. His gold tooth, his scar and goatee, his sneer at the people that found God, when all the Sikhs were murdered in India and the Shere Punjab got strong and started protecting the community. This was soon after. But he just sneered at all that, and that's what made me like him. Money and fun was all that life was. Once I saw a cousin-sister of mine with Razor's best friend, they were drunk and being loose. The next day we met at the temple and she was being holy and sly. That's when I wanted to be sly like that too. But thinking about it now I can feel the white ants scurrying around under my skull; it itches and they sting me every few seconds.

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One evening I was shaving my girlfriend's legs and told her that I once knew a man called Razor. She laughed.

—What kind of name is that?

—Oh, he was dangerous, a rude boy. People called him Razor

because you had to watch his sides because he was so dangerous. He was like a stepping walking razor.

I smoothed some more shaving foam in a line and drew the blade down.

—You know some funny people.

—I used to know him. I don't know him anymore.

—Why don't you know him anymore?

The blade nicked her just at the top of the knee bone. I was too careless. She blotted the ooze of blood with her index finger. I clicked my teeth and apologised and ran my finger along the blade to see if it indented my skin as easily as a fresh one should.

—I'm sorry. It's blunt. All razors go blunt. Should have used a new one.

Later that night, after I had massaged and rubbed lotion into her legs, we did cunnilingus and I said to her,

—I have forgiving lips. You have forgiving lips too.

—Yeah. And I forgive you for cutting me. Now shut up. And carry on.

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—You're a good boy. Grow up a little so we can go for a drink.

Razor was drunk. He smelt of ganja and whisky and my uncle Kully was there too, they were working on some deals. I liked their smell and disdain. Razor's hands were scarred and he spoke with a slight lisp. The way they chatted about other people made me scared but happy. There was depth in their contempt.

—His sister is a slag. Jaggy banged her after one night.

I made mental images of slags and banging.

—Shot him up and mashed him up. Booyakasha! Can you believe

that a lickle white mouse was at the door? Lickle white mouse.

It must have been like beating up the skinhead; dull wet thumps.

—He is dead. Chaarno got wasted at the gig and it's over. Feisty Pakis.

I imagine vendetta because of some slight at the bhangra hop. This was all good. I would be like this one day too. When I got back in the evening after Kully sweet-talked my mum, I smelt the smoke on my clothes and felt happy that it had clung to me. It was like an approval.

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I saw my cousin-sister with them again and they were chatting. She gave me a death stare. I heard them laughing and joking about what a slut she was the next day, then they shushed when they realised I was there, but I laughed too. I was one of them.

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After I was caught by the police with the cigarettes and had recovered from the hiding my father gave me, Razor loved me more. I had been blooded.

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On a July evening my girlfriend told me she did not want me anymore, and I cussed her so viciously it left pink scars on her skin. She cried and whined so hard that it reminded me of the summer day at the scrap yard. I was aged fourteen.

Razor was looking for a clutch and they were all together and high. They laughed and giggled at me as I ran around doing what they said. Fetch this and that and crawl inside a rusty car to look for this or that. I got brown-red grains of metal all down my forearm.

—Razor you made this boy your bitch. Tell him to get us some food.

Soon after they sat drinking with the Singh who owned the place. The smell of whisky sweetness mixed up with the haze of pollen reminded me of vomit. Mounds and mounds of compressed cars and twisted oxidised skeletons were their backdrop. I don't know what they were discussing but I started to sweat.

—Razor you have some money for a Coke?

His boys laughed at me and he flicked a 50p in the air, and then threw it into the dirty nettles that stood in bunches at the fence. They laughed.

—Fetch it and don't get stung or you're a bitch, he said.

There was dogshit in the nettles. I found the 50p but got stung and red. They laughed.

I bought a Coke and some other stuff. After two sips they took the can and used it as mixer for the whisky.

By four o'clock I didn't know how I was going to get home. They were wasted and I was supposed to be at school. It had been a nice day for fun and so I had tagged when I gave him the stuff from Kully in the morning. I stank of sweat and cuddled myself in the corner as they cussed and boasted of ripping girls apart when they came near them. Their sex was dangerous too, you see.

Soon they had me dancing for them, and when I did something wrong they shouted at me and barked that I was just a little bitch, but Razor didn't say anything, he just laughed too.

The stray dog came and wallowed up to us. He was so docile and weak. I reckoned it had been his shit amongst the nettles. They threw some scraps at him which he sniffed and circled suspiciously, looking up at us. I wondered why he shat in the nettles. He must have gained immunity to their poison. My stings were bloating in the sun now. It was six o'clock and I tried rubbing blocks of ice on them then stuck them on my tongue to see if I could taste nettle poison.

Then Razor and the boys laughed and started throwing things at the dog. One of them got him between the eyes and they all laughed. I laughed too, because I had to. Then Razor whistled for me to bring another box of cigarettes from his car. I did so and then walked over to the dog, crouched, and started patting its head. A clump of hair was missing from behind his ear. He was only small. I threw a piece of plastic with wires hanging out of it in front of him. He pawed it and then chewed and looked at me. I stroked his back. I looked at his body and his anus seemed inflamed like my forearms which were orange with the sting-rash. I scratched his head affectionately. Then Razor called,

—Boy, do you want to join our crew?

—Yeah.

They were all smiling, the ones that could be bothered to look at me. The Singh that owned the scrap yard said,

—That fucking dog is shitting here. I swear I am going to shoot the bastard one day.

—Put him in one of the cars when he thinks it's his kennel and then put him in the compactor, said one of the crew.

They laughed. The Singh got angry and told us how much he hated that dog and he was going to kill it. So Razor stood and said,

—Boy, kill the dog and you can drink with us.

—Yeah, boy, kill the dog and we will get you laid, I swear.

They all laughed.

Then they looked at me intensely and Razor said,

—Boy, do as I say. Kill the dog and I'll make you my don.

The sun was looking to set and it made the sky orange. I had killed ants and spiders before. I used to pull legs off daddylonglegs and watch them twirl on the walls and floor. So I thought, why not?

They were watching and knew it was entertainment. So I pulled away the piece of plastic and wire the stray was chewing and turned him over onto his back. He looked at me and raised his paws as if anticipating that he was going to be stroked on his belly. I looked at his inflamed anus again, and then glanced at Razor and said,

—Watch this.

Then I put my heel down on his throat and held it there heavy and deep while the dog writhed and mewled, his growls sounding more like screeched farts than last breaths. It was so easy. The dog was pathetic, but the sky and air and sunset were majestic.

The crew became silent as the dog started foaming at the mouth. I looked straight into his eyes and did not hear the footsteps behind me, but I felt Razor's open hand whack my left ear like a cold hammer. My eyes shut instinctively and I saw black and then stars and for a second I thought he must have drawn blood on my temple with his gold rings. I wasn't even aware of my foot coming off the dog's gullet and him staggering away. I just felt like crying because Razor had slapped me.

—Alright boy, you can do it. You can join the crew.

They all laughed behind me, laughed at me.

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My lips are forgiving, but when I remember her it is like white ants roaming. My girlfriend was sharp, like a stepping razor, and when she left it cut me up. On the day she left me I was mewling and pathetic, but the sky and air and sunset were majestic.

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