

video tapes, new books and fashionable clothes the boy had bought just a few months before. Also without explanation, Ali had parted from the English girlfriend who used to come often to the house. His old friends had stopped ringing.

For reasons he didn't himself understand, Parvez wasn't able to bring up the subject of Ali's unusual behaviour. He was aware that he had become slightly afraid of his son, who, between his silences, was developing a sharp tongue. One remark Parvez did make, 'You don't play your guitar any more,' elicited the mysterious but conclusive reply, 'There are more important things to be done.'

Yet Parvez felt his son's eccentricity as an injustice. He had always been aware of the pitfalls that other men's sons had fallen into in England. And so, for Ali, he had worked long hours and spent a lot of money paying for his education as an accountant. He had bought him good suits, all the books he required and a computer. And now the boy was throwing his possessions out!

The TV, video and sound system followed the guitar. Soon the room was practically bare. Even the unhappy walls bore marks where Ali's pictures had been removed.

Parvez couldn't sleep; he went more to the whisky bottle, even when he was at work. He realised it was imperative to discuss the matter with someone sympathetic.

The New Yorker, 1994

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My Son the Fanatic

Surreptitiously, the father began going into his son's bedroom. He would sit there for hours, rousing himself only to seek clues. What bewildered him was that Ali was getting tidier. Instead of the usual tangle of clothes, books, cricket bats, video games, the room was becoming neat and ordered; spaces began appearing where before there had been only mess.

Initially Parvez had been pleased: his son was outgrowing his teenage attitudes. But one day, beside the dustbin, Parvez found a torn bag which contained not only old toys, but computer disks,



Parvez had been a taxi driver for twenty years. Half that time he'd worked for the same firm. Like him, most of the other drivers were Punjabis. They preferred to work at night, the roads were clearer and the money better. They slept during the day, avoiding their wives. Together they led almost a boy's life in the cabbies' office, playing cards and practical jokes, exchanging lewd stories, eating together and discussing politics and their problems.

But Parvez had been unable to bring this subject up with his friends. He was too ashamed. And he was afraid, too, that they would blame him for the wrong turning his boy had taken, just as he had blamed other fathers whose sons had taken to running around with bad girls, truanting from school and joining gangs.

For years Parvez had boasted to the other men about how Ali excelled at cricket, swimming and football, and how attentive a scholar he was, getting A's in most subjects. Was it asking too much for Ali to get a good job, now, marry the right girl and start a family? Once this happened, Parvez would be happy. His dreams of doing well in England would have come true. Where had he gone wrong?

But one night, sitting in the taxi office on busted chairs with his two closest friends watching a Sylvester Stallone film, he broke his silence.

'I can't understand it!' he burst out. 'Everything is going from his room. And I can't talk to him any more. We were not father and son – we were brothers! Where has he gone? Why is he torturing me?'

And Parvez put his head in his hands.

Even as he poured out his account the men shook their heads and gave one another knowing glances. From their grave looks Parvez realised they understood the situation.

'Tell me what is happening!' he demanded.

The reply was almost triumphant. They had guessed something was going wrong. Now it was clear: Ali was taking drugs and selling his possessions to pay for them. That was why his bedroom was emptying.

'What must I do then?'

Parvez's friends instructed him to watch Ali scrupulously and then be severe with him, before the boy went mad, overdosed or murdered someone.

Parvez staggered out into the early morning air, terrified they were right. His boy – the drug addict killer!

To his relief, he found Bettina sitting in his car.

Usually the last customers of the night were local 'brasses' or prostitutes. The taxi drivers knew them well, often driving them to liaisons. At the end of the girls' shifts, the men would ferry them

home, though sometimes the women would join them for a drinking session in the office. Occasionally the drivers would go with the girls. 'A ride in exchange for a ride,' it was called.

Bettina had known Parvez for three years. She lived outside the town and on the long drive home, where she sat not in the passenger seat but beside him, Parvez had talked to her about his life and hopes, just as she talked about hers. They saw each other most nights.

He could talk to her about things he'd never be able to discuss with his own wife. Bettina, in turn, always reported on her night's activities. He liked to know where she was and with whom. Once he had rescued her from a violent client, and since then they had come to care for one another.

Though Bettina had never met the boy, she heard about Ali continually. That late night, when he told Bettina that he suspected Ali was on drugs, she judged neither the boy nor the father, but became businesslike and told him what to watch for.

'It's all in the eyes,' she said. They might be bloodshot; the pupils might be dilated; he might look tired. He could be liable to sweats, or sudden mood changes. 'Okay?'

Parvez began his vigil gratefully. Now he knew what the problem might be, he felt better. And surely, he figured, things couldn't have gone too far? With Bettina's help he would soon sort it out.

He watched each mouthful the boy took. He sat beside him at every opportunity and looked into his eyes. When he could he took the boy's hand, checking his temperature. If the boy wasn't at home Parvez was active, looking under the carpet, in his drawers, behind the empty wardrobe, sniffing, inspecting, probing. He knew what to look for: Bettina had drawn pictures of capsules, syringes, pills, powders, rocks.

Every night she waited to hear news of what he'd witnessed.

After a few days of constant observation, Parvez was able to report that although the boy had given up sports, he seemed healthy with clear eyes. He didn't, as his father expected, flinch guiltily from his gaze. In fact the boy's mood was alert and steady in this sense: as well as being sullen, he was very watchful. He returned his father's long looks with more than a hint of criticism, of reproach even; so much so that Parvez began to feel that it was he who was in the wrong, and not the boy!

'And there's nothing else physically different?' Bettina asked.

'No!' Parvez thought for a moment. 'But he is growing a beard.'

One night, after sitting with Bettina in an all-night coffee shop, Parvez came home particularly late. Reluctantly he and Bettina had abandoned their only explanation, the drug theory, for Parvez had

120 found nothing resembling any drug in Ali's room. Besides, Ali
wasn't selling his belongings. He threw them out, gave them away
or donated them to charity shops.

125 Standing in the hall, Parvez heard his boy's alarm clock go off.
Parvez hurried into his bedroom where his wife was still awake,
sewing in bed. He ordered her to sit down and keep quiet, though
she had neither stood up nor said a word. From this post, and with
her watching him curiously, he observed his son through the crack
in the door.

130 The boy went into the bathroom to wash. When he returned to his
room Parvez sprang across the hall and set his car at Ali's door. A
muttering sound came from within. Parvez was puzzled but re-
lieved.

135 Once this clue had been established, Parvez watched him at other
times. The boy was praying. Without fail, when he was at home, he
prayed five times a day.

140 Parvez had grown up in Lahore where all the boys had been
taught the Koran. To stop him falling asleep when he studied, the
Maulvi had attached a piece of string to the ceiling and tied it to
Parvez's hair, so that if his head fell forward, he would instantly
awake. After this indignity Parvez had avoided all religions. Not
that the other taxi drivers had more respect. In fact they made jokes
about the local mullahs walking around with their caps and beards,
thinking they could tell people how to live, while their eyes roved
over the boys and girls in their care.

145 Parvez described to Bettina what he had discovered. He informed
the men in the taxi office. His friends, who had been so curious
before, now became oddly silent. They could hardly condemn the
boy for his devotions.

150 Parvez decided to take a night off and go out with the boy. They
could talk things over. He wanted to hear how things were going at
college; he wanted to tell him stories about their family in Pakistan.
More than anything he yearned to understand how Ali had discov-
ered the 'spiritual dimension', as Bettina described it.

155 To Parvez's surprise, the boy refused to accompany him. He
claimed he had an appointment. Parvez had to insist that no ap-
pointment could be more important than that of a son with his fa-
ther.

160 The next day, Parvez went immediately to the street where Bet-
tina stood in the rain wearing high heels, a short skirt and a long
mac on top, which she would open hopefully at passing cars.

'Get in, get in!' he said.

They drove out across the moors and parked at the spot where on
better days, with a view unimpeded for many by nothing but wild

165 deer and horses, they'd lie back, with their eyes half closed, saying
'This is the life.' This time Parvez was trembling. Bettina put her
arms around him.

'What's happened?'

'I've just had the worst experience of my life.'

170 As Bettina rubbed his head Parvez told her that the previous
evening he and Ali had gone to a restaurant. As they studied the
menu, the waiter, whom Parvez knew, brought him his usual whisky
and water. Parvez had been so nervous he had even prepared a
question. He was going to ask Ali if he was worried about his im-
minent exams. But first, wanting to relax, he loosened his tie,
crunched a poppadom, and took a long drink.

Before Parvez could speak, Ali made a face.

'Don't you know it's wrong to drink alcohol?' he said.

175 'He spoke to me very harshly,' Parvez said to Bettina. 'I was
about to castigate the boy for being insolent, but I managed to con-
trol myself.'

He had explained patiently to Ali that for years he had worked
more than ten hours a day, that he had few enjoyments or hobbies
and never went on holiday. Surely it wasn't a crime to have a drink
when he wanted one?

'But it is forbidden,' the boy said.

Parvez shrugged, 'I know.'

And so is gambling, isn't it?'

'Yes. But surely we are only human?'

180 Each time Parvez took a drink, the boy winced, or made a fas-
tidious face as an accompaniment. This made Parvez drink more
quickly. The waiter, wanting to please his friend, brought another
glass of whisky. Parvez knew he was getting drunk, but he couldn't
stop himself. Ali had a horrible look on his face, full of disgust and
censure. It was as if he hated his father.

185 Halfway through the meal Parvez suddenly lost his temper and
threw a plate on the floor. He had felt like ripping the cloth from the
table, but the waiters and other customers were staring at him. Yet
he wouldn't stand for his own son telling him the difference be-
tween right and wrong. He knew he wasn't a bad man. He had a
conscience. There were a few things of which he was ashamed, but
on the whole he had lived a decent life.

'When have I had time to be wicked?' he asked Ali.

190 In a low monotonous voice the boy explained that Parvez had not,
in fact, lived a good life. He had broken countless rules of the Koran.

'For instance?' Parvez demanded.

195 Ali hadn't needed time to think. As if he had been waiting for this
moment, he asked his father if he didn't relish pork pies?

'Well ...'

Parvez couldn't deny that he loved crispy bacon smothered with mushrooms and mustard and sandwiched between slices of fried bread. In fact he ate this for breakfast every morning.

Ali then reminded Parvez that he had ordered his own wife to cook pork sausages, saying to her, 'You're not in the village now, this is England. We have to fit in.'

Parvez was so annoyed and perplexed by this attack that he called for more drink.

'The problem is this,' the boy said. He leaned across the table. For the first time that night his eyes were alive. 'You are too implicated in Western civilisation.'

Parvez burped; he thought he was going to choke. 'Implicated!' he said. 'But we live here!'

'The Western materialists hate us,' Ali said. 'Papa, how can you love something which hates you?'

225 'What is the answer, then,' Parvez said miserably. 'According to you.'

Ali addressed his father fluently, as if Parvez were a rowdy crowd that had to be quelled or convinced. The Law of Islam would rule the world; the skin of the infidel would burn off again and again; the Jews and Christians would be routed. The West was a sink of hypocrites, adulterers, homosexuals, drug takers and prostitutes.

As Ali talked, Parvez looked out the window as if to check that they were still in London.

235 'My people have taken enough. If the persecution doesn't stop there will be jihad. I, and millions of others, will gladly give our lives for the cause.'

'But why, why?' Parvez said.

'For us the reward will be in Paradise.'

'Paradise!'

240 Finally, as Parvez's eyes filled with tears, the boy urged him to mend his ways.

'But is that possible?' Parvez asked.

'Pray,' Ali said. 'Pray beside me.'

245 Parvez called for the bill and ushered his boy out of the restaurant as soon as he was able. He couldn't take any more. Ali sounded as if he'd swallowed someone else's voice.

On the way home the boy sat in the back of the taxi, as if he were a customer.

250 'What has made you like this?' Parvez asked him, afraid that somehow he was to blame for all this. 'Is there a particular event which has influenced you?'

'Living in this country.'

'But I love England,' Parvez said, watching his boy in the mirror. 'They let you do almost anything here.'

'That is the problem,' he replied.

255 For the first time in years Parvez couldn't see straight. He knocked the side of the car against a lorry, ripping off the wing mirror. They were lucky not to have been stopped by the police: Parvez would have lost his licence and therefore his job.

260 Getting out of the car back at the house, as he got out of the car, Parvez stumbled and fell in the road, scraping his hands and ripping his trousers. He managed to haul himself up. The boy didn't even offer him his hand.

Parvez told Bettina he was now willing to pray, if that was what the boy wanted, if that would dislodge the pitiless look from his eyes.

265 'But what I object to,' he said, 'is being told by my own son that I am going to hell!'

What had finished Parvez off was that the boy had said he was giving up his accountancy. When Parvez had asked why, Ali had said sarcastically that it was obvious.

270 'Western education cultivates an anti-religious attitude.'

And, according to Ali, in the world of accountants it was usual to meet women, drink alcohol and practise usury.

275 'But it's well-paid work,' Parvez argued. 'For years you've been preparing!'

Ali said he was going to begin to work in prisons, with poor Muslims who were struggling to maintain their purity in the face of corruption. Finally, at the end of the evening, as Ali was going to bed, he had asked his father why he didn't have a beard, or at least a moustache.

280 'I feel as if I've lost my son,' Parvez told Bettina. 'I can't bear to be looked at as if I'm a criminal. I've decided what to do.'

'What is it?'

285 'I'm going to tell him to pick up his prayer mat and get out of my house. It will be the hardest thing I've ever done, but tonight I'm going to do it.'

290 'But you mustn't give up on him,' said Bettina. 'Many young people fall into cults and superstitious groups. It doesn't mean they'll always feel the same way.' She said Parvez had to stick by his boy, giving him support, until he came through.

Parvez was persuaded that she was right, even though he didn't feel like giving his son more love when he had hardly been thanked for all he had already given.

295 Nevertheless, Parvez tried to endure his son's looks and reproaches. He attempted to make conversation about his beliefs. But

if Parvez ventured any criticism, Ali always had a brusque reply. On *one occasion Ali accused Parvez of 'grovelling' to the whites;* in contrast, he explained, he was not 'inferior'; there was more to the world than the West, though the West always thought it was best.

'How is it you know that?' Parvez said, 'seeing as you've never left England?'

Ali replied with a look of contempt.

One night, having ensured there was no alcohol on his breath, Parvez sat down at the kitchen table with Ali. He hoped Ali would compliment him on the beard he was growing but Ali didn't appear to notice.

The previous day Parvez had been telling Bettina that he thought people in the West sometimes felt inwardly empty and that people needed a philosophy to live by.

'Yes,' said Bettina. 'That's the answer. You must tell him what your philosophy of life is. Then he will understand that there are other beliefs.'

After some fatiguing consideration, Parvez was ready to begin. The boy watched him as if he expected nothing. Haltingly Parvez said that people had to treat one another with respect, particularly children their parents. This did seem, for a moment, to affect the boy. Heartened, Parvez continued. In his view this life was all there was and when you died you rotted in the earth. 'Grass and flowers will grow out of me, but something of me will live on -'

'How?'

'In other people. I will continue - in you.' At this the boy appeared a little distressed. 'And your grandchildren,' Parvez added for good measure. 'But while I am here on earth I want to make the best of it. And I want you to, as well!'

'What d'you mean by "make the best of it"?' asked the boy.

'Well,' said Parvez. 'For a start . . . you should enjoy yourself. Yes. Enjoy yourself without hurting others.'

Ali said that enjoyment was a 'bottomless pit'.

'But I don't mean enjoyment like that!' said Parvez. 'I mean the beauty of living!'

'All over the world our people are oppressed,' was the boy's reply.

'I know,' Parvez replied, not entirely sure who 'our people' were, 'but still - life is for living!'

Ali said, 'Real morality has existed for hundreds of years. Around the world millions and millions of people share my beliefs. Are you saying you are right and they are all wrong?' Ali looked at his father with such aggressive confidence that Parvez would say no more.

One evening, Bettina was sitting in Parvez's car after visiting a client when they passed a boy on the street.

'That's my son,' Parvez said suddenly. They were on the other side of town, in a poor district, where there were two mosques.

Parvez set his face hard.

Bettina watched him. 'Slow down then, slow down!' She said, 'He's good-looking. Reminds me of you. But with a more determined face. Please, can't we stop?'

'What for?'

'I'd like to talk to him.'

Parvez turned the cab round and stopped beside the boy.

'Coming home?' Parvez asked. 'It's quite a way.'

The sullen boy shrugged and got into the back seat. Bettina sat in the front. Parvez became aware of Bettina's short skin, gaudy rings and ice-blue eyeshadow. He became conscious that the smell of her perfume, which he loved, filled the cab. He opened the window.

While Parvez drove as fast as he could, Bettina said gently to Ali, 'Where have you been?'

'The mosque,' he said.

'And how are you getting on at college? Are you working hard?'

'Who are you to ask me these questions?' he said, looking out of the window. Then they hit bad traffic and the car came to a standstill.

By now Bettina had inadvertently laid her hand on Parvez's shoulder. She said, 'Your father, who is a good man, is very worried about you. You know he loves you more than his own life.'

'You say he loves me,' the boy said.

'Yes!' said Bettina.

'Then why is he letting a woman like you touch him like that?'

If Bettina looked at the boy in anger, he looked back at her with twice as much cold fury.

She said, 'What kind of woman am I that I deserve to be spoken to like that?'

'You know,' he said. 'Now let me out.'

'Never,' Parvez replied.

'Don't worry. I'm getting out,' Bettina said.

'No, don't!' said Parvez. But even as the car moved she opened the door and threw herself out and ran away across the road. Parvez shouted after her several times, but she had gone.

Parvez took Ali back to the house, saying nothing more to him. Ali went straight to his room. Parvez was unable to read the paper, watch television or even sit down. He kept pouring himself drinks.

385 At last he went upstairs and paced up and down outside Ali's
room. When, finally, he opened the door, Ali was praying. The boy
didn't even glance his way.

390 Parvez kicked him over. Then he dragged the boy up by his shirt
and hit him. The boy fell back. Parvez hit him again. The boy's face
was bloody. Parvez was panting. He knew that the boy was un-
reachable, but he struck him nonetheless. The boy neither covered
himself nor retaliated; there was no fear in his eyes. He only said,
through his split lip: 'So who's the fanatic now?'