

Praise for *England is Mine*

‘Gripping, intelligent, streetwise and absolutely contemporary, *England is Mine* is a stunning first novel. It’s a piercing depiction of online radicalisation that I sped through with appalled delight. Hard to think how it could be any more timely’

Toby Litt, author of *Exhibitionism*

‘A truly thrilling and innovative writer. His portrayal of radicalisation, of the strangeness and loneliness of a life lived on the internet, is subtle, entirely believable, fresh and compelling. A brilliant, original book’

Rachel Connolly, author of *Lazy City*

England Is Mine

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For Kabir

'It was not you who ate the idea, but the idea that ate you.'

- Dostoevsky, *Demons*

I

David

THE PRE-SHOW MUSIC STOPS. Darkness. A plastic cup whizzes over David, showering him with beer. He laughs and runs a hand through his hair. Brixton Academy, Karl Williams, a gig he's looked forward to for eight months. He's wearing two T-shirts: the one he came in plus a new exclusive one from the merch stall with tonight's tour date. The girl in front screams, starts to video, wrists wrapped in red and black barbed-wire gummy bracelets. He's tall enough to see over her phone and all the other phones. Zoe, his stepsister, not so. Fans jostle to get closer. In shards of smoke and sherbet light, Karl walks on, swigging a bottle of wine, and salutes the crowd. 'Good evening, London.' The crush worsens, helping David and Zoe slide into the pit.

Karl opens with 'Sleeping Pills' – a song by his former band, Salomé. Guitar jangles, spiky and blue. David closes his eyes to savour the moment and finds himself tumbling left in a sway. Zoe grabs hold of him and tumbles too. Karl yanks the collar of his shirt and claps and points and punches the air. 'I'll return empty-handed,' David sings. 'But with you.' Before the next song, Zoe untoggles her chunky chain necklace and pockets it. 'No way that was staying on.'

David falls on the sticky, beer-soaked floor again and again but each time is pulled up. There is no menace in the crowd. Everyone is on the same team. He manages to take a couple of photos.

The sways are too intense for him to aim the camera. He's thankful for his Dr Martens.

Behind Karl and his touring musicians, large screens play fast-moving black-and-white videos of bleak empty streets, interspersed with images of Germaine Greer, Ralph Ellison, Emily Dickinson. Floodlights spray vibrant colours over the stage and out on to the crowd. Karl says little between songs. It's a slick, professional performance. When he returns for the encore, he mumbles something about England: 'Unrecognisable. Isn't it?' Cheers. Karl smirks, shrugs and motions to his musicians to play the final song. David wonders what Karl meant, then puts it out of his mind. 'Black Glass' is a favourite, an early solo one. 'You'll pay a price,' he sings.

Outside, he can't stop shivering. The steady slash of winter air. Yet he's seen Karl and it was even better than he thought it would be. His eyes rest on the entrance, which glows neon green and whose battered old billboards are slotted with black letters that read 'Karl Williams Sold Out'. His eyeliner has run. His ears ring. His hair is frizzy, swamped with beer. His jeans no longer seem super skinny. The plastic cap on a lace has split open, leaving a thready mess. Sharing a cigarette with Zoe, he examines his photos and posts the least blurry one on Instagram with a simple comment: 'Best night of my life. #karlwilliams #salome #brixtonacademy.'

‘HOW WAS IT?’ MUM ASKS, leaning against the radiator, legs crossed. She has on a yellow shirt, black trousers and gold lace earrings, and looks ready to leave. David is hung-over.

‘Great,’ he says. ‘Just sent you the *Guardian* review.’

‘Positive?’

‘Five stars.’

Stephen joins them in the kitchen. ‘Have fun last night?’

‘Yeah.’ David is now willing to engage with him, but not in a meaningful way. However much Mum might want it, they will never be pally. His loyalties will always lie with Dad.

They divorced three years ago. Mum started seeing Stephen six months later and married him last summer. They knew each other from Action Aid, where she still works (Stephen has moved on to Amnesty International). David has no reason to believe that Mum cheated on Dad with Stephen or that Stephen was in any way connected to the divorce. But David blames him nonetheless.

‘It was at Brixton Academy, right?’

‘Yeah.’

Stephen tells him again that he saw U2 and The Cure there. ‘Great venue.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Good crowd?’

‘Yeah.’

Stephen checks his Apple Watch. ‘I’ll see whether Zoe is awake.’

They are supposed to be having brunch in Broadway Market. David and Zoe went to a pub after the gig. He stuck with beers. She shifted to double G&Ts, a decision she might be regretting. She hasn’t tweeted anything this morning. She hasn’t even retweeted or ‘liked’ anything.

At twelve they finally make it to The Oaktree. Its tables have flyers for a sister company, Creative Block. The windowsills are decorated with cactuses. The curtains are frilly. Scandi-pop foams out from ceiling speakers. At a nearby table, someone tinkers with a PowerPoint presentation on a rose-gold MacBook. Home for David is Newbury Park, where Dad lives, and the cafés there are not like this. He has now been vegan for six months and, scanning the menu, is taken aback by the number of options. Knowing that Mum or Stephen will pay, he orders scrambled tofu with sun-dried tomatoes, a freshly squeezed orange juice and an oat flat white, a change from his normal breakfast: Rice Krispies, instant coffee.

‘There used to be a place in Broadway Market called Hey Sugar,’ Mum says. ‘They had *poolaki*. I’ve never seen it anywhere else in the UK. It’s an Iranian candy that looks like a coin, and is made from sugar, water, vinegar, saffron, coconut, cocoa powder. Baba would bring it back from his trips to Isfahan.’ Zoe reveals that it has moved to Deptford. They discuss rent prices for businesses. David has zero interest in the conversation. He is itching to watch YouTube videos from the gig and read more reviews on the Karl Williams subreddit. But whenever Mum takes him to a café or a restaurant and he starts using his phone she has a go at him. ‘How’s university?’ she asks Zoe.

The compulsory Shakespeare module is dull. A Hollywood cinema one starts soon, though, and that should be fun. She is also organising a protest as part of the Ally Club society.

‘We put a petition up and three thousand people signed it in twenty-four hours,’ Zoe says. ‘Yet they’re still going to go ahead and let Rachel Vine speak on campus. Just because they’re scared the government will send them a strongly worded letter for going against their guidance. It’s cowardly. They’re giving a platform to someone who spreads hate, who has made a career solely out of spreading hate.’

Zoe once revealed to him that from twelve – when she lost her mum, Stephen’s first wife, to cancer – through to sixteen she was such a wreck that she couldn’t communicate offline. This still

surprises him: her, a wreck. Since starting at Queen Mary, she's learned to speak with confidence, authority. Her words come fast, in full sentences and from the centre of her mouth, not from the corners, as with David.

The Ally Club will picket the event. They won't stop Rachel Vine from speaking or use violence, but they will make their feelings known. Stephen offers his support. 'You can be sure the right will claim the Ally Club interfered with Rachel Vine's freedom of speech,' he says, topping up their water glasses. 'They have no idea what freedom of speech means. It means no one should face violence, intimidation or imprisonment for what they say. That's it. Nothing less. Nothing more.'

'Exactly.'

'What do you think, David?' Stephen asks.

He shrugs. In his autobiography Karl wrote that he is a free-speech absolutist, and quoted Voltaire: 'I disapprove of what you say but I'll defend to the death your right to say it,' or something like that. David has read it twice and agrees: he's happy for anyone to say anything. But he doesn't want to argue. He's impressed Zoe managed to style her blue-black hair today. He must look like shit.

'We're peacefully letting the university know that they made a mistake in inviting her to speak,' Zoe continues. 'People talk about "healthy disagreement" as if saying transphobic things were totally harmless. That's ridiculous. Because speech isn't harmless. It has consequences. If it had no consequences, what would be the point of protecting it in the first place?'

David takes out his phone. He might not be able to get away with watching or reading something, but he will get away with quickly checking how many 'likes' his gig photo has got.

No more. It has stalled on five.

A waiter brings their food, which he hopes will ease his tentacle-cling headache.

'I think it is a tricky subject, free speech,' Mum says. 'I remember . . . Near the end of the Shah's regime, Baba, my father, went to ten evenings of poetry at the Goethe Institute, and each evening people recited anti-Shah poems. And for the next two weeks I

would wake up every night at three or four a.m. and go to my parents' room to check whether he was still there. I was scared that the secret police, the SAVAK, would come and take him away. Everyone was scared of the SAVAK. And then, of course, with the new regime, he spent a week in prison for his painting of a man with his hand on a woman's body. So much changed from the time of the Shah to the time of the Islamic Republic, but one thing that stayed the same was a yearning for free speech. It seemed obviously dreamy, free speech . . .'

'I can't imagine how scary that must have been,' Zoe says. 'What you and your family experienced in Iran. That's a real freedom-of-speech crisis, unlike the manufactured one here.'

Mum nods and sinks her fork into her egg yolk.

BACK IN NEWBURY PARK, David pops into Gnanam Food & Wine, picks up supplies – baked beans, bread, hummus, toothpaste – and walks home. He hates taking the underpasses because they're connected by a large bleak square in which someone from college, Mo, likes to hang out with his mates. But he has too much pride to take the other route, which is ten minutes longer.

Approaching the first underpass, he hears hip-hop beats. They will be there. Just half the lights work and even those that do fuzz, flicker. Graffiti tags loop in and out of shadow, and Coke cans and McDonald's paper bags and the carcass of a shopping trolley. He curses his way through a puddle and on into the square. Sure enough, perched on the back of a bench: Mo and a mate.

Mo looks up. 'Oi oi. Ibrahim.' There's a Bluetooth speaker between his feet.

'Yeah?' Ibrahim says, spinning a hi-vis football.

'Recognise him?'

'Erm.'

'Pussy from my college.'

'Ah. Course. Yeah. Makeup Boy.'

Mo makes the wanker gesture.

Ibrahim laughs. 'Look how scared he is. Look.'

He passes them, focusing on the second underpass: close, close, close. As he enters it, the square hardens with the slap of trainers on concrete, making him jittery, but he resists the temptation to turn. 'Watch this,' Ibrahim shouts. 'CR7!' Following a thump and a swoosh, David experiences a shock on his back, and tumbles over, backpack clanging. The ball bounces away.

'Ohhhhh. Ibrahim, man.'

'Siuuuuuuuu!'

Jeans torn, palms sore, he picks himself up. The music romps on. There is an unmistakable smell in this underpass – piss. He rubs a mushy cigarette butt from his knee.

‘That was some Champions League shit.’

‘Siuuuuuuuuuuu!’

‘You need to bring that curl to our five-a-sides, man. That was . . . Oh, man.’

Without looking back, David continues home.

He stares out of his bedroom window. Smoke pours from a chimney opposite. In the garden the frizzled black stems of a creeper plant cling to the back wall and rustle over on to the roof behind. After a series of complaints from the neighbours – the previous owners made sure to prune it every summer – Dad killed it, but he never bothered to remove the cut stems. On the paving stones, a watering can lies sideways. The sound of children’s laughter from somewhere. He wonders how college ended up being so bad, worse than secondary school.

There is no PE. There is no maths. There is no dress code. And still . . .

Fucking Mo. Since the incident in the common room six weeks ago he has been making David’s life hell. It is partly David’s fault – he should never have brought it with him; he should only have used it at home – but he suspects Mo is such a prick that he would have found a reason to bully him anyway. David was naive to think he might make friends, might be popular in college.

Because he was so self-conscious about his skin – the oiliness, the spots, the redness – he decided to give Active Duty Makeup for Men a go in the summer. Having got nowhere with any of the girls at secondary school, he was determined to get somewhere with one in college. He ordered the essentials kit, which included a primer, a concealer pen, a compact with anti-shine powder, a face sponge and a remover. From September to November he sensibly left everything at home. Then he grew paranoid that for it to have the effect he wanted he would have to keep

reapplying it throughout the day, so he took a makeup bag with him to college and spent his free periods in toilet cubicles. One afternoon in December, he left his backpack on the customary heap in the common room and went to read a book. The next thing he knew Mo was hysterically waving the compact in front of him and shouting: ‘What the fuck?’ They had similar ASOS backpacks and Mo had accidentally ended up rummaging around in his. David muttered, ‘Give it back,’ and attempted to grab it, but Mo swaggered away, over to a group of girls, and paraded it, motioning towards David. They pissed themselves, apart from Selina, who asked how ‘fucking insecure’ Mo was about his sexuality. ‘Just leave him alone. And, besides, have you looked in a mirror? Trust me, you could do with some makeup.’ She rolled her eyes, grabbed the compact and returned it to David. There was whispering among the other girls. At the time, this appeared to faze Mo – he dabbed his cheeks – but he soon doubled down and started calling David a faggot. The cool guys in their year followed his lead, and Selina was ostracised by Jennifer and Alice for her intervention. David became Makeup Boy.

Having Karl at Brixton Academy on the horizon made life bearable. He could spend his walks to class scouring Instagram for new tour content, his lunch breaks weighing up outfit options, his evenings refreshing setlist.fm to see which songs were being played. What now?

The sky is slate grey. A small white feather has got itself gummed to the drainpipe. He opens his notebook, re-reads his lyrics. ‘There’s a boy wrapped in chains / Lies by the river Thames / There’s a boy wrapped in chains / Dead or alive no prize / You were his only flame / Till you changed / He couldn’t play your game / He’s just a child / Born without a name / You wrapped him in chains / And fed him sinners’ shame.’ He is pleased with them. But not sure whether he can sing them. He has only a limited understanding of melody, and that might not be enough to emulate Karl. He can’t tell whether something is in or out of tune. It all sounds the same to him.

The snap of the front door. He heads downstairs.

‘Ah. You’re home?’ Dad says, wearing his camouflage cap with the R+ logo of the German metal band Rammstein. A gym buddy gave it to him ages ago, when he used to regularly go to the gym. It is unlikely that he has ever looked up the band, let alone listened to them.

‘Yeah,’ David says. ‘Got back at three.’

‘How was the concert?’

‘Great.’ He wants to say more, to tell Dad how it felt hearing his favourite songs live; being caught in the welcoming tides of a crowd and tumbling left, right, left, right; spontaneously, euphorically, hugging strangers who shared his love for Karl and therefore, surely, feelings of self-doubt and unlovability. But he stops there. He finds it hard talking to Dad about music or books, much harder than to Mum, which bugs him, but is the way it is and probably always will be.

‘Been working?’

‘Seven Kings. Girl moving into a flat she bought. Only twenty-three. Can you believe that? Only twenty-three. You should have seen her TV. Basically a cinema screen.’

David asks what she needed help with. Dad methodically lists everything: the wall mount, the flat-pack wardrobe, the furniture in the kitchen, the treadmill in the spare room, the sink.

‘All right then?’

‘It was fine.’

As a teenager, Dad joined the British Army and served as an electrician in the Royal Engineers. After leaving, he expected to find a job easily. However, as the army hadn’t provided him with an AM2 assessment, companies didn’t consider him fully qualified, in spite of all his knowledge and experience. According to Mum, he could have undertaken the assessment without much trouble, but he was too stubborn to do so and instead decided to strike out on his own. He started civilian life as a self-employed electrician. He is now a general handyman hireable on TaskRabbit. Throughout David’s life, he has been falling: falling, falling, falling. David worries that he will keep falling.

From his Reebok sweatshirt, the slop of belly.

‘Want to watch an episode of *Only Fools and Horses*?’ David asks.

‘When?’

‘Nine?’

‘That works. Eight would too.’

A shimmer of need in Dad’s eyes – or is he imagining it? That Dad once had the self-confidence to buy Mum a drink at a Rolling Stones concert is difficult to believe.

He apparently only knew ‘Gimme Shelter’ but was at Wembley Stadium with two army colleagues, who loved them. She had gone on her own. She hadn’t yet made any friends in London but as a child had dreamt about one day seeing them and didn’t want to miss the opportunity. She ended up sharing the experience with Dad and they went on their first date soon afterwards. Having learned that her father was a famous painter, he turned to *Time Out* for inspiration, and took her to the Tate. She found him charming and funny and kind – kinder than any of the other men she had met in Britain – as well as attractive. He confessed to not being the artiest of men, but made an effort, researching films, exhibitions, theatre shows they could see together. He kept this up for some time. But as his fortunes changed the effort became too much to muster and the research fizzled out.

‘Sure,’ David says. ‘Sweet. Looking forward to it.’

David inserts the DVD and returns to the sofa. He sits on the right side, Dad on the left, a large bowl of ready-salted crisps between them. ‘Which episode?’

‘How about the one with the chemical corporation?’ Dad says.

David selects it. They have seen each episode countless times. He has suggested other series they could try – *The Office*, *Peep Show*, *Seinfeld* – but Dad wants to stick with *Only Fools and Horses*. They have the *Complete Collection* box set. It has all seven series, plus fifteen Christmas specials.

Watching this, David feels close to Dad, certainly closer than at any other time. Although they aren’t talking, they are laughing together. And that is surely something.

ON MONDAY MORNING, DAVID has a history class on the origins of the Cold War. The subject is interesting, but Mr Davies sets too much homework, and David is falling behind. In the afternoon, a German class on weak masculine nouns. Grammar is mind-numbing. Tuesday: English.

‘So,’ Mr Knowles says. ‘Has everyone read *The Crucible*?’ A scattering of nods. ‘Good. Well, I want to start with the character of Abigail Williams. What did you make of her? Did you see her as a straight-out villain? Did you sympathise with her at all? I want to hear your thoughts.’

David has plenty he could say, but he hates speaking in class; whenever he contemplates raising his hand he feels his throat constrict.

‘Come on,’ Mr Knowles continues, sweeping his eyes over the cramped, airless room. ‘Okay. How about I kick things off by sharing one possible response to Abigail?’ He coughs. A West Ham pin badge glints out from his navy-blue blazer. The fans in the class are convinced he wears it only to curry favour with them and each Monday interrogate him about that weekend’s game to try to catch him out. ‘She is a villain through and through. The least complex character in the play. She lies. She manipulates. She’s responsible for the deaths of nineteen innocent people. And her motivations are transparent – envy plus a thirst for revenge on Elizabeth Proctor. Do we think that’s a fair response?’

‘Bang on, sir,’ Freddy says. ‘Class over?’

‘Very funny,’ Mr Knowles says. ‘Anyone else?’

‘She’s a bit of a hoe,’ Kalila says.

‘Ohhhhhhh.’

‘Shiiiiiii.’

‘What you mean?’

‘You know what I mean,’ Kalila continues. ‘It’s like Sir was saying. She’s only in it for revenge on Liz. And she cast a spell on Liz and everything because she wanted Liz’s man. She saw him and she was, like, “Oh my God, I want a bit of that. He mine.”’

‘Kalila’s right,’ Jennifer says, raising her hands over the hooting. ‘Abi’s in it for one thing and one thing only. She’s a hoe with no morals. Allow her.’

‘Okay,’ Mr Knowles says. ‘That is a possible interpretation. Any others?’

A wobbly silence. ‘Nah,’ Doug says. ‘Jury’s verdict is hoe.’

After sliding his fingers through his short, tidily cropped hair, Mr Knowles encourages the class to think about the mores of the time, about Abigail’s background.

‘She embodies the repressed desires of Puritan women,’ Selina says exhaustedly. ‘But unlike the other right-on Puritan women in the village, like Elizabeth, Abigail doesn’t suppress her desires or repent for them. She gives herself up to them and goes all in for what she wants.’

‘Good,’ Mr Knowles says. ‘And how about her methods?’

‘You’re right. She lies. She manipulates. She’s ruthless. How else can she go about things in a Puritan age though? Besides, she’s never had any guidance from anyone on how to act in society. She’s an orphan who had a shitty childhood. Right? She’s used to solving problems alone in her own way. She’s a villain, sure, but she’s also independent and strong and free-thinking. Between Elizabeth and Abigail, I know who I’d rather be.’

‘Uhh. That’s such a *you* thing to say,’ Jennifer says. ‘It’s obvious—’

‘Jennifer,’ Mr Knowles says. ‘Let’s stay on track. Selina has made an intelligent contribution. She raises valuable points. I would like us to consider and expand on those points.’

Selina sits back, unmoved by Jennifer’s snarky comment or Mr Knowles’s praise. David wonders how she always manages to look so effortlessly cool. Today, the jangle of necklaces, the Grimes hoodie, the washed-black jeans with the rips at the knees, the

rocky black boots. He senses that in her head she has already left college behind. Her Instagram stories show how comfortably she fits in at literary events in London, performing slam poetry, knocking back boxed wine. She must be counting down the days until university. Like him, she doesn't have any friends here. Unlike him, she doesn't seem to care. Last Friday he saw Jennifer and Alice confront her at the lockers. Jennifer asked whether her skirt could be any shorter. Selina regarded her with distaste but neglected to respond. Alice followed up by asking why Selina wore nose rings. 'If you want to get the boys' attention, babe, I would take them out. Not looking like a hobo tends to help. Just saying,' Selina turned to Alice and said: 'How about I wear what I wear and you wear what you wear. We can't all be basic bitches.' Then she slammed her locker shut and strolled away, giving them the finger.

'Okay,' Mr Knowles says. 'Let's talk about the history of Puritanism. Does anyone know where the Puritan faith originated and what it was a response to?'

David read the Wikipedia entry for Puritanism last night. The Puritan faith originated in England. The Puritans sought to purify the Church of England of Roman Catholic practices. He could say this. If he starts speaking more, it's possible Selina will see him as more than an object of pity.

'Anyone?'

Feeling his throat constrict, he looks away.

In the afternoon, another history class on the origins of the Cold War. Mr Davies gets them to discuss the launch of the Marshall Plan. The last chapter David properly read was on tensions at Yalta.

AFTER HIS PARENTS SPLIT UP, they sold the family house in Goodmayes; Dad moved to Newbury Park, Mum to Stratford. Unable to agree on custody arrangements, they went to court, where the judge sided with Mum, ordering David to spend seventy per cent of his time with her. He endured this for three years. But when he turned sixteen, and Mum had swapped Stratford for Haggerston with Stephen, he exercised his legal right to choose and reversed the ratio. She had wanted the divorce; she could suffer the consequences. Sometimes he even spent a whole week with Dad.

Then her father died and her despair grew and he agreed to a new schedule: Mondays, Tuesdays, Fridays, Sundays in Newbury Park; Wednesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays in Haggerston.

This Wednesday Stephen has to work late, so he lounges with her in the living room. Bob Dylan records crackle away. The music is boring, but he enjoys lowering and raising the needle.

The following evening Stephen is around and asks Mum whether she has seen the video of Zoe's protest. It shows a knot of students outside the entrance to the building where Rachel Vine was scheduled to speak, holding HATE REWARDED HERE banners and shouting.

David felt uneasy watching it. He's become friends with Zoe – somehow. They bonded over anger. As a widower, Stephen had promised her that he would never remarry, and she had believed him. For weeks after David and Zoe were introduced, they shared links to famous horror-movie scenes on WhatsApp with comments like 'wouldn't mind this happening at the wedding lol' and eyes emojis. Then he found out she liked Salomé. He had never met someone who liked Salomé. They started chatting about music and the messages continued even after the anger subsided.

He now considers her his closest friend – well, his only friend. But what would Karl make of her protest?

‘Yeah,’ Mum says. ‘I finally had the chance on the bus home. Work was so busy. Who knew you can receive sixty emails in one day?’

‘No lunchbreak?’

‘None.’

‘Damn,’ Stephen says. ‘At least it’s over now. I walked past Chris watching it on the *Guardian* and had to point Zoe out. A small claim to fame, I know, but . . .’

Mum assembles ingredients for dinner. ‘David, we were thinking of making *sangkok*. You can have it with vegan cheese or hummus. Does that sound okay?’

‘Sure.’

He is snacking, idly listening and scrolling on Instagram. A new selfie from Selina. Black choker necklace. Sleeveless white Metallica top. The subtle red highlights in her long black hair. The fullness of her cheeks. The plumpness of her lips. Those lips. God, she’s hot. The selfie has fifty-one ‘likes’. He has never had that many ‘likes’. Someone even commented with a fire emoji.

‘I thought I used to get UK politics,’ Mum says. ‘But watching the video of Zoe’s protest . . . I admire her activism. And I have so much sympathy for vulnerable students who feel . . . But it’s strange how the left’s attitude towards freedom of speech has changed. It’s hard to get my head round it, to square it with life in Iran.’

David looks up. She is rubbing the bump on the bridge of her nose. It annoys him each time she performs this reflex, as it reminds him of the bump on the bridge of his nose. The one facial feature he inherited from her. Not the symmetry, with the narrow forehead, the strong cheekbones, the small, pointed chin. Not the striking eyes, rounded eyebrows. Just this bump.

‘I know what you mean,’ Stephen says. ‘Things aren’t the way they were when I was Zoe’s age. I was convinced that freedom of speech was absolute. And with your experiences in Iran . . .’ He pauses, gathering his words. ‘I guess we just need to remember

that freedom of speech is now being exploited to maintain the status quo far more than it is being used to challenge it. And the status quo still needs work. Really, Zoe and her generation are fighting for the same things that we were – equality, dignity, respect. They’re just doing it in a different way.’

‘Mm,’ Mum says. ‘I suppose so.’

DAVID STARTS HIS ENGLISH HOMEWORK. In spite of himself, he enjoys studying in his room here: a view of a leafy street from the glass desk, a HomePod, a functioning lamp.

The walls are white, except for a whale over the bed, where a cot had apparently once been. As a child, he liked whales, so, predictably, Mum left it there for him. The built-in wardrobe: empty. The built-in bookshelves: empty. Even the Persian picture frame on the bedside table: empty. Since moving here in autumn, Mum and Stephen have repeatedly tried to convince him to bring more of his things over and personalise the room. But he wants it to remain as it is: hotel-like.

For his homework he has to write a thousand words in answer to the question ‘Discuss John Proctor, the protagonist, and Abigail Williams, the antagonist, in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*’. Within twenty minutes, he has five hundred. Keying his thoughts into Google Docs is manageable.

A knock. ‘Can I come in?’ Mum asks.

‘Yeah.’

‘Busy?’

‘English.’

She tilts her head to see the book on the desk. ‘You’ve started *The Crucible*?’

‘Yeah, I like it. Definitely the best book we’ve done so far this year.’

She read it in Iran. It was the first literary book she read from start to finish in English. ‘I still remember buying it. A street called Ghandi Avenue, where people would sell black-market Western books and cassettes. When I came home with it – that might have been the proudest I ever made Baba. He read it two or three times

after me. Then we had to burn it, of course.' Until her father died, she rarely spoke about her past. Now she can't stop.

'Right.'

She sits on the bed, adjusts her tortoiseshell glasses. 'Sayeeda finally sent his things.'

'Your father's things?'

A box with notebooks, photographs, sketches, diaries. 'Hopefully it will make it to London. I'd like to show you. It breaks my heart that you never had the opportunity to meet him.'

'I spoke to him on the phone.'

'It's not the same. You would have loved him. Everyone who met him did. He was a free spirit, an artist. I'd like you to know more about him.'

'Okay.'

She misses speaking Farsi too. David suggests that she return to Tehran for a holiday sometime. It wouldn't be safe, she insists. Her father was known to the authorities. She would be flagged by the system. Besides, with him gone, and her mother long gone, there is nothing left for her there. He mentions her cousin Sayeeda. Mum says she barely knew her, to be honest. Everyone in Iran she was close to has now died or emigrated to America. Her school friends are in California.

'But . . . I do want you to know your heritage. I want you to know your grandfather. So, when the box arrives, it would mean a lot to me if—'

'Yeah, no worries.'

'Thank you.' A press of the bed with her palms. 'How's the mattress, by the way?'

'Fine.'

'Better than the previous one?'

'Yeah.'

She fidgets. A tingle from her vintage bracelet. 'The reason I came was actually to speak to you about college. How is it going? Are things getting better?'

'Yeah.'

'Honestly?'

'Mm.'

'You're so quiet these days. I know you don't like talking about college. But I need to ask.'

He swivels in his chair, concentrates on his laptop. 'It's fine.'

'You've made friends then?'

'Mm.'

'Just promise that you will tell me if you're ever unhappy again there, and know that you can always talk to me about anything. Or Stephen. Or Zoe.'

'Or Dad.'

'Can you talk to him?'

He closes his eyes. 'I want to finish my homework.'