

READING PASSAGE

SUBURBAN EDUCATION

In the past few weeks circumstances had made me discover what an ignorant I was. Lately I'd been fortunate, and my life had changed quickly, but I'd reflected little on it. When I did think of myself in comparison with those in Eleanor's crowd, I became aware that I knew nothing; I was empty, an intellectual void. I didn't even know who Cromwell was, for God's sake I knew nothing about zoology, geology, astronomy, languages, mathematics, physics.

Most of the kids I grew up with left school at sixteen, and they'd be in insurance now, or working as car-mechanics, or managers (radio and TV dept) in department stores. And I'd walked out of college without thinking twice about it despite my father's admonitions. In the suburbs education wasn't considered a particular advantage, and certainly couldn't be seen as worthwhile in itself. Getting into business young was more important. But now I was among people who wrote as naturally as we played football. What infuriated me – what made me loathe both them and myself – was their confidence and knowledge. The easy talk of art, theatre, architecture, travel; the languages, the vocabulary, knowing the way round a whole culture – it was invaluable and irreplaceable capital.

At my school they taught you a bit of French, but anyone who attempted to pronounce a word correctly was laughed down. On a trip to Calais we attacked a Frog behind a restaurant. By this ignorance we knew ourselves to be superior to the "Public School" kids, with their puky uniforms and leather briefcases, and Mummy and Daddy waiting outside in the car to pick them up. We were rougher; we disrupted all lessons; we were fighters; we never carried no effeminate briefcases since we never did no homework. We were proud of never learning anything except the names of footballers, the personnel of rock groups and the lyrics of 'I am the Walrus'. What idiots we were! How misinformed! Why didn't we understand that we were happily condemning ourselves to being nothing better than motor-mechanics? Why couldn't we see that? For Eleanor's crowd hard words and sophisticated ideas were in the air they breathed from birth, and this language was the currency that bought you the best of what the world could offer. But for us it could only ever be a second language, consciously acquired.

It was as if I felt my past wasn't important enough, wasn't as substantial as hers, so I'd thrown it away. I never talked about Mum and Dad, or the suburbs. And once I practically stopped talking at all, my voice choking in my throat when Eleanor said my accent was cute. "You've got a street voice, Karim. You're from South London – so that's how you speak. It's like cockney, only not so raw. It's not unusual. It's different to my voice, of course."

Of course... At that moment I resolved to lose my accent.

Hanif KURAISSI, The Buddha of Suburbia (1990)

**Public School: British private school.*