

Raman Mundair: Day Trippers (2015) * 5,0 ns

Parminder didn't like to admit it but she had a type. For as long as she could remember she had an aversion to Asian men. Years of her overbearing Daddyji¹ and chachas² had created a distaste for her Asian brotherhood. No. She preferred her men pale and interesting.

She had met David at a work do. His expensive get-up, bohemian chitchat and touchy-feely ways beguiled³ her. He was so different from the men she was used to. Fast-forward several years and here she was in her well-located, detached home⁴, mortgaged to the hilt⁵, with David and their two boys – Oriel and Miles – who were as verbose⁶ as their father. Parminder knew she was terribly lucky to live as she did, but had begun to wake up feeling numb, with a longing for silence.

Gurpreet didn't like to admit it but he had a type: anything but Asian. To be more specific, anything but South Asian. Absolutely no Indian, Pakistani or Bengali women. No. Brown didn't do it for him. Never had and never would. He'd had enough from his desi⁷ childhood: Mum and sisters and numerous female relatives - Auntie This and Massi That. No. He didn't want any more of it.

He'd met Aisling after uni. Her red hair, green eyes and soft Irish accent were exotic. Five years later they had children named Sophie and Hannah. He wasn't quite sure how he had got here.

At university, Parminder and Aisling had a competitive friendship; Parminder had never felt entirely at ease in Aisling's company. She always had the feeling of being quietly judged. Yet they'd been drawn towards one another. Meeting on Facebook gave an opportunity to show how well they had done; how far they had travelled. There was the fact that they had both married partners from other cultures.

Parminder was surprised how nervous she felt before their reunion. She made a hair appointment, had a manicure, agonised over what to wear and bought a new dress. She picked out David's clothes. She even vetted the photographs of the boys on her mobile phone so that she would share the best ones.

¹ sb. far (indisk engelsk)

² onkel (hindi)

³ vb. betage, forføre

⁴ *Detached-home* sb. parcelhus

⁵ *To the hilt* adv. til halsen

⁶ adj. ordrig

⁷ adj. fra Indien, Pakistan eller Bangladesh

The highlights of Gurpreet's family evenings involved investigations of the works of Jamie Oliver, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, and Nigella Lawson⁸: each recipe a performance, each meal serving up just the right sustenance for the life they deserved to live. How quietly discerning they were. How absolutely, as the advert said, they were worth it. And so weekends were spent shopping at John Lewis and lunching at Cafe Rouge or Carluccios. Weekly grocery shops at Waitrose, or Ocado delivery with topups from Sainsbury. The children's clothes were from Boden, Joules - with little bits from Next and H&M; the furniture from House of Fraser, John Lewis and, only occasionally, Ikea.

It took Gurpreet a while to wonder if they really needed to change the decor and furniture every other year and did the kids really need a seasonal wardrobe?

Parminder couldn't believe how little her mother knew her. From time to time food parcels were delivered, all based on the fact that she had loved Indian sweets as a child. One parcel leaked sugar syrup onto David's favourite Paul Smith trousers. The drycleaner was unable to remove the stain and David sulked for the whole week. Parminder called her mum and scolded her thoughtlessness. She didn't notice when the parcels stopped arriving.

When they got together Gurpreet took charge at the restaurant, made sure they were taken to the table Aisling had booked - the one with a view of the river that, on their arrival, they had been told was unavailable. He ordered the wine, caught the waiter's attention when required and paid the bill. At first, Parminder found this presumptuous and irritating, but, as the evening progressed, she enjoyed his decisiveness. It was refreshing after the sensitive, linguistic negotiations she was used to with David in which everything from the colour of the children's rooms to the electricity bill had to be discussed.

Presents from their Indian grandparents used to arrive twice a year: on the children's birthdays, and for Diwali⁹. Bright silks paired in odd colour combinations, trimmed with gold and sequins¹⁰. They came folded carefully and wrapped in a plastic bag with the back of an old envelope as a label. The children would usually rip open parcels as soon as they arrived, but these were left unopened for weeks.

When they were younger and still opened their grandparents' parcels, they would hold up the shalwar kameez and kurta pyjamas¹¹ and look at them with suspicion. One year Aisling was convinced the clothes had a strange odour and threw them in the bin.

⁸ *Jamie Oliver, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, and Nigella Lawson*: populære britiske TV-kokke

⁹ *Diwali* stor indisk lysfest

¹⁰ sb. paillet

¹¹ *shalwar kameez* sb. traditionel klædedragt af kjortel og bukser, *kurta pyjamas* sb. traditionel krageløs klædedragt

For a girl raised on Dairylea triangle sandwiches, mutter paneer sabji and coca cola, Parminder had developed quite a taste for the regular soirees she and David threw for their friends. The evenings featured large quantities of wine, cheese from the deli and cracker, grapes, and an assortment of nuts.

These evenings made Parminder feel sophisticated and she delighted in the Orrefors wine glasses and decanter, the little Radford cheese knives, the Sagaford cheese dome, platter and the subtle porcelain plates. Delicate little things, a world away from her mother's steel thalis and the heavily floral dinnerware that appeared on the rare occasions her parents invited someone to dine with them. Even then it wasn't a dinner party as such, but the feeding of men by a kitchen full of women and children, who would eat only after the men's appetites had been sated. It had been her job as the eldest girl to serve the fresh-off-the-tuva rotis to the men - the buttered steam aroma from the roti quickening her hunger as she circled the table.

Parminder hadn't expected to see Gurpreet again. After their reunion meal, her relationship with Aisling had lapsed into irregular social media contact, and despite telling each other that they should definitely meet up again, neither had followed this up. She was surprised she recognised him when, almost a year later in Birmingham on business, she spotted him as she was checking in at her hotel. She felt strangely flustered that he hadn't seen her. That evening she ate in the hotel restaurant and chose a table facing the entrance. Dessert had finally arrived when she admitted to herself that she was waiting for him and then, as if on cue, he came through the door, immediately recognised her, and smiled.

Gurpreet had seen her at the hotel reception desk but had looked away. He found himself distracted during the day's meetings. When he saw her in the restaurant he recognised straight away that she had been waiting for him all along.

They chose Leicester for their next weekend together - a city neither of them knew. They hadn't remembered that it was Diwali until the sound of fireworks roused them from their hotel bed. From the window they could see the mela¹² in full swing. They shared childhood memories of Diwali as they hurriedly dressed. Down on the streets they felt a rush of recklessness and ran, hand in hand through the streets towards the bright lights.

On Melton Road the sound of bhangra¹³ filled the air as they mingled with the Indian families dressed in their finest. The women and girls shimmered and sparkled, their bindis¹⁴ and red kum-kum punctuating¹⁵ the night. Gurpreet and Parminder felt underdressed. But here they belonged, here they were comfortable.

¹² Mela sb. (hindi) festplads eller marked

¹³ sb. traditionel indisk musik og dans

¹⁴ sb. indisk kvindeligt dekoration i panden (ofte en prik)

¹⁵ sb. (hindi) farvet pulver til traditionel udsmykning

They became aware of conversations in Punjabi¹⁶, tuned into like a radio. Playfully, they followed a large Sikh in a red turban with his family, dipping in and out of the Indian restaurants with them. They copied his order, eating a starter in one, a main course in another and having thai and taking away dessert from a third.

Later, in bed, they spoke only in Punjabi and fed each other gulab jaman, jelebis and laddoo, licking the sweetness from each other's lips.

Aisling noted that something was different. She concluded that Gurpreet was distinctly more ethnic than he used to be.

Parminder started to play bhangra in the car when she took the kids to school. When they complained, she turned up the volume.

It was easy for them: their usual travel for work provided perfect cover. They became bolder and began to choose places closer to home.

One weekend they headed to Southall¹⁷. The buzz of the Punjabi bazaar, the rhythmic uplift of the bhangra, the paan stalls, Indian sweet shops and the skies seared by the flights heading to and from Heathrow, took them both back to long summers with London cousins. They spent Saturday wandering around, drinking in the sights, smells and sounds of Little India.

Before they knew it they had accumulated a trousseau of shalwar kameez, traditional jewellery sets, bindis and kurta pyjamas. They discovered that one of the local dhabbas cooked food exactly like their Mummyjis¹⁸. During lunch Parminder pointed out that the things Gurpreet had bought for her were those that traditionally, her mother would have given her had she married a Sikh man, as had been expected of her. The thought made them fall silent and look away from one another.

The next morning Parminder woke with the taste of prashad¹⁹ in her mouth. She couldn't believe it when she found herself suggesting that they visit a gurdwara²⁰. Neither of them had been to a gurdwara for years. They associated it with hours of Sunday morning tedium. Now they were filled with anticipation. The prospect felt thrilling and strangely taboo. They dressed themselves carefully. Parminder wore one of her new shalwar kameez and fixed her hair to look modest and pious.

There was a wedding going on at the gurdwara. The bride sat head bent, sparkling in red and gold. As they entered the prayer hall both wondered if people could tell they weren't husband and wife. They sat opposite one another in the male and female sections and let

¹⁶ sb./adj. sproget/kulturen i Punjab regionen (nordlige Indien/østlige Pakistan)

¹⁷ forstadsområde i det vestlige London (ofte kaldet Little Punjabi eller Little India). Pronounced *Sau-thawl*

¹⁸ sb. mor (indisk engelsk)

¹⁹ sb. madofring i hinduisme og sikhisme (som ofte spises efter den religiøse ceremoni)

²⁰ sb. Sikh tempel

the prayers wash over them. When it came time for langar they sat together, their legs touching, feeling a sense of calm and completeness, as if they had arrived home after a long, arduous and confusing journey.

Gurpreet decided that his kids should learn Punjabi and signed them up for lessons at the nearest gurdwara. They reluctantly attended their first lesson and came away discombobulated, telling their mother it was boring and the place smelled funny.

On parents' evening, Parminder surprised David and the boys by meeting them in shalwar kameez. After he put the boys to bed David told Parminder that her behaviour was confusing them.

Gurpreet started to grow his hair and beard in the traditional Sikh way. One night the kids walked in on him attempting to tie a pugri²¹. They ran away screaming and Aisling told Gurpreet to stop scaring her children.

David was concerned. The boys had told him that "Mum was acting all weird". Parminder hardly spoke to him at all and when she did it all seemed foreign to him.

Gurpreet overheard Aisling telling the girls about their proud Irish heritage; that they came from a long line of well-to-do, middle-class Irish stock. He began to see clearly how things would go: when his girls married and had children, he would be a blip in their family tree, an exotic anomaly, soon to be forgotten.

David wanted to go to couple-counselling and when Parminder refused, he broke down and sobbed that he had no idea who she was anymore.

The days and weekends were no longer enough. Gurpreet and Parminder knew they didn't want to be tourists - daytrippers into their own cultures - anymore.

Parminder found herself feeling sick at the thought of eating cheese. She craved aloo paratha²² and churee-things her Mummyji used to make. The English and European food she usually ate failed to satisfy her - the dishes felt thin and insubstantial. She wanted to be nourished, filled with substance, but she couldn't quite work out what.

Aisling told Gurpreet that he was no longer the man she married.

David was at work and the children at school when Parminder did the test and confirmed that she was pregnant. She sat still for a few moments and felt a quiet lightness overcome her. She found herself smiling as she got up and wandered through the house opening every window.

Raman Mundair: Day Trippers. Closure, Peepal Tree. 2015.

²¹ sb. (hindi) turban

²² sb. indisk brød med fyld

