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Sightseeing

by Sara Ahmad

When I was 12 I was no longer allowed to go to Rainbow Centre. For years me, my father and my little brothers would go from shop to shop to buy *The Others*, *Rush Hour 2*, *Catch Me If You Can*, *Sweet Home Alabama*, *The Ring*, *Minority Report*, *The Bourne Identity*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Last Samurai*, *The Fast and the Furious*, *Cold Mountain*, *Bruce Almighty*, *Freaky Friday*, *Daredevil*, *Bad Boys 2*, *The Matrix Reloaded*, *Hulk*, *Mystic River*, *School of Rock*, *Mean Girls*, *Troy*, *Man on Fire*, *Van Helsing*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *The Terminal*, *Shrek 2*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *Shark Tale*, *Kill Bill: Vol 2*, *Ocean's Twelve*, *Hellboy*, *Secret Window*, *Taking Lives*, *I Heart Huckabees*. A third of these were in fact filmed on a hand-held camera by a man sitting in the dark on his own in a Chinese cinema, quite some distance from the screen, the sound filling around him tinnily. Being an accessory to the illicit piracy trade sent a chill through me.

One day I noticed a man in a bakery looking at me with great interest and I told my mother I no longer wanted to wear short skirts. Soon my father and brothers started going to Rainbow Centre without me. I waited until the three of them came home and I took on the responsibility of sorting through their haul, organising it by genre. Now there are no bootlegs at Rainbow Centre; just people getting copies of their wedding videos before they're drowned in jitter, the remnants splintering.

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My aunt lived with my grandparents in a ground-floor apartment in Hill Park and one day many years ago a high retaining wall burst and collapsed on her as she slept. She became trapped under trees and soil and my grandmother ran out into the streets with her clothes billowing to call for help. They pulled my aunt out and she survived with a broken hip. Whenever we visited her we brought Dairy Milk Fruit and Nut from England that she would hide under boxes of food in her chest freezer. Me and my brothers would find it and eat it anyway. My grandparents are now dead and my aunt lives by herself in the crumbly apartment. She is terrified of lizards, on account of one jumping into her blouse while she was making the bed as a teenager. This year, she asked us to buy her a bathrobe from Marks & Spencer, which she wishes to tie cosily around her waist.

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My mother would take me to Hyderi Market to buy fabrics for my special occasion clothes, whatever my age. It was important that I was mute throughout our shopping trip so as not to give away that we were imposters. My mother and I watched as the salesmen unrolled the fabrics across the table with some thuds and fanned it across their arms. Sometimes they cocked their heads at me and asked in English, is it nice? The jig was up. In this way my mother's foreignness lost her some bargaining power but she still asked to see some chikan. When the salesman had unrolled all the fabrics on the shelf, piled up like dead bats, my mother gestured to the other wall of fabric across the aisle from us—what about those? He looked at my mother with a small expression and said madam, that is a mirror.