

Portent
By Mike Waugh

Lauren and Rahul emerged at the brow of the hill and sucked in the freezing Hebridean air.

“Look!”. Lauren pointed at the magnificent Arnish Point lighthouse standing proud on the island, emerging through the fog and drizzling rain, casting its paternal gaze on everything it surrounded. The enormous spotlight whirled across the horizon at a speed that surprised Rahul.

Lauren squinted into the distance. She thought she could see a plume of smoke although it was hard to discern against the fog.

“Imagine. A cup of tea by a roaring fire!”. Lauren was quite excited at the idea, and grabbed Rahul’s hand and started playfully dragging him towards it.

“Maybe they’ll do us a bacon sandwich. Imagine that, dirty white bread, delicious thick, smoky bacon just melting into your mouth, with a dollop of ketchup adding that bit of tang. And oh my days, the smell...”, she teased.

Rahul shook his head. He’d never wanted to go on a dawn walk, let alone one inside a freezing wet cloud but her enthusiasm was infectious. However, even she couldn’t corral him to get excited about visiting the lighthouse.

“It’s not a cafe you know, you can’t just rock up demanding a full fry up. And besides, it’s all automated these days, there’s probably nobody...”. Rahul trailed off as Lauren ran arms aloft, her voice being embraced by the fog.

“We have marched far and wide to visit your kingdom, the stories of your legendary cooking have reached our army. Come. For today.” Lauren span on her heels to face Rahul.

“For today, we dine”.

Lauren opened her arms and Rahul rushed at her. He picked her up as if she weighed nothing as she shrieked with laughter, and slung her over his shoulder, racing towards the lighthouse. He grunted and growled as she tried to rain down blows on his back. Until Rahul stopped suddenly.

Lauren was still mock-protesting but Rahul set her down. She couldn’t see his face which had turned into a look of deep concern. He was staring at the lighthouse. It wasn’t smoke, it was a fire. Below

the light, he could see flames licking out of one of the windows. Lauren, sensing something was wrong turned and saw exactly what he did. She gasped.

Rahul motioned to her. "Come on," he intoned, as he started running towards the lighthouse. Lauren held back.

"Hold on! We should call..."

Rahul wasn't waiting. He knew that there was no reception anyway, and that if there was anyone inside, the next few minutes were critical. He sprinted, Lauren trailing way behind.

"Rahul! NO!". Lauren's fear was well-founded. He was selfless in every regard but right now, she wished he would think only of himself, because she knew he'd rush in. She scrambled for her phone and tried to get a signal.

Rahul could smell the acrid smoke as he got closer, mingling with the white fog. On any other day, the islanders would have seen this from their crofts and cottages but visibility meant help wouldn't necessarily be on its way.

At the base of the lighthouse he looked up for the flames but they were gone. He raced up the stairs, shouting all the way. As he climbed, he entered a wall of smoke. He pulled his t-shirt up to cover his mouth and called out. Nothing.

A doorway from the stairs was ajar. The smoke seemed to be coming from this room. He kicked open the door and a blast of heat and a gust of smoke escaped. His eyes streamed as he struggled to see where the fire was but the flames were nowhere to be seen. No fire, just smoke and... He gave his eyes a rest in his t-shirt and looked again. No. It can't be.

On top of two burnt metal chair frames sat a couple, charred black mannequins, their skin completely melted. They had burnt alive but Rahul looked down and saw they were still holding hands. A metal walking stick propped up against one of the chairs and their stooped posture suggested they were elderly. But they hadn't moved. Rahul stared at them, their eye sockets just hollow memories of where life had once been.

Everything else in the room had burnt too, the ashes and embers suggesting this was the tail-end of a searing fire. The cause was a mystery. Rahul shook himself out of his shock and rushed out, looking for more rooms. He raced up the stairs and found another door. He barged in and there was no fire, nothing but the most unexpected sight - a pristine, top of the range drum kit. It was all set up with a stool, and two drumsticks lying on the snare, as if awaiting their master.

Rahul stood there, heart racing, listening. All he could hear was the thudding of his own heart and the low hum from the whirring motor that drove the light from up above.

The August bank holiday was blissfully hot, which was good news not only for Rahul and Lauren, but also for the two million people enjoying the sights, sounds and colours of the Notting Hill Carnival. Lauren stepped out onto the first-floor house balcony in Rahul's half-buttoned shirt, toying with her bed-hair, openly dragging on a spliff on the one weekend of the year when no-one seemed to care. She leaned on the railings, smiling as the thudding bass rattled through the cast iron, and surveyed the overspill of the crowd below. They were stationed three streets away - close enough to hear but not close enough to see the main action.

"C'mon Loz, keep moving", shouted Rahul from inside the bedroom, towelling off his wet hair. Lauren closed her eyes and exhaled a cloud of acrid smoke and closed her eyes, listening to the rhythmic thud, thud, thud and let the sunshine wash over her.

"Feels so...". Lauren let out a moan of pleasure, her face basking in the sun, a picture of blissful relaxation. Rahul smiled at the star-shaped figure on his balcony, shook his head and joined her outside.

The sunlight hit him with force; the strength of the light and the glorious heat taking him close to where Lauren was feeling.

"Woah, that's just...". Rahul sat down arms outstretched, facing the heat like a sunflower.

"Isn't it? Here. Blowie". She reversed the spliff into her mouth and cupped her hands, her breasts falling into the open shirt as she leant forward. Rahul cupped his hands around hers and she blew as Rahul sucked up the smoke into the pit of his lungs and he rocked back on his chair.

As they let their hands go the remaining smoke billowed and hung in the air, and momentarily Rahul was floating in a warm cloud. Until, suddenly, a blue light cut through the smoke. Coming to his senses, his chair fell forward as he noticed the spinning police lights. They came from a patrol car on an overpass across the street. Rahul could make out two policemen, interviewing a couple of teenagers. His eyes were drawn to the flashing lights; somehow, they seemed to move more slowly than he expected. And then it hit him, like a low slamming into his stomach. A feeling of pure, unadulterated dread.

The memory of the charred bodies flashed in front of him. Neither of them had spoken much about the incident since it happened - a tragic accident they'd said. The couple were well-loved across the

island - him for his tales of life on the road as a musician, her for her sterling work in the community. Beyond that, Rahul had tried to forget. The memory was too sharp, too vivid and he knew it had wormed its way deep into his unconscious. Some days, he'd wake up sweating, his pulse racing. He'd instantly forget what it was he was dreaming about, but the dream would coil and snake its way back, somehow, however tenuously back to that lighthouse.

Lauren, oblivious to Rahul's sudden change of mood was fixated on the street below. "Oh isn't that the sweetest..." Her face beamed as she studied a group of a dozen small children, all immaculately dressed in matching khaki waistcoats and hats, holding drum kits.

Lauren let out a childlike shriek of excitement. "I so want one of those, look!"

From around the corner, the adults carried the tour-de-force - an enormous paper mâché sculpture of a young couple that rose 20 feet into the sky and wobbled past the balcony. The group, on their way to the main parade, were starting to get into formation. Lauren looked at Rahul drawn, ashen face.

"Babe. Babe! What's wrong?"

The dread was inflating with his every breath. He too took in the children with their little drum kits. The paper mâché couple. And all he felt was blackness. His eyes drew up to the police car, studying the policeman and animated teenagers. Lauren's arm on his leg didn't distract him as he stared.

As the paper mâché couple bobbed out of sight towards the overpass, one of the teens started to gesticulate wildly to a policeman, cigarette in one hand, pointed fingers in the other. There were angry shouts, then the teen reluctantly held his hands up behind his head. Rahul watched intently, Lauren's voice a thousand miles away as he studied the cigarette falling from the teen's fingers in slow motion. It dropped out of sight, behind the terraced houses, but the overpass spanned the main parade.

Again, the lights whirred slowly around. Lauren was now studying his face carefully, concerned. And as the dread reached an all enveloping suffocating blackness, Rahul knew.

He stood up and bolted indoors. Lauren called after him, but Rahul, barefoot and bare-chested sprinted out the bedroom, down the stairs, out the house.

"Rahul, what? Where are you... RAHUL!" Lauren called fruitlessly after him as she saw him running down the street.

Rahul's heart raced, his toes feeling the warm tarmac at every turn. He bounded down two streets, shouting all the way. "Move! MOVE!". People stepped to one side, others got barged out the way as Rahul fought his way to the main parade. In front of him were tens of thousands of people lining both sides of the street. Down the middle, he could make out the paper mâché figure and the waistcoated children, bobbing along to the beat of the music.

Rahul started making his way through the throng, the crowd now thick with people until he could move no further. He turned around, frantic. He looked to the railings, hemming in the spectators and fought his way through angry jabs and shouts, until he grabbed hold of the steel. Stewards and police monitored the parade but the one nearest had his back turned. Rahul vaulted up over the top. Just as the steward opposite noticed and shouted, Rahul started bounding down the middle, through semi-clad women waving feather boas, musicians blasting trumpets and a sound stage driven by an electric milk-float. Police radios crackled as a hand reached out to grab Rahul but to no avail. He sprinted hard, whipping through the procession.

Within moments, he caught up with the paper mâché couple. A wisp of smoke, barely noticeable escaped out of the top of the paper man's head, as the sculpture bounced along on its makeshift electric plinth. The children were busy drumming away, their faces beaming as they confidently made their way past the crowds. Rahul turned briefly to see a policeman nearly on top of him when ran forwards and tore into the paper sculpture. Through the opening, he jumped onto the plinth to the gasps of crowds.

Inside the sculpture, the flames started to dance in every direction. And there in the middle, two children in waistcoats looked up at him. A little boy and girl, holding hands, their brown eyes a picture of surprise, wonder and fear as flames licked around them all.

Rahul picked them both up in one scoop. The entire structure was now catching fire, the flames from his makeshift entrance even bigger as the oxygen fed their hunger. Rahul looked at the fiery curtain on the other side and with a child under each arm, he ran and burst through the other side, crashing painfully onto the tarmac below.

Outside, on the main parade, the shouts had turned into screams as the paper mâché turned into a fireball. Rahul turned to the boy and the girl, their eyes bursting with terror. They took one look at Rahul and ran off ahead, leaving him lying on the tarmac. He felt the dread lift and lay there as the policeman caught up with him, agog. Despite the blood now trickling down his bare back, Rahul lay motionless in the sun, screams and pandemonium, smiling. The dread had lifted and he heard Lauren's voice cut across the chaos, shouting his name from the barrier.

Two hours later, after the mayhem had been converted into bureaucratic form-filling with the police, they strolled through the crowds. Suddenly Rahul stopped, and momentary panic spread across Lauren's face. "Stop it, seriously you're freaking me...". Lauren stopped mid-flow as she saw

Rahul breathing deeply through his nostrils. She giggled and did the same - the unmistakable smell of a fry up. They looked at each other for a beat and nodded. Rahul spotted the source - a basement cafe down a long flight of stairs. Lauren surveyed the crowd, the noise, the rubbish and in the corner of her eye, she noticed two drumsticks, rolling down the cobbled street.