

## THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

*In this excerpt from Hanif Kureishi's novel *Something to Tell You*, the narrator Dr. Jamal Khan, a successful psychoanalyst living and working in London, and his friend Henry take a walk around the area where they live.*

Carrying his own atmosphere with him, Henry swung around the neighbourhood like it was a village – he was brought up in Suffolk hamlet<sup>1</sup> – continually calling out across the street to someone or other, and, frequently, joining them for talk about politics and art. His solution  
 5 to the fact that few people in London appeared to speak understandable English now, was to learn their language. “The only way to get by in this ‘hood is to speak Polish,” he announced recently. He also knew enough  
 10 Bosnian, Czech and Portuguese to get by in the bars and shops without yelling, as well as enough of several other European languages to make his way without feeling marginalised<sup>2</sup> in his own city.

I have lived on the same page of the A-to-Z<sup>3</sup> all of my adult life. At lunchtime I liked to stroll twice around the tennis courts like the other workers. This area, between Hammersmith and Shepherd’s Bush, I heard  
 15 once described as “a roundabout surrounded by misery”. Someone else suggested it might be twinned with Bogotá. Henry called it “a great Middle Eastern City”. Certainly it had always been “cold” there: in the seventeenth century, after the hangings at Tyburn near Marble Arch, the bodies were brought to Shepherd’s Bush Green to be displayed.

Now the area was a mixture of the pretty rich and the poor, who were  
 20 mostly recent immigrants from Poland and Muslim Africa. The prosperous lived in five-storey houses, narrower, it seemed to me, than North London’s Georgian houses. The poor lived in the same houses divided up into single rooms, keeping their milk and trainers fresh on the windowsill.

The newly arrived immigrants, carrying their possessions in plastic  
 25 bags, often slept in the park: at night, along with the foxes, they foraged through the dustbins for food. Alcoholics and nutters<sup>4</sup> begged and disputed in the streets continuously. [...] New delis, estate agents and restaurants had begun to open, also beauty parlors, which I took as a  
 30 positive sign of rising house prices.

When I had more time, I liked to walk up through Shepherd’s Bush market, with its rows of chauffeur-driven cars parked alongside Goldhawk Road Station. Hijabed<sup>5</sup> Middle Eastern women shopped in the market, where you could buy massive bolts of vivid cloth, crocodile-skin

35 shoes, scratchy underwear and jewellery, “snide”<sup>6</sup> CDs and DVDs, parrots  
and luggage, as well as illuminated 3-D pictures of Mecca and Jesus. (One  
time in the old city in Marrakech, I was asked if I’d seen anything like it  
before. I could only reply that I’d come all this way only to be reminded of  
Shepherd’s Bush market.)

40 While no one could be happy on the Goldhawk Road, the Uxbridge  
Road, ten minutes away, is different. At the top of the market I’d buy a  
falafel and step into that wide West London street where the shops were  
Caribbean, Polish, Kashmiri, Somali. Along from the police station was  
the mosque, where, through the open door, you could see rows of shoes  
45 and men praying. Behind it was the football ground, QPR<sup>7</sup>, where Rafi  
and I went sometimes, to be disappointed. Recently one of the shops was  
sprayed with gunfire. Not long ago a boy cycled past Josephine and  
plucked her phone from her hand. But otherwise the ‘hood was  
remarkably calm though industrious, with most people busy with  
50 schemes and selling. I was surprised there wasn’t more violence,  
considering how combustible<sup>8</sup> the parts were.

It was my desire, so far unfulfilled, to live in luxury in the poorest and  
most mixed part of town. It always cheered me to walk here. This wasn’t  
the ghetto; the ghetto was Belgravia, Knightsbridge and parts of  
55 Nottinghill<sup>9</sup>. This was London as a world city

*Source:*

Hanif Kureishi, *Something to Tell You*, Faber & Faber, London 2008, S. 13ff.

**Annotations**

- 1 hamlet – little village
- 2 marginalised – being made unimportant
- 3 A-to-Z – Geographer’s A-Z Street Atlas: a series of street  
maps of cities in the UK; the first atlas, of London, was  
originally published in the 1930s.
- 4 nutter – (Brit. slang) foolish, eccentric or mad person
- 5 hijabed – wearing a headscarf (hijab) for religious reasons
- 6 snide – hier: schwarzgebrannt
- 7 QPR – Queens Park Rangers (a soccer team)
- 8 combustible (adj.) – catching fire and burning easily; explosive
- 9 Belgravia, Knightsbridge and Nottinghill – rather wealthy  
boroughs of London