



Pizza Kebab

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I make sure bad luck wins out, every fucking time. It's a knack I have. Could be we carry our fathers' despair around with us along with all of our grandfathers' hunger. Could be no one believes in honor anymore, but people around here still think their reputation is worth dying for. Money's more important than honor, they say. But respect is like trust, you can't put a price on it. It's the official currency around here, and once you run out of it, you're dead.

I know I could have died like Daniele, for my honor. Because in the end, despite whatever bullshit they tell you, it's finders keepers. Basically, the world is split between two types of people: you're either holding a gun or you're being held by a gun. And we've chosen to be the ones holding the gun, whatever the cost.

I don't despise people like Adam or my father, they just make me laugh. The fact is, there are three types of immigrants around here. First there's the good little boy: he works, he's got some job or other, the boss gave him the keys to the office, he's looking forward to his pension, he wishes you Happy Christmas even though he's Muslim. Some call him a slave. He looks like a monkey in a Gucci suit. Then there are those who believe in God, heaven, virginity, abstinence, long beards, prayer five times a day, a religious explanation for everything. Exactly the sort who know how to ruin your day. Word on the block is they'll all be arrested sooner or later. Those in the third group scrape by: they dream of glory, and their Arabic is lousy, as lousy as the run-down buildings they live in and want to escape from. Because, no matter

the color of your skin or which God you say you believe in, a man's destiny is to line his own pockets. Does she love me for my money or because I'm not afraid of death? Depends on your point of view. Death is everywhere, and we're perfectly aware of how we're going to end up. This is where we've chosen to be. We live life full on. These zombies say that we were born to be prison fodder; our mothers still wonder how such nice boys could have grown into men accused of such filthy crimes.

Why should I lie? We may be ignorant, but don't fuck with us. I smile and mind my own fucking business, not like that lot who are always spouting off some bullshit. Like that guy, I can still see him now: no more than fifty, eyes wide open and bits of white spittle at the corners of his mouth. "I'd shoot the lot of them, I mean it... Send them all back home... I'm sick of it... Take a machine gun, rat-a-tat-tat!" They don't like Pakis, they don't like mosques, they don't even like Youssef's Pizza-Kebab shop. But they buy their stuff from us: I'm their go-to man – coke, smack, smoke, ket, Molly, blades and pieces, shoes and accessories.

But I've got nothing against anyone. Our whole lives we've been eating shit and told it's chocolate. We've the same as everyone else, just a bit less so. I see my bluds on the street, the ones who die and the ones who can hardly believe it if they make it to thirty. There's no work. People scrape by. Then someone gets rubbed out and the TV crews show up. Cameras and flashes. It's only when they get to your building that the journalists see that half the



buzzers have no names and the other half have names they can't pronounce. And then there's the cops. We got one thing in common with them: none of us ever went to school. I read on Facebook once about an old guy from Calabria who said he kicked the shit out of blacks. That's the type that must inspire the cops they send here. Anyway, sooner or later they all go away – the TV crews, the newspapers, the politicians, and the squad cars. There's just us left in these buildings.

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That day I was sitting at the bar. We'd been smoking Mary Jane and I was so stoned I could barely keep my eyes on the TV. Then the match gets interrupted, there's some idiot talking, a photo comes up on the screen, breaking news in red: they're looking for someone from around here. "An Islamic terrorist cell," they're saying. Two months before, Andrea was still drinking straight whisky and rubbing up against some bitch's ass in the Copacabana. He'd tried the white stuff a few times and liked it, but he didn't have the money and had to give it up. Now his face was all over Channel 5, and there was a video of him talking about heaven, sounding like he was smashed out of his head. One of my bluds almost puked at the sight of him.

I swear I didn't hide him because he was a friend of mine. I just couldn't believe it, that's all. I wanted to keep him close, seeing is believing and all that, like St. Thomas, the only biblical character I ever liked. He turned up with fearful blue eyes, a grubby beard, and a bag. "What the fuck you doin' here?!" I said. He had nowhere to go, the police were questioning everyone in the building, there were roadblocks everywhere. And we were stuck with the hash in the house, no one would be buying, everything on hold. "You're a fuckin' problem for us, you know that?" What was with this dipshit,

anyway? His mother broke her back cleaning rich people's stairways, his father ran off with some Moldovan, his sister was an anorexic who was obsessed with her phone, counting likes all day. When she tucks it into her trousers, it's almost as wide as her skinny hips. She'll be happy now her big brother's famous. He's got the same gloomy expression he always had as a boy. "I really fucked up, bro..." Even if he were my own flesh and blood, it wouldn't make any difference. I'll stop at nothing. I'm a criminal first and a friend second. I push him against the wall and lay into his ribs, he crumples and I check to see what he's got on him. Just a book in his jacket pocket. Surprise, surprise! It's the Quran. "All the answers are in here, right?!" I say. He's coming around and tries to say something but he can't, so he stays where he is.

Later on, once we've calmed down, he's sitting on the couch. Behind him there's a box full of knockoff shoes, and there's a Dalí on the wall. That's fake too. I'm holding two cans of beer, and I sit on the leather armchair next to the widescreen. I pull my piece out of my trousers, lay it against my right thigh, and offer him a can. "Drink." He's shaking as he brings the alcohol to his lips and gulps down a mouthful. "That was so easy," I laugh. He's completely freaked out. A helicopter passes overhead. And here he goes, talking like a lawyer. Prattling on. What sense is there to our lives? "You went to school too long," I say. No, I don't need no order in my life. The only order I'm interested in is when I'm counting the cash. I tell him he can sleep here, but tomorrow he has to go. And less talk.

I lock him in and go out. It must be getting on towards two am, but money never sleeps, not even at night, so I go out to make some. Maybe Paolo's knocked over an apartment and has something for me. I get a call but it's not Paolo. All hell's broken loose. Youssef's Pizza-Kebab has been torched and there are police and ambulances all over the place; they're

saying that Youssef is dead. Some skinheads are saying they're coming around to kick some ass. Our warehouses are full and our pockets are almost empty. The chick texts me privately and asks if I'll give her that Prada bag. I've got a hundred grand worth of watches and jackets on me, Fendi wallets, Prada shoes. Then the worst possible thought crosses my mind, like the crap that floats up when the toilet's clogged. No, there's no way I'm pawning off anything, I'm not selling the Bugatti. When it comes to money, people will stop at nothing. Money's got no flag. I've got to hang on to the dough.

The Quran says that Allah made the earth for us as a carpet. But all I see on the ground is asphalt and blood. The next day I pick up Andrea. They thought he was more Italian than I was, and I thought he was just another sad motherfucker, like us all, stuck here on Hell's ring road. I get him into the car. Antonio drives, vaping constantly and wearing a track suit like some goon from Gomorra. We take him to the square and he gets out. "Where's my mother?" he asks me. "You said you were taking me to my mother's." Everyone saw it. We killed him like a dog under the noonday sun. So many people, and not one witness.

The helicopters have gone, the junkies are back. The TV crews have moved on, the squad cars cruise around the neighborhood like blue sharks. This is what we do. It's our job to keep our hands in the shit so that you don't have to. Because, at the end of the day, we don't really exist. That's all there is to it. But I've got nothing against you. I forgive each one of you, every day: my father, Adam, Daniele, Andrea, my woman, the skins, maybe even the cops and journalists. I forgive you too for pretending you don't know anything, just like my own people do when they talk to the police. I forgive the ones who stuff themselves with lies and drugs because they're not strong enough. Us and those Isis guys, we're not so different, we're both selling cheap dreams. We're just rivals. You can dream of paradise, of screwing virgins, of milk and honey, or you can come to us and treat yourself to a special trip at a decent price, on any airline to any destination, needle and strap on the house. There may be no way out of this hell we live in, but people like me will always be around to help you forget. It's the paradox of people who live our whole lives knowing for certain that the rest of the world has forgotten about us and our kind. We're all experts in oblivion.