

## DOPE

Nikesh Shukla

*DOPE: I know it's but I this girl like*

*Me: Huh?*

You search for clues in your last exchange, over a year ago now, as to what happened. He didn't reply when you asked what his broken text message meant. You can only assume now that things were bad for him, and he was struggling to communicate. At the time, you thought he was being weird. And now, you think, I was too wrapped up in my own world to translate his message.

When the call comes, you're driving the family to the beach. There's something calming about a bleak British seaside scene during the winter. The way the brooding sky threatens the sanctity of the sand. The silence and emptiness. The boarded-up stalls, kiosks and cafes, nervously waiting for the on-season. The people who live here, wrapped in their coats, enjoying the freedom of the promenade. You answer the call on the car's Bluetooth speaker, and when you hear the tears in your mother's voice, you tell her she's on speaker phone. She

asks if the kids are in the car and you say yes. She says a muted hi to them, their soft shy replies lost in the white noise of the motorway. You say you'll call her back. You exchange a look with your wife that says, something has happened. Mum always launches straight into the list of things that have annoyed her that today, that prompted her to call. As her youngest son, you are her moral compass.

You process the news while your wife and children run the BMX pump track of sand dunes, built to help the beach recover after the summer. They disappear and reappear, rolling like hills as the riders run through the sand. You walk purposefully slowly behind them, trying to catch up with yourself.

He called himself DOPE and you called yourself Yam. He demanded you remember all caps when you spell the man's name, same as DOOM. A lifetime ago, before you had a family and when he was still married, you used to sit in the pub, drink lager after lager, and freestyle to each other, pausing only to write down the best rhymes for posterity. The folder on your desktop, called Butter Chicken Beats, a series of half-finished loops DOPE made for your band, never got fleshed out into actual songs; the rhymes in your rhyme books never got committed to record. You had a lot of fun imagining though. You called yourselves The Intrepid. You wanted to be like the best duos, like Outkast, like Black Star, like Tribe (all due respect to Ali Shahid Muhammad).

When you had kids, when he and his girl broke up, you didn't meet up as much, and the text exchanges became functional instead of shared links to new videos, or snippets of rhymes or YouTube interviews with your favourite rappers.

You became cousins, rather than friends, catching up at the one or two family gatherings a year you were both free to attend. Around Diwali. Around a wedding, or a surprise birthday party. Gone were the old times. Lager after lager. Freestyles upon freestyles. Getting more and more antagonistic, till you were the centre of your family, everyone watching, laughing at the pageantry of your snaps, all goading you both to tear each other apart. The months fell into silence, the songs were never finished.

And then he texted you. And then you replied, Huh? And then DOPE was gone.

You run to catch up with your wife and children. One of them is acting like a dog, bent over, burrowing into the sand with two gloved paws. The other is waving a long stick about declaring herself a wizard. Your wife occupies them both and gives you that silent smile, I care but we'll talk later when there is space to do so. And you smile back like, sure, I'm hurting though.

It begins to rain.

You read back through text messages, thinking about the time that has elapsed since you had a proper conversation. He tried, a bunch of times, and you didn't engage. Perhaps you were busy, because life as a parent is intense. Perhaps you were busy and didn't want to reply in platitudes, and thought, I'll reply more thoughtfully later, and later never ever comes.

That final exchange, you wish you'd said more than, Huh?

There is an arrogance in these types of death, where you pick apart through the embers of the years and work out what you could have done differently, and how that might have been enough to save a loved one. You could have been the hero. You could have changed things. Grief offers us this as a way of understanding our role in someone's death. The alternative is knowing that you could have idly stood by and watched, or you could have intervened and attempted to kickstart his recovery, and neither would have made any difference.

You scroll back past the messages to the last time you sent each other some rhymes. It has been a good four years.

*DOPE: I'm like Hammer, you can't touch this / sorrow and bliss, kiss from a fist / twist in the tale, can't fail, rail against the whole damn town, don't frown, clown, I'm DOPE Fucking BROWN.*

*Me: DOPE BROWN, back with Yam, Sam I am, damned I'm not, what you got, watch your blood clot like cream, dream a little dream, scream a little scream, sing about me, sing about me, remember me this way, DOPE BROWN and Yam, armed, charmed and ready to play.*

Yeah, you think, I will remember you this way.

## **Nikesh Shukla**

Nikesh Shukla is a novelist and screenwriter. He is the author of *Coconut Unlimited* (shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Award), *Meatspace* and the critically acclaimed *The One Who Wrote Destiny*. Nikesh is the editor of the bestselling essay collection, *The Good Immigrant*, which won the reader's choice at the Books Are My Bag Awards. He co-edited *The Good Immigrant USA* with Chimene Suleyman. He is the author of two YA novels, *Run, Riot* (shortlisted for a National Book Award) and *The Boxer* (longlisted for the Carnegie Medal). Nikesh was one of Time Magazine's cultural leaders, Foreign Policy magazine's 100 Global Thinkers and The Bookseller's 100 most influential people in publishing in 2016 and in 2017. He is the co-founder of the literary journal, *The Good Journal* and *The Good Literary Agency*. Nikesh is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and a member of the Folio Academy. Nikesh's new book, *Brown Baby: A Memoir Of Race, Family And Home* was released on Bluebird in February 2021.

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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