



Look! Open your eyes and look, Dulal tells himself in an attempt to stir some excitement in his heart, but no luck.

There is something profound about *seeing* that's different from merely looking on. But this realization does not help him. A part of him is catatonic.

This is not how it was supposed to happen.

He came prepared to see this country as his own, to belong to it. From the minute he boarded the flight at Frankfurt, he felt a yearning to connect to this place. Mom and Dad told him as much. Kissing his forehead, Mom said, 'You should draw your own conclusions about that country.' But now he feels as though some cord inside him has snapped. At the moment, he doesn't dare embrace something so alien to his world. He knows that he has to strive hard to fix this snapped cord within him.

Dulal waits quietly outside the airport terminal. He doesn't have the sense of relief one usually feels after

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the ordeal at an airport. He was excited about seeing a new country, but contrary to his expectations, his curiosity has somewhat dimmed. He feels low, oddly nervous being here – looking for a missing truth in a strange country.

‘Adventures,’ Martin told him, ‘give you courage. But this isn’t just about adventure, it’s something much bigger. This is like you are discovering yourself. We want this trip to make life more meaningful for you. You’ll find that it is more complex and has more meanings than you know.’

He felt quite brave hearing his father talk about the adventure ahead.

Then why does it feel different now? Why are my legs shaking? Why does it feel like the ground is slipping from under my feet? Deep in thought, he clenches his fist. His toes, too, would have dug deep into the earth in desperation, had he been barefoot. But the shoes and the mosaic floor stood in the way. Instead, his back stiffens against the wall. Ill at ease, he looks ahead.

The road beyond the railing goes up to the taxi stand, and further ahead, the roundabout leads to the city. He reckons that he has to take this road. He needs to go into the city – but where? To some hotel, of course – but which one? He doesn’t know; he has no names, did not do any research before coming here. Martin told him, ‘It’ll be more fun getting there and finding things out along the way. One step, and you’ll feel like you’ve discovered a new country all for yourself. You’ll feel like Columbus, what do you say?’

‘Brilliant, Dad!’ He just stared, fascinated, as Martin roared with laughter. Doris looked at him with gleaming eyes. They brought him up with such love! At this

moment, this memory pulled at the strings of Dulal's heart. Just like Dad advised, he boarded the flight with zero preparation, save a little knowledge of Bengali. Enough to get by, he thought.

But now, he can hardly follow the people around; everything feels mixed up inside his head. His legs are shaking; he takes two steps back to lean against the wall again. An army of famished people in dirty rags hounds him; he needs no language to know they're beggars even though he has never seen such destitutes before. He gestures them to go away, but they don't. They keep asking, standing there with their hands stretched out. His head starts to spin; he turns away, closing his eyes and leaning back on the wall. Slouching away, they yell annoyingly at him. Despite the unfamiliarity of the language, the tone of their collective voice makes it clear they are abusing him. He is amused, his nervousness slowly giving way to a comforting calm. His legs stop shaking; he pries himself away from the wall.

The storm inside began the moment the plane touched down at Dhaka. But he doesn't know why. It is just another country, maybe alien and unfamiliar –but why does it make him feel this way? Why such a visceral reaction to a new land? He has no control over these feelings. Before the plane landed, the uneasiness overwhelmed him; he clutched his knees, gripped his hair, letting his head slack against the seat, in an attempt to calm his nerves. A flight attendant rushed to him: 'Please fasten your seatbelt.'

He felt his hands shaking the moment he touched the seatbelt. Nothing ever felt like this, in all his twenty-five years. His well-framed body chiselled from playing

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soccer with his friends and long-distance cycling – no one catching up to him. What has gone wrong today?

‘Are you not feeling well?’ the man sitting next to him asked.

‘No, I’m fine. Thanks.’ He barely managed a whisper. Dulal tried to gather himself looking out the window. After taxiing down the runway, the plane stopped completely, everyone keen to get off, standing uncomfortably with their baggage along the aisle. Dulal could not move. His body felt completely numb, but he told himself it was just because he was missing his adoptive parents.

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Dulal was born a war child in Bangladesh – his father a Pakistani soldier and mother a tea picker. He was born somewhere off Srimangal in the hilly tea-garden area. His adoptive parents never knew exactly where. He was all of two months when Martin and Doris decided to adopt him.

He feels like breaking into laughter. He was supposed to grow up in the streets or in a home. Instead, he ended up with everything – a big, warm house; good education; choicest foods; anything he wanted to wear and the freedom to choose his lifestyle. The paperwork lists his name as Dulal, a label someone in this country must have given to the plantation worker’s newborn baby. Martin and Doris decided to not tamper with that, and they christened him Dulal Yope van Hoven. How strange!

They kept an address written down for him for the past twenty-five years of his life; they somehow knew one day he’d go back looking for his mother in the land

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of his birth. This thought triggered a sudden surge of emotion, jolting Dulal out of his reverie.

Everybody else got off; he was the last one. He stumbled as he tried to exit from the craft. That storm was catching up to him again. He gripped his wallet, and in his mind, he was transported back to a familiar space.

Only on his last birthday did Doris give him that wallet with the address safely tucked in. 'We have decided to send you to Bangladesh. You'll go and find your real mother.'

'Have you forgotten something?' someone asked as Dulal came to a sudden stop.

Blankly, Dulal stared back. 'Yeah. I did. But I can't remember what.'

He walked past the surprised stares of everyone around him without loosening his grip on his wallet. He felt choked and nauseated. Unnoticed, his hand slipped from the wallet.

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As his thoughts scatter, he lifts his small bag, wondering if he should cross the square ahead. But the very first step he takes transports him back to Frankfurt – standing before his father, telling him, 'I don't think there's any point in looking for someone I have never seen. I don't want to dig out someone. You are my real parents.'

He knows they would laugh if they heard him say all this. Martin would say, 'My boy! You must know her for your identity. Not for love, not for shelter and not for money.'

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He remembers the time when he was seven years old and first learned about his mother in Bangladesh. He cried on Doris' lap, screaming and howling. 'You are my only mother. I don't want anybody else.'

He broke all his toys as he watched the snowfall from his window. Later, he kept banging on his parents' bedroom door until Doris opened it. 'The country you told me about, does it snow there, Mummy?'

Doris took him in her arms. 'Let's get back to your room; didn't you sleep at all?'

He said nothing, quietly trotting back to his room with Martin and Doris in tow. Martin said with a soft smile, 'Broken all our toys, have we? Good. We'll get you some new ones on the way back from school tomorrow. And no, it doesn't snow in that country, but the sky darkens before it rains. And it rains a lot over there.'

Doris kissed him goodnight. 'Now try to sleep. It's not morning yet.'

Since then, Dulal has associated that day with his sense of identity. Martin, years later, showed him the address. 'Your mother worked on this tea estate during the War of Independence in Bangladesh. You're a war child.'

Is a man's identity just about that? Or there is something more, much deeper? Dulal has a strange vision—defying all logic, it seems to be snowing in this tropical delta where there has never been any frost. A thick layer of fog dims the visibility all around. And he is just a helpless boy, with nowhere to go, walking helplessly through the flakes, dropping like soft, white jasmines. A strange trail of light confronts him, a light that exists only inside him. In that illumination, he sees someone

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else, not himself, a figure calling out to him, stretching out a pair of skeletal hands.

Dulal comes out into the open, leaving the airport terminal behind. Is it going to rain? He looks up at the sky – no trace of clouds, a gleaming blue sky spreads out. His eyes flit sideways and settle on the line of soothing coconut trees to his right. He stands in their shadow and asks himself quite suddenly, ‘Is she even alive? Does she still work on the tea estate? How will I feel when I find her? *Identity* – what a weird word.’

Dulal feels an emptiness whirling inside him. He is thirsty. He looks everywhere for a bottle of water but sits down suddenly on the ground, dropping his bag. As he leans against the tree a magical cloud settles over his eyes.

Leaning against his autorickshaw, Ranjan notices Dulal. Ranjan came from Bhanugachh just yesterday; he’ll probably stay on for a month or so in the city. For a new experience, he has decided to drive the three-wheeler to earn a living. There are so many of them in Bahar’s yard; Bahar lives in the cramped apartment next to it. ‘You’ll have to stay with me for a few months,’ he told Ranjan. ‘You have to make my portrait. I won’t let you go otherwise.’

Bahar’s home, Ranjan knows, is an excellent hangout. In the six months away from Dhaka, Ranjan missed the garage a lot. Shrouded in greenery, the place is out of the ordinary and does not seem to be part of the overbuilt, congested capital city. Ranjan has just dropped off a passenger. He somehow knows Dulal plans to go into the city, but on principle, he never calls out to anyone.

‘You will never get any passengers, for you cannot call out to them,’ Bahar complained. ‘I know you’re not

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a cabbie at heart. So long as you take out my *babytaxi*, I lose money. But since I enjoy your company, I don't care a bit.' The transporter laughed.

Still, curiosity gets the better of Ranjan. He is keen to know if this visitor with unfamiliar looks wants to go into the city or not. If he does not have money, no problem; Ranjan will give him a free ride.

He can sense that Dulal is upset over something. He looks like a Bengali, but Ranjan can tell he is not from around here. It is evident that the young man is from another part of the world. Not speaking to anyone, Dulal just sits there, alone with his bag. Is he crazy? Is he another runaway, just like Ranjan?

He has now been observing Dulal for such a long time that he can draw him on his canvas.

Ranjan takes a step forward, making an imaginary stroke on an invisible canvas. He walks further ahead. In his mind, Ranjan tries to bring the strokes together to form a coherent picture of the man in front of him. Soon enough, the stranger's figure appears on the canvas, sitting with his back propped against the coconut tree.

Ranjan first noticed Dulal's tall, lanky frame when he passed by him. Some six feet tall. Perfectly etched eyes and a sharp nose, painted as it were, in the glowing black ink of his skin. What a radiant lustre; this black that only Dulal could carry so well. Ranjan can merely steal a little bit of that black for his canvas.

He walks up to Dulal and stands before him. 'Are you going into the city?'

When Dulal's eyes meet his, Ranjan feels shaken. A fine-art graduate, he paints the images in their ethereal beauty. But Dulal's gaze puzzles him. What is it about that gaze! Never has he seen this colour before. To see



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this elusive tone up close, Ranjan sits down in front of Dulal.

Tilting his head, Dulal says meekly, 'I *am* going into the city.'

'Where?'

'I don't know.'

'I don't get it.' Ranjan settles comfortably on the grass.

A hesitant Dulal, in his broken Bengali, manages to say, 'I don't know where exactly. Some hotel perhaps. I don't know anyone here.'

'Tourist?'

'Not exactly.'

'Then? On business?'

Dulal simply looks away without saying another word. Ranjan can see the pain in his eyes. He quickly changes his tone to pleading. 'Why don't you come with me?'

'Where?'

'To the city. Where I live.'

'Yes, I will,' Dulal says urgently. 'I was looking for something like that. Someone who would be my friend. I will be really happy if I could stay with you.'

Dulal's desperation draws Ranjan closer to him. So often has he tried to see different sides of life. He has endlessly searched for something new, something extraordinary. Could this boy be that? He genuinely wants to know Dulal. He wants to make Dulal a part of his runaway life. I'll bring him alive on my canvas. I'll take him to the plateau of Kamalganj and the banks of the Dholai. Maybe to the tea estates in the foothills. But will he come? Ranjan faces uncertainty.

'What are you thinking?' whispers Dulal, coming out of his reverie.

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‘About you.’

Dulal remains unperturbed. ‘There’s a lot about me.’

‘Really?’

‘Right now, I’m inside a shell. If you break it, there’s another shell and then another.’

‘All right. There are many shells, I see. Everyone lives inside a shell. I have some shells of my own. You’ll know soon enough.’

Ranjan’s eagerness barely touches Dulal. He looks away as if what Ranjan has said does not mean anything. He’s too engrossed in keeping himself hidden from scrutiny. Suddenly, Dulal’s gaze catches Ranjan’s, startling him. Feebly, he says, ‘I’m very thirsty.’

‘Wait here. I will get you some water.’

Left alone, Dulal thinks about the man he has just met. He can’t be just an autorickshaw driver. He seems to be hiding his true self – but why? He’s at once excited about discovering something – someone – again. He could depend on Ranjan. He seems familiar in this unfamiliar city. Dulal feels absolutely at ease now. A calm descends over him. He imagines going to a tea estate, and the mere thought makes him feel better. He looks around everywhere. A soothing breeze caresses him, and he is reminded of those long-lost times when he was happy. And he is thankful to everyone – those who brought him into this world and those who took care of him.

Ranjan returns with a bottle of water. ‘Here. Take it. I am Ranjan. And you?’

‘Dulal Yope van Hoven. Just call me Dulal. My parents call me Yope.’ He finishes the bottle of water in one go. Ranjan feels that Dulal could have drained off the Bay of Bengal had he been on its coast. Keeping the empty bottle by the tree, Dulal takes out his wallet. He changed a

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hundred- dollar bill at the airport. His parents gave him 5,000. ‘Tell us whenever you need anything,’ they told him. ‘We’ll send some more. Please don’t suffer because of money. That should be the least of your worries.’ He feels an inexplicable sadness thinking of Martin and Doris. He hands Ranjan a 100-taka note. Ranjan presses his hands firmly: ‘You don’t have to give me money for a bottle of water. It’s what a friend always does.’

‘A friend...’

‘Yes. You and I are friends by now.’

Staring at Ranjan’s face, he feels reassured, his voice friendly in the bustle of the unfamiliar city. He feels happy but is somehow unable to rid himself of this lingering sadness. Fiddling with the empty bottle in his hand, he suddenly says, ‘You know I felt like I’d die of thirst.’

Ranjan bursts out laughing. ‘Dying is not that easy, my friend. And this country is no desert. There’s water everywhere, as much as you want.’

‘Thank you, Ranjan. I didn’t think someone would come into my life like such a blessing.’

Dulal gently holds Ranjan’s hands. Freeing his hands from his grip, Ranjan says, ‘You can never be sure what I am in your life. Our friendship can land you in a lot of trouble as well, Dulal.’

‘I don’t understand...’

‘Not today. Some other time.’

‘Some other time? Okay. All right. But whenever you do tell me, make sure we are sitting under a tree.’

‘Okay. Whatever you want. But not these coconut trees. Some big, sprawling tree.’

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Dulal's sudden burst of laughter pierces the air, scaring away a crow in the tree above. It startles him. He watches the crow as it flies away... Dulal's eyes are a pool of fathomless black ink – a vague sadness swimming in it. Ranjan feels distressed looking at him. He has seen many shades of life, but this boy sitting before him is still a riddle. He knows he can't let him go, at least so long as he is in the city. Or – does a long journey together entice him? Dulal looks away once the crow flies into the distance. 'Crows in this country are beautiful.'

'I don't like crows at all. I doubt if there's anyone who likes crows.'

Dulal changes the topic. 'I know you are hoping I will turn out to be a good friend. Perhaps because you've lost your old friends for some reason?'

'Bahar is a close friend. You'll meet him soon.' 'Is he the only friend you have left?'

'Actually... I *am* looking for someone new.'

'Okay. I am that "someone new", right?'

They both laugh.

'Odd, isn't it? We have become friends in no time.'

Dulal gets up with his bag. 'I'm not carrying too many clothes. I want to buy the kind of things you wear here.' 'Don't worry. All that will be taken care of. Let's get into the car.'

Dulal sits on the back seat of the autorickshaw they call babytaxi here, with Ranjan in the driver's seat. As they get to the city, Ranjan thinks of his new friend: Why is Dulal here? What does this country have for him? All of a sudden, he feels a sharp glare at the back

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of his neck. He can sense Dulal's eyes searing him. 'Why do you drive this tuk-tuk?' His face is almost resting on Ranjan's back; he can feel Dulal's hot breath on his skin.

'I know quite a few things. It's like an addiction. A way to amuse myself and adapt and fight off monotony.'

'Brilliant! You are like a magician! A mix of many things.'

'All for survival, my friend.'

'I will learn from you.'

'Of course.'

Ranjan suddenly pulls up. 'Tea?'

Still looking around, Dulal says, 'Hey! What bird is that?'

'Oh, that's a magpie-robin. We call it doyel, our national bird.'

'Nonsense! How can there be a national bird? What's so special about a bird? And what's wrong with the other birds? I don't accept this.'

'Well,' Ranjan says calmly. 'To each his own.'

Once outside the taxi, Dulal doesn't look at Ranjan again. He says, 'A while ago, you told me a friendship with you could get me into trouble... I don't care about that. I'm not scared of anything.'

'Neither am I,' Ranjan retorts. 'No matter where I am, I can always find happiness.'

'Give me your hand. I want to hold it.' Ranjan squats in front of Dulal. He had no idea that in this little time he'd forge such a strong bond with the boy from a faraway land. He just cannot gauge his gaze; it's very unfamiliar. He takes Dulal's hand in his and presses it. 'Let's go.'

'Where are you taking me? I don't want to go to a starred hotel.'

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‘I’m not taking you to a hotel. You are not someone who would like to stay in a fancy place like that. I have a lot to show you.’

‘So... where?’

‘Where I live.’

‘Is it a nice place?’

‘Nothing great.’

‘Why?’

‘The place is always noisy. It’s hard to get much sleep.’

‘And?’

‘There’s no place to cook. You can’t ask for tea whenever you please.’

‘That’s no trouble. We can go out for tea.’

‘But I can give you something else.’

‘What might that be?’

‘Endless trees and lots of birds.’

‘Great! I can live in peace with that much.’

Dulal’s voice is so detached and strange, to Ranjan, it sounds like the wailing of a woman from a distance. He asks comfortingly, ‘What bothers you so much, Dulal?’

‘I’ll tell you once we get to your place. Alone together, up close. Will you tell me about your hurt?’

‘My hurt?’ Ranjan’s eyebrows pucker. ‘Do you want some tea?’

‘Yes. I am not wasting your time, am I?’

Ranjan smiles. ‘If I manage to earn a day’s meal, it is more than enough for me. Also, I am not a taxi driver by profession; it’s something I love doing. I don’t think I will take you home right away. You are new here, I’ll show you around a bit. We will buy some clothes. Do live in this city as long as you want. After that, I will take you to another place.’

‘Wow! You’ve thought that far ahead already?’

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‘It’s a habit. I like thinking ahead. I really think you will like the place I am talking about. I’ve been in exile there for some time.’

‘Where’s that?’

‘Far away from Dhaka, in some hilly tea tracts.’

‘Tea gardens? I’ve come to this country looking for a tea garden.’ Dulal takes his wallet out to show Ranjan the address. ‘Do you know this place?’

Ranjan smiles mildly. ‘Very well indeed. I am from the same area.’

Dulal grips his arm firmly. ‘Won’t you take me there?’ he pleads.

Ranjan feels as though the soft blue of the sky hovering over the plantations has cast a glow over Dulal, left an impress on him. As if he were a character from a Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale. His face has never beamed like this before. Right now, he is a young man riding a horse, the sun shimmering all around him. Amazing!

Who is this boy? What is his urgency? Who is there in the tea garden? For whom has he crossed thousands of miles? Ranjan does not meet Dulal’s gaze. He simply nods. ‘Just tell me when you want to go. I can always make time for you. Whom do you want to see there? Please tell me.’

Dulal takes the last sip of his tea. ‘I feel extremely tired. I really need some sleep,’ he says, looking away.

‘Are you not well?’

‘Perhaps. And when I don’t feel well, I can’t think. I really need to rest.’

‘Then let’s go home. I will show you around tomorrow.’

‘Will you teach me how to drive the tuk-tuk?’

Ranjan doesn’t reply. They leave the tea shop. Looking around before getting into the autorickshaw, Dulal says,

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‘Your country is quite different.’

‘Beautiful?’

‘Different. Not exactly beautiful. Natural beauty is more pleasant in many other places. Your country is something else – something completely different. I won’t be able to explain it to you.’

‘I know you are really sleepy. Your words are getting mixed up, your eyes drooping.’

‘Do I look really bad?’

‘Absolutely not. You are like Hans Christian–’

‘Stop. I don’t like hearing such things.’

Ranjan starts his autorickshaw. Dulal leans against the seat and sleeps. When they stop at the traffic light, he opens his eyes. ‘Have we reached?’

Ranjan turns to say no. He can see Dulal’s bloodshot eyes as he falls back to sleep. Such unperturbed sleep. He is not looking around the city he has come to see. Why is he sleeping so deeply? Ranjan wonders. He almost feels angry and mutters to himself. What is this dense slumber, Dulal?

The entire afternoon and evening Dulal sleeps, and when he finally wakes, it is night. The door closed, Ranjan is painting in a corner of the room, in the light from the table lamp. But the untrammelled quiet of the room is too much for Dulal to bear. The outside noises crash in like waves to assail the silence in the room. From the street outside float in the strains of a song, cries of gamblers. He used to spend long hours in the club near their Frankfurt home, but that was different, nothing like this. He somehow feels that this place suits him, and that thought is comforting. While entering the room, he met Bahar. ‘Hello,’ was all he could manage.



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He feels thirsty, completely drained out. His head spins as he tries to sit up straight. He manages to gain control over himself somehow. In an almost imperceptible voice, he whispers, 'Ranjan... water.'

His voice is cracked, distorted. It makes Ranjan's insides curl. He feels scared, deep compassion for the boy surging inside him. He looks at Dulal with a father's affection. He pours a glass of water from the jug on the table and hands it to Dulal. Dulal gulps it down and asks for more. And then he smiles. 'I feel really good now. Let me tell you a couple of important things. Since I landed here, you have been like my own. You really should know these things about me.'

Ranjan listens to him intently. Dulal speaks without a pause, barely stopping to breathe. 'There are two truths before me,' he says. 'One is death and the other – identity. I have been diagnosed with HIV. I mean, I have AIDS. As much as I have known you, I think you would know what that means. You will not be scared, will you? You will not be repelled by me either, right?'

Ranjan nods. 'Right. I know I don't get it by simply being with you.'

'Then you can say I am counting days until death comes. And that is why I am here. I have come to this place to find my identity. I am a war child from here. Mom and Dad said, "Go to your own country and look for your mother." I have to trace my mother and know who she is before I'm gone forever.'

Ranjan is speechless. Dulal presses his hand and says, 'Didn't you say you'll show me the magnificent trees and birds? I slept throughout the day. Now I want to see the beauty of this place in the dark of night. Will you show me the most beautiful bird?'

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Ranjan does not move. He fights to control his emotions. He does not have the heart to tell Dulal that there are no birds at night. Even the trees don't look green. Everything is black in the darkness. He says nothing. He does not know how to say such things. Does he have to learn from Dulal how to talk all over again?

'You look lost. But I know you're actually very sharp. What are you thinking about?'

'About you.'

'You can never be done thinking about me. There's no beginning, there's no end.'

'I think you play sports, and you don't seem like a writer. Then why are you talking so enigmatically?'

Dulal does not want to continue the meandering conversation; he holds Ranjan's hand. 'Let's go look at the trees and birds.'

Ranjan's hand stiffens, and tears cloud his eyes.

'Are you crying, Ranjan?'

Sitting beside Ranjan, Dulal feels his hot tears falling on his hands. His head bowed down, Dulal asks his friend, 'Are you crying?' They no longer feel like tears but two crucial words, 'death' and 'identity' being etched into his skin.

