Welcome To Spooktown – Daman Bamrah

[Spooky music]

ED EASTON: Ah! A proper ghost, innit?

[Pilot speaking over radio] I request our flight attendants be seated at this time. We’re landing in about one minute. Thank you.

[Radio beeps]

ED: [over radio] I’m quite excited to be on a plane. I hate it that like the, uh, anxiety gives me an edge.

KATH HUGHES: [over radio] Yeah, and it is kind of mad, isn’t it? There’s just a hunk of metal in the sky. Can you smell petrol?

ED: Yeah. Oh, it’s my, uh, I had a Scrumpy.

KATH: Oh, is that what it is?

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Bloody hell.

ED: That’s what you get in first class, mate.

KATH: Are we in first class?

ED: I’m in first class.

KATH: Oh, is that why we’re talking on walkie talkies?

ED: Yeah. That’s why I’ve just popped back – sorry, yeah, that is why – that’s why we’re, uh, we’re on walkie talkies permanently.

KATH: That makes sense.

ED: Over.

KATH: Thank you, over.

[Radio beeps]

KATH: So we’re – we’re heading to Punjab, right?

ED: Yes, uh, we’re heading to Punjab. Over.

KATH: Great. I’m quite excited, I’ve never been. Over.

ED: I’ve never been either, over. Um – um –

KATH: Was that – was that true over? Was that true over?

ED: No no no, it wasn’t a true over, it wasn’t a true over. False over.

[Beeps]

Flight attendant: Sir, Madam, could you keep your seats?

ED: I think it’ll be really nice, though, and travel broadens the mind.

KATH: Yes.

ED: Wait, I haven’t said ‘over’ yet.

KATH: Sorry. Sorry to interrupt.

ED: I still haven’t said ‘over’ yet.

KATH: Sorry to interrupt, over.

ED: Um, over.

KATH: Roger.

[Radio sounds]

[Announcer speaking over loudspeaker]

KATH: Any nightmares this week?

ED: Sort of. I sort of had a bit of a misunderstanding, but it wasn’t – not sure that it was a nightmare. I went and saw ‘Everything Everywhere All At Once,’ the film.

KATH: Oh.

ED: And then I got into a 15 to 20 minute conversation with somebody where they thought I was saying I had seen – I’d been to London and seen everything, everywhere, all at once, and I was just too eager.

KATH: What a day.

ED: And I thought they were doing a joke, but they thought I was being serious, so they were like, ‘what did you see?’ And I went, ‘Everything Everywhere All At Once,’ and they went, ‘ooh, bloody hell, you’re keen,’ and I went, ‘[chuckles] yeah.’ And they went, ‘and what did you see really?’ And I went, ‘Everything Everywhere All At Once,’ and they went, ‘yeah, but what did you see?’ And I was like, ‘I saw – I saw “Everything Everywhere All At Once.”’ ‘Right. Right, yeah. So when – but last night what did – I mean what did you do after you left here?’ I was like, ‘well I went out and I saw “Everything Everywhere All At Once.”’ And they’re like, ‘yeah. Yeah yeah yeah yeah. It’s funny. Um, would you just tell me what you saw?’ I’m like, ‘Everything Everywhere All At Once.’ It went on for like 15 minutes. Because I thought it was like a really famous film, so everyone knew it.

KATH: I thought that, yeah. Yeah, I thought that.

ED: But they had just never – they’d just never heard of it. The exact same thing happened to me at a music festival with the band Everything Everything. They thought I was incredibly keen.

KATH: ‘Everything everything.’

ED: ‘Everything. Everything.’ [panting] I suppose that’s a light nightmare.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: A lightmare.

KATH: Bit of a lightmare, yeah. It still counts, though.

ED: Yeah. God, we got through baggage claim quickly there, didn’t we?

KATH: Yeah, we did.

[Door slamming]

ED: How long was – that’s not very –

KATH: I don’t even remember landing.

ED: It’s we – we could hear us landing.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: And we could hear us leaving the plane to get to baggage claim.

KATH: Is that – is that what all that shouting was to get back in our seats?

ED: Yeah. We could hear us – we are obviously in the taxi now on our way to the farm.

KATH: Yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah. God, everything moves quickly in Punjab, doesn’t it?

ED: Yeah, very extreme land.

KATH: Yeah.

[Car driving over gravel]

ED: Is that Daman?

KATH: Oh, yes it is.

[Spooky music]

ED: Hello, Daman.

DAMAN BAMRAH: Oh hey, guys. How are you doing? Thanks for coming through.

ED: No no no, thanks for inviting us.

[Footsteps in grass, birds chirping]

KATH: No, thanks – thanks for inviting us over, yeah.

ED: Yeah, such a polite invite.

DAMAN: Not at all. It’s – it’s usually tough to get people here, so it’s a welcome change if anything.

KATH: Oh, really?

ED: That’s crazy because you’d think after everyone’s been locked down for, you know, two years, everyone would be chomping at the bit to leave and head to Punjab.

DAMAN: I – oh, definitely. I mean, yeah. But, you know, given that it’s a – it’s an – obviously a pretty scary place, you would think even though people haven’t travelled, this would maybe be, I don’t know, one of the places people didn’t go, still.

ED: Right, right.

DAMAN: But look, you made it –

KATH: Okay.

DAMAN: And, um, I’m not complaining because I don’t want to be here alone anyway. So.

KATH: Oh, okay. Great. So we’re – we’re doing you a favour then. So great. Great.

ED: Well, great. Yeah.

DAMAN: If anything yeah, absolutely.

ED: I’m glad we can be your human comfort blankets. It’s very nice. It’s very –

KATH: Yeah. Yeah. That’s all I’ve ever wanted.

ED: Yeah, yeah. You always put it on your Christmas list, actually.

KATH: I do, I do. So finally. Thank you.

DAMAN: It’s happened.

ED: It’s finally happened.

DAMAN: Momentous occasion.

ED: Uh, so thank you again for – for inviting us here. Fucking mad excited to be here. Um, I’m going to ask you a couple of questions and then Kath’s – I think Kath’s got a question for you.

KATH: Yeah yeah yeah.

ED: And then we’ll hear – I heard you’ve got a spooky old story about this, um, I’ll say it, beautiful farmhouse we’re stood outside. So my – my first question is have you – have you eaten since you got here?

S: Have I eaten since I got here?

ED: Yeah.

S: I mean I have eaten. I have, indeed.

ED: Right.

S: Because if you look around us, there’s, uh, there’s fields and fields of crops.

ED: Yes.

S: Uh, now –

KATH: Right.

S: Look, one of my dreams is to, uh, escape capitalism and just be able to eat off of – off of the ground as God intended.

ED: Uh, love the answer there, obviously. Um, my second one – that was a softball.

S: Oh.

ED: This is a hardball.

S: Right.

ED: What is the scariest thing that’s ever happened to you?

DAMAN: The scariest thing that’s ever happened to me. Ooh. I’ve got to say, I’ve lived a very privileged life. Not too many scary things have happened. But one – one that sticks out in my head is, um, so a few years ago I lived with my parents and my younger sister, and her room was – was next to mine. Upstairs. And there was – there was one – there was one evening where I was like – I was watching whatever, some sort of series, um, in my bed. And, uh, I – I was more of a night owl than anyone else so I stayed up later. And my door was open, so I was being – I was – to be fair I was being a bit inconsiderate. The door was open and I was watching this – this series out loud.

And my sister came into my room and she just stood at the door. And I was – I kind of paused. I paused what I was watching. I was like, ‘oh, sorry,’ like, ‘my bad, am I – am I disturbing you? I’ll – I’ll turn it off.’ Um, and when I looked at her carefully, her eyes were totally closed. Completely closed. And her arm reached out, without looking –

KATH: Oh.

DAMAN: Uh, for the door handle and slowly shut. And that was it. She – and like I – and I know my sister, she wouldn’t have – that’s not like a – her giving me attitude, because she’s – she wouldn’t do that. She’s – she’s not like that.

ED: Yeah.

DAMAN: So I was like, ‘what?’ And I got up and I went to her room and immediately she was fast asleep, snoring.

ED: Oh yeah. Yeah.

DAMAN: And I – I don’t know, I don’t know what the hell that was.

ED: Yeah. That’s –

KATH: That’s creepy as hell. Yeah, that’s creepy as hell.

DAMAN: But that’s super creepy. Super creepy.

ED: That’s super creepy.

KATH: Yeah.

DAMAN: Yeah.

ED: Love that.

DAMAN: So –

ED: I love as well that you were like – you didn’t even think, you went, ‘the – the spookiest thing that’s ever happened to me, yeah, it was exactly this specific thing.’ Like no thought. No like, ‘hm, which thing was it?’ It was like, ‘oh yeah.’

KATH: ‘No, I think about this every day of my life and now I can finally say it out loud.’

DAMAN: Keep – I’m very close to my sister. Keep your enemies close, as they say. God, she’s – she’s spooky. Spooky, spooky.

ED: What was the, um, what was the series you were watching? It seem – it seems like it has to be something really embarrassing because you were like, ‘I was watching – some series and the series I don’t want to talk about.’ What were you watching?

DAMAN: No, I can’t remember. Maybe it was like ‘Narcos’ or something, you know what I mean? It was just like – so I was like, ‘whatever, I’m gonna –’

ED: Bullshit, bullshit. ‘Probably something cool like “Narcos” or, you know, whatever, “The Wire”. Probably re-watching “The Wire”, mate.

DAMAN: Just probably some like foreign language, Scandi-noir, you know what I mean. I’m just – light watching, light watching.

[Spooky music]

ED: My – my last question, um, is to you – now, a problem we’ve come across is the council – Spooktown council have obviously put us up to this or something. We have this email saying that people aren’t giving their all to their stories and some people are even lying about their stories. And there wasn’t an incentive there to tell a true story, um, so now if – if we find the story to be false, we have to murder or kill the guest. We should’ve told you this beforehand. We should’ve popped it in the email. Still haven’t sorted that out yet. The admin side of it.

KATH: Yeah. Yeah, sorry about that.

DAMAN: Pretty big caveat there, I mean I wasn’t – wasn’t aware that a capital punishment was on the cards. Um, I guess I – I have to take the risk now.

KATH: Yeah, yeah. That’s why you’re here right now, aren’t you?

ED: We have come all the way here.

KATH: Yeah, yeah.

DAMAN: Yeah, yeah. Not that – not that there is a risk, obviously. Because –

ED: Nice.

KATH: Nice.

DAMAN: There’s no – there’s no – yeah. Why would there be?

ED: Yeah. Well played. Well played.

KATH: Really nice, yeah.

ED: We nearly got you. We nearly got you.

DAMAN: Of course. Of course.

KATH: Okay, okay. Passed that test.

DAMAN: Yeah.

ED: Um, with the death thing, we didn’t want to be too much of a double bell end, so we’ve decided to give you two options, one choice. And the options are can’t stop breathing in, [reverse drowning] or Kath’s crowbar.

DAMAN: Wow. Okay, Kath’s crowbar or non-stop breathing in.

KATH: Yeah.

DAMAN: I would say non-stop – non-stop breathing in.

ED: Fuck. Bullshit.

DAMAN: Yeah.

KATH: Okay.

DAMAN: Like it sounds – it sounds unique, like it sounds like it would make the papers, you know? Because –

ED: Yeah. That’s true.

KATH: Oh, that’s – yeah, you’d be remembered for that, wouldn’t you? Yeah.

ED: Yeah.

DAMAN: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Whereas –

KATH: Yeah, that’s fair. Whereas if I’ve just batted someone with a crowbar, it’s like they’re going to remember me, really.

DAMAN: Yeah, the funny thing – yeah. Um, if it makes the papers it’s somewhere in the middle, you know? Whereas –

ED: Would you – would you want it – ‘The Chortle’ front page news to be like – because it’ll hit ‘Chortle’ – would you want it to be like, um –

DAMAN: Yeah, of course it will.

ED: Uh, ‘Can’t – Can’t Breathe for Laughing? How about Can’t Breathe for Breathing? Comic Dies from’ – would you want – would you want something like that or would you rather have like the bit on the side and it’s just like, ‘Got Crowbarred’?

DAMAN: Ooh. I would have my moment with the first one.

ED: Yeah.

DAMAN: But with the bit on the side – with the bit on the side it’s like people wouldn’t initially pay attention to it, but then they’d talk about it. Like they’d be like, ‘oh, that’s – that advert keeps coming up for that guy that got crowbarred, have you seen it? Oh, it’s so annoying.’ And like – but it would – it would be a talking point that way, do you know what I mean?

KATH: Yeah. Yeah, you’ve got to think these things through.

DAMAN: Um, yeah.

ED: It’s in – it’s in the budget, is all I’m saying. It’s in the budget.

KATH: Yeah yeah yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Okay, so if you are lying to us about the story, uh, that’ll be your – your fate then for the evening.

DAMAN: I’m not scared of it yet.

ED: Okay, great. Kath, you had a question, I believe.

KATH: Oh yes, I do. Yeah, I said – I said it was really important and I need to ask this. Uh, Spot the dog, Clifford the Big Red Dog, Dog the Bounty Hunter. Shag marry kill.

DAMAN: Ooh. Clifford the Big Red Dog, marry.

KATH: Really?

ED: He has a massive dick.

DAMAN: Yeah, yeah. Because, you know, when we go to events and stuff – yeah. Yeah, yeah. The massive dick, obviously. Reason number one. I mean you’d be married for years and there’d be bits of the dick you’d still have never seen, you know? Just two decades down the road, ‘oh!’

KATH: That’s – that’s so upsetting to think about.

ED: Oh god.

KATH: Okay, now you’ve explained it. I get it.

DAMAN: Now, yeah. Um, I would say shag Dog the Bounty Hunter, uh, we’ve lived very different lives. Maybe he’d teach me something. Um, that would be –

KATH: That you could then explore with Clifford, you know? Yeah.

DAMAN: Yeah. Well exactly, yeah. Absolutely. Um, and, you know, there you go, by – by, uh, ruling those two out, you’ve got Spot left. I’m sorry, Spot has to die. Kill Spot.

KATH: Spot is such a sweet dog. He taught us so many things. He taught us how to read, mainly.

DAMAN: Mainly, yeah. Exactly. I mean it was a – it was a big life skill, you know?

KATH: Yeah.

DAMAN: It sounds like one skill but it’s a – it’s an important one.

KATH: It’s a big one, yeah.

DAMAN: It’s a big one. Um, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Spot. And I hope – and I hope he didn’t, you know, inhale his way to death like some people might. Uh, that’s all I can wish for him.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: You get to kill him however you – you want, apart from like old age. You can’t do that.

DAMAN: Can I borrow your crowbar, Kath?

KATH: Sure, I do loan it out. Yeah, yeah.

DAMAN: Yeah, okay. Fair play. Well that’s sorted.

ED: One swift kosh to the head.

DAMAN: And it’s done. The deed is done. No one – no one reads again.

ED: Spot the tiny – Spot the tiny red dog. Spot the tiny dead dog, I should’ve said. Spot the tiny dead dog, there we go.

KATH: Well, great.

ED: Yeah, great.

KATH: Uh, yeah, really strong answer.

ED: Oh, I actually just – just before we hear your story about this abandoned farmhouse, I do have one more question. Did my dad put you up to this?

DAMAN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

ED: Okay.

DAMAN: Sorry.

KATH: Jesus, he’s –

ED: Why doesn’t he just text me?

KATH: I’ve – yeah, I don’t know, Ed.

DAMAN: He’s a good – he’s a good guy. He’s a good guy, and –

KATH: I don’t know.

ED: Yeah, he seems like a good guy. Sure, he seems like a good guy. That’s how they get in.

DAMAN: Yeah, I mean look, he’s not – we don’t have the same relationship you do, so I – yeah.

ED: I should fucking hope not.

DAMAN: I can’t speak – I can’t speak for you.

ED: Um, great. Well thank you very much. Uh, we’d love to hear your story that you have, your spooky story about this here abandoned farmhouse in Punjab.

KATH: Yes please.

[Spooky music]

[Rain sounds]

DAMAN: The rain splattered against the window on the rocky drive to the farm. Other than the car’s poor suspension throwing my family around in our seats, it was the only sensory clue that anything was happening outside on an otherwise pitch-black night. I hadn’t seen my grandfather in years, and though I was happy to see him, something about the farm always made me uneasy. We pulled up to the gates [gate creaking] and the driver got out to open them.

[Car door slamming, gate creaking]

I’d never been happier that we had a driver for the trip. He wasn’t a driver in the strictest sense. Manurj was an apprentice of my grandfather’s on his farm, and he’d been sent to collect us from New Delhi. I was confused as to how he’d found his way here in the dark, but that wasn’t my problem. We were here and that’s all that mattered.

My family and I got out of Manurj’s old white Suzuki Jeep and went inside to greet my grandfather. He hadn’t seen me in a couple of years, and it was his first time seeing me as a teenager. He hugged me tight and looked at me with a warm gaze.

‘Look at you,’ he said. ‘You’re big now, which means you can help me on the farm. I can’t wait to show you everything tomorrow. We’ll go and explore. Just remember, everything within the fence borders is ours. Everything beyond isn’t. So enjoy the freedom of the farm, but make sure it’s our land that you stay on.

Manurj, who’d come in to join us for tea, solemnly nodded in agreement. ‘Your grandfather is a smart man. Have fun tomorrow and make sure you listen to him.’

I was excited but again something was wrong. I brushed my teeth [teeth brushing] and as I was on my way to bed, a cross armed figure appeared in front of me.

[Ominous music]

It was Manurj, and he looked shaken by something. ‘Hey, I was serious earlier. Listen to your grandfather. The border is not to be crossed. There are dangers in the farm. Dangers you don’t have back home. Don’t cross the border and don’t go into the abandoned farmhouse. Do you hear me?’ He stared at me as I wearily nodded before walking away.

That annoyed me. Why couldn’t I explore? Isn’t that the reason I was here? I’d – I’d just become a teenager so I was responsible, I was intelligent. Why did no one trust me? This wasn’t the freedom I expected. I went to bed and it felt weird. The – the silence wasn’t welcome to a city boy. Even my mum, who’d grown up in the villages of Punjab now hated the silence. The worst thing about the silence is that you’re hyper-aware when it’s broken. I lay in bed for hours, my only company being the thuds and faint screams in the distance. [screaming] But I had to make sure I didn’t worry. This was the farm. This was nature. We weren’t in the city anymore. Who knew what creatures lay out there in the dark and what they were up to? But again, that wasn’t my concern. I was safe in the home of my grandfather, so I had nothing to worry about. And in the early hours I finally got some sleep.

[Birds chirping]

The following day, granddad sent me out for my first task on the farm, picking weeds. It wasn’t the most exciting task, but I stepped out and I saw the farm in daylight and it was beautiful. There were trees and all sorts of greenery everywhere. Fields of sugar cane and corn with loads of crops I’d never seen before.

So I went round the farm collecting weeds, my surroundings making a boring job interesting. My parents and my sister had been driven by Manurj to go and visit another family member, which while more relaxing, wasn’t what I wanted to do at all. Family trips were full of random visits to family members, and I was excited to be doing something cool, something I could tell my friends about. I kept collecting the weeds into the early afternoon, by which time I’d reached one of the borders.

Now I knew not to cross it, but I’d just realised something crazy. There was a crop on the other side of the field that my granddad didn’t have, but one of the only ones my excited teenage brain recognised. It was, of course, a field full of marijuana. And come on, I – I had to take a picture in a field of marijuana. My friends in England would love that. We hadn’t ever done it or anything like that, but the idea of me in a field full of marijuana? Man, that would make me look so good in front of everyone. It would only take a second, so – so why not, right? So I did it. The tiny wooden fence didn’t look that serious so I just stepped over it, and it felt good. It felt liberating. I wasn’t really one to break the rules, so between that and being in a field of marijuana, I was developing some sort of serious clout, probably. I took my flip phone out for a selfie and I posed. [phone clicking]

But in the background of the screen I saw a small red figure moving towards me rapidly. [ominous music] I quickly turned around to protect myself when I realised the red figure wasn’t a ghost or an animal of some sort. Rather it was a girl around my age walking towards me. She had a red Punjabi suit on with white trousers and a white scarf to match. And she wasn’t shy.

‘Hey, who are you?’ She shouted in Punjabi.

I shouted back, ‘I – I’m your neighbour’s grandson. I’m – I’m just here visiting. Sorry, I’ll – I’ll go back to our side of the fence.’

‘Why?’ She said. ‘I know your granddad. He’s – he’s lovely. No one new’s over here anyway, especially anyone my age. Uh, do you want to hang out maybe? I can show you around all the fields and all these farms. It’ll – it’ll be a good time.’

And my family was still out with Manurj and my – my grandfather was on the other side of the farm working. No one was going to miss me for a couple of hours, so I thought, ‘why not?’

‘I’m Seema, by the way.’ She shook my hand and I took another look at her. She had dust all over her face and her suit, which was ripping at the edges.

‘Easily done,’ I thought, ‘working and walking around the farm will do that to you.’

‘Do you like chocolate?’ She asked, sticking out her hand. I didn’t even know where she’d got it, but obviously I liked chocolate, so I took some. [wrapper crinkling]

I tried it and, ‘oh my god, we don’t get it like this back in England,’ I thought to myself.

‘If you like that I can easily get us some more. Do you – do you want to come?’ She knew exactly what I was going to say. One piece was never going to be enough. I nodded and she grabbed my hand and started running. Where we were going and what we were doing I didn’t know, but I – I felt alive. I felt the leaves from the trees gently slap my face as we ran through the woods. I felt the soil jump on my sandals, running through the fields of crops. I was living an adventure. This wasn’t another family trip with nothing to talk about afterwards. This was real and it was brilliant.

We must’ve run for 15 minutes straight before we got to where the chocolate was. We ran out of the field of crops onto a dusty road. And in front of me I saw one single abandoned house. No windows, nothing inside but one single table. And nothing but fields of crops in the distance for what looked like miles.

‘There’s the chocolate,’ said Seema, looking incredibly accomplished, ‘and it’s all for us.’ She’d never let go of my hand the whole time, leading me towards the entrance of the house when suddenly I shook my hand loose and the memory of last night appeared in my brain. ‘Don’t cross the border and don’t go into the abandoned farmhouse.’

‘But you can’t have been warned about here. This is where I live with my grandma,’ said Seema.

‘Oh, you live here? Where – where is everything then? Don’t you have a bed? A sofa? A kitchen?’

‘Well we – we live a really simple life,’ she replied. ‘We’re not like you guys from abroad. We just have the farm. That’s all we have.’

I looked around at the dusty walls surrounding this lonely table with a lonely plate of chocolates, nothing to be seen anywhere. Nothing apart from two things. One ceiling fan and one photo frame. And in the photo frame was one photo. It was black and white, and from the creases and withered edges you could tell it had been printed a long, long time ago. But there were three people in the photo. A really old woman, hunched over, dressed in a light suit with thick glasses, holding a thin, jagged walking stick. A younger man stood next to her in an army uniform. And next to him Seema, wearing exactly what she was wearing now.

‘Who are these people?’ I asked.

‘Oh, well that’s – that’s my grandma, and next to her is my dad.’

‘Oh, okay. Uh, are – are they at home?’

‘Well my grandma is. She’s just in the garden actually, and I think she really wants to see you.’

‘Really wants to see me?’ I thought, ‘but how does she know I’m here? How does she know I exist?’

‘It’s true,’ [echoing] echoed a croaky voice in the distance, ‘come to the garden so I can take a look at you, son.’

‘You’ll like him, Grandma,’ said Seema.

I looked up, looking through the empty doorways through to the garden and it dawned on me that all of a sudden nightfall was upon us. It had just been the afternoon an hour ago, I swear. What had happened? In the pitch black out through the back, there was a faint light near the doorway with a slow, heavy step approaching, [thudding] and with a thud the jagged walking stick from the photo stamped itself onto the ground in the garden doorway. All of a sudden the screams and thuds from the night before were viscerally loud. [screaming]

Was this real or – or was I hallucinating? Had Seema drugged me? I had to get out, but how? I – I don’t know how I got here in the first place. I panicked, desperately looking for a window to jump out of to escape, when my wrist was grabbed. [ominous music intensifies] All my breath left my body as I turned around and saw the towering figure of Manurj.

‘Get in the car, now.’

[Footsteps running]

I ran towards the Suzuki Jeep with my grandfather in the passenger seat dragging me in, [car engine] Manurj right behind me, jumping in and stepping on it, navigating the blind, dusty roads back to our house. We got home and before my family, all crying, worried to their core, could hug me, Manurj dragged me out of the car and into the house, furious. [footsteps, gate creaking]

‘I told you. I told you not to cross the border, to listen to your granddad, to not go to the abandoned house. I told you.’

‘I – I’m sorry,’ I sobbed. ‘I – I was just meant to be there for a second until Seema came over and said hi and – and took me there.’

Manurj’s face went from anger to shock. ‘Seema?’

‘Yeah, Seema.’

‘Was she wearing a red and white Punjabi suit?’

‘Yes,’ I replied.

He paused and slowly exhaled. ‘Ten years ago I was your age. I’d come to the village to visit my aunt. Before I got there she warned me of the same things I warned you about. She warned me that an old woman used to live in the abandoned house 100 years ago. Her husband left her when her son was just a baby, so her son was her pride and joy, her everything. He got married and had a daughter, but his wife tragically died soon after in a random attack on the village, so against his mum’s will he decided to become a soldier. She begged him not to, but he went to war. He wanted to protect people. He went to war and never came back. The old woman and granddaughter couldn’t take the news of his death, and are both said to have died as soon as they heard the news.

You see when I first came to visit my aunt, I got lost, but someone found me. Someone hung out with me and offered to take care of me. Someone called Seema. [dramatic sounds] It is said that the spirit of Seema helps the spirit of her grandmother find and capture young boys to replace the void in her heart, the void of a missing son. And sometimes at night, you can hear the screams [screaming] of all of the young boys she’s captured, all locked up somewhere near the house, none good enough to live up to his memory. If your grandfather hadn’t seen me and saved me at the last minute, I wouldn’t be here. I would just be another one of the screams in the night. So next time he says something, anything to you, you listen, okay?

I cried myself to sleep that night knowing I’d let everyone down. [Birds chirping] I swore to help extra and stay within the border on the next day. I continued picking the weeds near the fence. Not over the fence this day, just near it on our side. I needed to follow the rules. I was in the zone, picking away, when I heard a knock on the fence. [knocking] Must’ve been a squirrel. But I heard another two knocks, so I turned and I looked at the fence. And against it stood a short pair of legs and a jagged, thin walking stick. [dramatic sounds]

[Spooky music]

KATH: Okay, so I can pick a hole in this straight away, then. If this happened to you, what on earth are you doing back here? Why would you – why would you disobey your granddad again?

DAMAN: You know when – you know when you were like a journalist in a documentary –

KATH: Sure, I do know that.

DAMAN: And you have to – you have to get close, yeah.

ED: Now you’re speaking Kath’s language.

DAMAN: You know that experience we’ve all had, um, of being Louis Theroux? Um, when, uh, you want to – you want to – you don’t want to tell someone an experience without showing them, right?

KATH: Mhm, okay.

DAMAN: Like you guys are more creeped out and you – and you feel the story more now that you’re here, right?

ED: Yeah.

DAMAN: And you feel threatened by – by Seema and her grandmother.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Very much so.

DAMAN: And I – I wanted – I wanted you to have the same fear that I did.

KATH: Aw, thanks.

DAMAN: Because I don’t want to – I don’t want to experience this alone, are you kidding me?

ED: Yeah.

DAMAN: I’m, uh, that was – that was not my choice. As soon as you – you suckers were like, ‘where do you want to meet me?’ I gave you – I gave you the address.

KATH: Yeah, okay. Okay. Yeah.

ED: That is our collective name, is suckers.

DAMAN: That’s it, yeah.

ED: A sucker of podcast hosts. I suppose we’re kind of safe as well because they’re – they’re just after boys and we’re both men now. And Kath, you’re a lady.

DAMAN: Yeah.

KATH: A girl, yeah.

DAMAN: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

ED: So your – your granddad sort of know – is book smart on this, um, doesn’t sound like he’s ever experienced it. Manurj has experienced it and has then gone to live with your grandfather.

DAMAN: Mhm, yeah.

ED: Why, if this happened, well, I suppose you were a child, you were a teenager, you’d just turned 18.

DAMAN: Yeah.

ED: So I’m not sure how old you are now but it’s at least a few years ago, um, it’s been – your family have been here for quite a few years. Why haven’t they moved? Is the point –

DAMAN: They have.

ED: They have? Oh, I thought you were saying, ‘they have moved.’

[All laugh]

ED: ‘They have.’

KATH: Oh, okay, well that’s that then. Uh –

DAMAN: No no, oh yeah, no. They have, no.

ED: That’s – cross that one off.

DAMAN: No, my – my, uh, my grandfather, he now lives between the farm and the city. He – he lives with, uh, one of my uncles in the city in Punjab, but his – his heart is still attached to the farm.

ED: Okay, yeah.

DAMAN: You know?

ED: Yeah, I get that.

DAMAN: And sometimes – sometimes when, you know, even though – even though there’s scary things about, you don’t care because you’re – that’s where he spent so much of his life and that’s where he’s – he’s grown his own crops with his own hands, so even though it’s not entirely – entirely safe, he’s – he’s willing to take the risk.

KATH: Yeah. Yeah.

ED: Yeah, and I suppose it’s hard to sell a house next to a haunted farm.

DAMAN: It’s incredibly hard, weirdly enough. Yeah, it’s just not –

KATH: Well you – surely you’ve got to declare that, haven’t you? You’ve got to declare if your neighbours – if you’ve had – if you’ve had a disagreement with your neighbours you’ve got to declare it, I think. So –

ED: Yeah, really?

DAMAN: Yeah. Yeah. I –

KATH: Yeah, so it’s a very tough sell, that.

DAMAN: Absolutely, I think that’s a clause, that’s – yeah. Many estate agents have tried. Some of them have got quite far, but it’s because they lied and it got found out in the end and then the sale didn’t go through.

KATH: Oh.

ED: Right. Yeah. And so – so like on the – when they’re signing the papers and they’re like, ‘oh, is the farm next door to this haunted?’ And they’re like, ‘ah, fuck. You got me.’

DAMAN: ‘Fuck, yeah.’ Yeah, exactly. ‘We were hoping you wouldn’t ask that.’ But somehow they all – they all ask that.

ED: ‘Is there’ –

DAMAN: Upon – upon the time of sale, which I’m going to start asking, because maybe I’m missing a trick.

KATH: Yeah, yeah.

DAMAN: Signing all sorts of contracts near haunted houses.

ED: ‘Listen, um, what’s – what’s the council tax bracket,’ um, ‘is it on like gas mains or is there a – do you have to like connect it to a canister,’ and, ‘is – is there a haunted farm nearby?’ They’re the three questions you’re meant to ask when you buy a house, right?

KATH: It’s usually that you have to – yeah.

DAMAN: They’re – yeah, exactly.

ED: The power three.

KATH: And get a survey done. Yeah. Yeah.

DAMAN: That’s right.

ED: And get a survey done. Is there any rising damp?

DAMAN: Because my – my granddad, he always asks about the – the haunted mansion, but he doesn’t generally ask about the gas or the damp, so that’s why he’s kind of fallen in the past.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Right, yeah.

DAMAN: And, uh, you know what I mean?

KATH: Yeah.

DAMAN: That’s – it’s all – it’s all equally important.

ED: Yeah. Yeah, you’ve got to ask all of them. It’s like –

DAMAN: You don’t – you don’t want damp. It’s –

ED: Right, yeah. Well answered. Well answered.

KATH: Yeah, really well answered. Um –

ED: ‘Why does – why does your family still live on the farm?’ ‘They don’t.’

KATH: ‘They don’t. They don’t.’ Yeah, quite easy.

ED: Big tick from me. Smart lad.

KATH: Also, as you point out, very hard to sell, so –

ED: Very hard to sell. Hard sell.

KATH: Um – why did you accept chocolate from a stranger?

DAMAN: Why – why – wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t you accept a chocolate – chocolate from a stranger?

ED: He’s got you there, Kath.

DAMAN: Especially when you – when you were a teenager? Especially.

ED: Yeah.

DAMAN: I mean I’d – I’d still do it now. I’m still going to back it. But especially as a teenager.

KATH: I – you know what, I’ve actually – I’ve accepted a cake from a very strange man in a shop. But I accepted it to get out of the shop. Because he – it was a very weird – it was very weird.

DAMAN: Oh god, that was your escape clause. Well – well at least you got a cake out of it.

KATH: Yeah.

DAMAN: That’s – yeah, that sounds horrible, though.

KATH: I did eat it. It was in a wrapper. It was in a wrapper.

ED: Okay, okay, okay, okay.

KATH: It wasn’t homemade. That would’ve been worse, I think.

ED: Yeah, you never eat homemade cake.

KATH: No, no. So yeah, okay. Yeah, I get it. I accepted a cake from a stranger in my 20s. So yeah.

ED: Have I accepted anything from anybody?

DAMAN: It was a good choice. I mean it made – it made your life a bit better in that moment, right? The cake. Accepting the cake.

KATH: As in I –

DAMAN: As in you escaped.

KATH: I escaped, yeah. I got out, yeah. So yeah. That – that –

DAMAN: Yeah.

KATH: Part was good, yeah.

DAMAN: Yeah.

KATH: And then later on I was like, ‘holy shit, I still – I’ve got a wrapped cake in my pocket. Brilliant.’ And then I remembered the reason why and then I was sad again.

DAMAN: Right. Oh god.

ED: I think I accepted, uh, some cider off a stranger at a festival, and I swear down it was petrol. I fucking –

DAMAN: Oh god.

ED: I bet my life it was petrol. But I’d also never had Scrumpy, so it could’ve just been my first taste of Scrumpy.

KATH: Maybe.

ED: It sucked either way.

DAMAN: Did you – did you like think that and then think, ‘but I’ve got nothing else to drink. I’ll carry – I’ll carry on’? Or did you – or did you ditch it?

ED: They offered me a swig. And I swug – swug it. Swug? Swigged?

KATH: Swag? Swigged? Swigged?

DAMAN: Swigged? Swigged? Yeah, swigged.

KATH: Swigged. Yeah, it’s swigged, isn’t it?

DAMAN: I swigged?

ED: I – I swigged it. I swigged it.

KATH: Swig – swigged it, yeah.

DAMAN: Swigged it, yeah.

ED: And then I – and then I was sick. Because I was like, ‘that’s petrol.’

DAMAN: Oh god.

ED: But also then I kept – they sort of like left immediately. It feels weird that they didn’t carry on –

KATH: Oh god, it wasn’t piss, was it?

ED: Um, I’d probably prefer it if it was, Kath.

KATH: Okay.

ED: I – I just think it was a very tight story.

KATH: I think it was as well. I – I mean I have no reason to doubt that it’s not real. Even though – even though I don’t know why, actually. Because I’m like we can’t prove that this happened. We can’t – because we can’t see Seema. Yeah.

DAMAN: You know any – you know any young boys you don’t care about that you can lure to the – to the farm? That might make them appear.

ED: Genuinely about three. Three that I’ve just not taken a shine to whatsoever.

DAMAN: Well then let’s make it happen. Let’s go.

ED: I do like their parents though, so I guess –

DAMAN: Ah.

ED: Yeah, I can’t really –

KATH: Yeah, okay.

ED: So you can’t give them away.

KATH: I’d – yeah.

DAMAN: Alright, well, seems a bit selfish of you there.

KATH: Yeah, Ed.

DAMAN: To declare you have – you knew three people and then just say, ‘but – but they’re all off the table.’ Well then, you know?

ED: Yeah. Yeah, true.

DAMAN: Then don’t tell me about them then, Ed. You know?

ED: Yeah, it was a waste of everyone’s time. I’m very sorry.

DAMAN: I was – yeah, I was excited there for a bit. I thought –

KATH: Unbelievable.

ED: Um, yeah I guess so – hm, it’s just – I’m – you’re right, Kath, I’m being – I’m being like drawn by how good the story was rather than if I believe it was true or not.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: He’s – he’s vexed me with his words.

KATH: So I can see –

ED: His silver tongue.

KATH: Yeah, so let’s sort of break this down. Okay, so I believe that you heard screaming in the night and assumed it was an animal. It happens, foxes are weird. Um –

ED: Weird. And owls.

KATH: So – but – and owls. And owls. Um, so I believe that. I believe that as a teenager you went, ‘oh look, a – a weed field, let’s go take a photo.’ Believe that.

DAMAN: Yeah.

KATH: Um –

DAMAN: I’ll show you the photo later on.

KATH: Great. Okay, yeah, that’ll – that’ll help. Um – I –

ED: Awesome. Cool, still getting kickbacks all these years later. It was worth it then.

KATH: Yes, cool.

DAMAN: It was worth it for sure. It was my profile picture for months.

KATH: How do we not know that this was a massive like elaborate thing to – sort of created by your granddad, um, and – and or Manurj, uh, to just get you to work on the farm. Like do a solid day shift, you know, like a solid day’s work. How – you know like in ‘Arrested Development’ when they’re like –

DAMAN: I mean –

KATH: They teach them a lesson every time someone loses an arm or a limb or something? What if it was a big one of them?

DAMAN: But why would – why would he do that to me on like – on day one? Because I was kind of doing it and then I – and then I broke the rules, but then after that, now I’d never – now I never want to go back, other than obviously today, uh, but other than that I don’t want to really go back.

KATH: Actually yeah. Okay. Yeah.

DAMAN: Because now I’m too scared.

KATH: Okay.

DAMAN: So it wouldn’t be – it wouldn’t be a good tactic from my granddad.

ED: Good answer. Solid answer, fucking hell.

KATH: Solid answer.

ED: There’s that silver tongue again. I don’t know, I think – I think it’s time for a conflab, Kath.

KATH: Yeah, I think it probably is, isn’t it?

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Yeah. Alright then, so we’ll, um –

ED: We’re just going to have a chat over in this, um, farmhouse about whether we believe you or not.

DAMAN: Okay. Take your time, take your time.

ED: Thank you.

KATH: Thank you.

[Leaves crunching]

KATH: Hey Ed, what do you think?

ED: I – I believe it.

KATH: I do as well. But I’m – but I’m still questioning why. Because we don’t actually have any proof other than that yes, there’s an abandoned building here.

ED: I think this is the first time a story should’ve made it into Spooktown lore. This is like the first good – like I’m like, ‘oh, this is what it should be.’

KATH: Yeah.

ED: ‘Oh, this was the idea of the podcast.’

KATH: Yeah. ‘Oh, this was the format. Great. Okay. Finally. We’ve worked it out, lads.’

ED: Do you want to not believe him because we keep on letting people in or because you genuinely think it shouldn’t be going in?

KATH: No, I don’t know what it – no, I think it’s because I’m like, ‘why do I believe?’ So – because I – I’m just basing this on – on his memory, not like, ‘oh, I can’t see Seema. I can’t see the grandma.’ Do you know what I mean?

ED: I see. So you –

KATH: But then I –

ED: We are just basing it off – we have to – if we believe him at all, we have to believe the whole thing.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: So you either have to go out there now and be like, ‘you’re a fucking liar, mate. I don’t believe a word your snake mouth says,’ or go out and be like, ‘see you later.’

KATH: I think I do believe his snake mouth.

ED: It’s still a snake mouth though, okay.

KATH: It’s still a snake mouth, yeah.

ED: That’s – that’s your line in the sand. You’re not crossing that bit. ‘It’s a snake mouth or I walk.’

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Okay. But – but you do believe it.

KATH: I think I do believe it, yeah.

ED: Okay.

KATH: Should we go tell him he doesn’t have to breathe in to death?

ED: If he doesn’t want to.

KATH: If he doesn’t want to, sure.

ED: If he doesn’t – it’s still – you know.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Yeah? After you.

KATH: Thank you.

ED: Yup.

[Leaves crunching]

KATH: Heya. Um, shall we have a little chat?

DAMAN: Hey guys. Yeah, I’m – I’m really nervous. I’m really nervous. Um –

ED: You should be really nervous. You should be quaking in your boots.

DAMAN: Yeah, it’s like results – it’s like results day.

ED: Yeah.

DAMAN: Yeah. Um – it’s not – you’re not going to give me an envelope, are you? You’re just going to tell me, right?

ED: I wish I had an envelope. Wait, I’ve got an envelope in my backpack I’ve been wearing this whole time. Give me two seconds while I just, um, I’m just going to – [unzipping] that, have to fold that up. [paper rustling] Pop that in there, just need to post that later, um, you’re in.

DAMAN: Yes!

ED: You made it.

DAMAN: I thought you were going to hand it to me. I didn’t realise you were going to post it.

ED: Yeah, that’s –

DAMAN: We’re – we’re already here. We’re already here.

KATH: That’s the goof.

ED: Oh, it’s not for you. It’s just a – it’s just a letter I needed to send, was the – was the bit.

DAMAN: Oh, I see, I see, I see. It’s – I –

ED: Um, but obviously that’s part of –

DAMAN: Oh, I was very – I was self-obsessed there.

KATH: To be fair you were considering whether you were going to have to die in a minute, so I think –

ED: True.

KATH: You know –

DAMAN: It was – yeah.

KATH: You were distracted and I think that’s okay.

ED: So you’re in, you’ve made it in. How do you feel?

DAMAN: Fantastic. You know – yeah, I feel good, I feel – you know, mainly relieved that I don’t – I don’t have to die.

ED: Yes.

DAMAN: That’s, um, that’s a big plus point I would say, yeah.

ED: Well –

KATH: Yeah, sure.

ED: You don’t have to die now.

DAMAN: Really – well.

KATH: It’s going to – it’s going to happen, though.

ED: It’s not carte blanche forever.

DAMAN: I mean – what do you mean?

ED: You’ll eventually die.

DAMAN: Why are you – why are you saying that?

ED: I say – I just say it to everybody. It’s – it’s sort of like my goodbye.

DAMAN: I’m not – I’m not going to die. No one’s – no, that’s not part – that’s not part of this. That’s not part of anything.

ED: Oh.

DAMAN: That’s not part of life.

KATH: Um –

ED: Yeah, no, okay.

KATH: Okay.

DAMAN: I already – I avoided getting murdered, um, so – right, guys?

KATH: Well –

ED: Yeah yeah. Yeah yeah, no, that’s right.

KATH: Uh, yeah. Yeah.

ED: That’s right. I forgot. So I’m sorry.

DAMAN: Oh, okay. I was worried there – I was worried there for a bit. Woah.

ED: Yeah. Yeah. Nothing –

DAMAN: Freaked me out. I’m going to die? What?

ED: Nothing to worry about.

KATH: Nothing. No problems here.

ED: We’re going to have to leave now.

DAMAN: Um, you’re going to – you’re going to leave? Okay. Alright.

ED: Yeah, I think we’re going to split.

KATH: Yeah, I reckon.

ED: Go see Punjab.

DAMAN: I understand, yeah. Covid’s just – it’s just passed, you want to explore. I get it.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: Yeah, and I mean we’ve only seen one area, which is this. So, you know.

ED: Yeah, and it’s creepy.

DAMAN: Yeah.

KATH: Might as well explore a little bit.

ED: Absolute pleasure. Loved the story.

KATH: Yeah, loved it.

ED: Thanks for inviting us here. Have a lovely time with your granddad. Say hello – give him our best.

KATH: Yes.

DAMAN: Oh, I will do. I will do, guys.

ED: And Manurj as well. Give him our best.

DAMAN: Definitely.

ED: Ta-ra!

KATH: Bye!

[Spooky music]

ED: [over radio] That was nice.

KATH: [over radio] Nice.

ED: Gosh.

KATH: So nice.

ED: I don’t think I’ve ever said this before, but that was – that was nice.

KATH: Ed, I don’t think I’ve ever said this before.

ED: Go on.

KATH: That was so, so nice.

ED: So, so nice.

KATH: Yeah.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: I don’t ever think I’ll ever say that again.

ED: Yeah. I actually didn’t think that one was nice. I’m going to go meet June Sarpong.

KATH: Oh, nice.

ED: Again, yeah. Um, she asked me to meet here at the Angel of the North.

KATH: Oh.

ED: Yeah. It’s just before Newcastle.

KATH: Right.

ED: Going to have to hop on a plane straight over there. She says that the whole of T4 was haunted the whole time.

KATH: The whole time?

ED: The whole time.

KATH: Oh my god. What’s the Angel of the North got to do with it?

ED: It’s just the – the middle point between where she is and where I am now.

KATH: Oh.

ED: Yeah.

KATH: What a nice coincidence.

ED: Yeah, I suppose it is, yeah. I suppose it is. Yeah, yeah. Um, yeah, we’re going to go meet on top of one of the wings.

KATH: Which one?

ED: I don’t know, but I’ll find out when we get up there.

KATH: Great.

ED: Do you want to… come and –

KATH: Don’t like heights.

ED: Okay.

[Spooky music]

This has been a Little Wander production. Music from Rhodri Viney. Local artwork from Suze Hughes. Voice by Melanie Walters. With special thanks to Beth Forrest, Steve Pickup, Sam Roberts, Henry Widdicombe, and Jo Williams. Other podcasts from Little Wander include Here to Judge and I Wish I Was An Only Child. Subscribe now on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts.