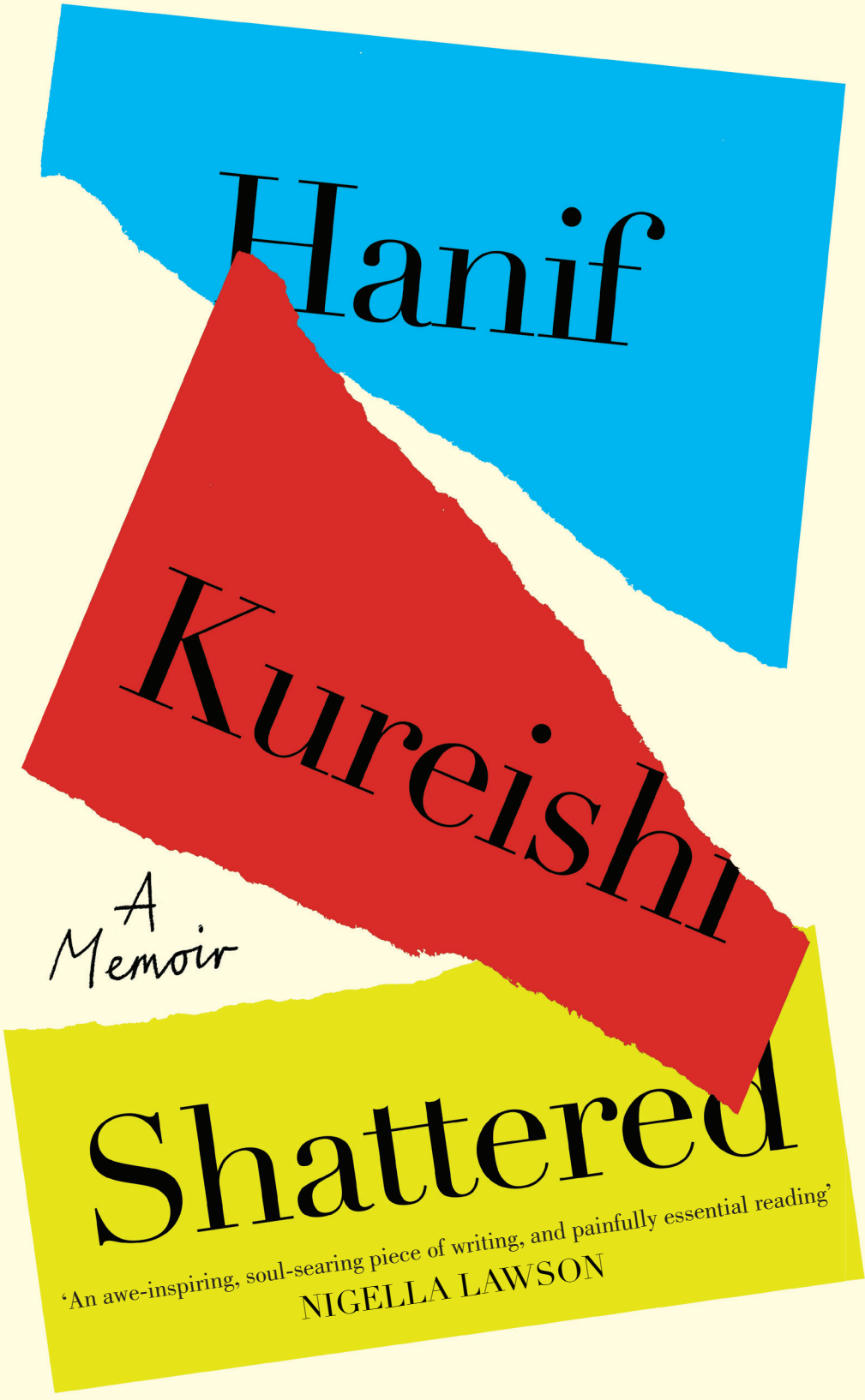

Hanif
Kureishi
A Memoir
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For Isabella

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This book began as a series of dispatches dictated from my hospital bed in Italy and later in London, after my accident on Boxing Day 2022. My partner, Isabella, and my sons took down my words as the events happened. They have since been revised, expanded and edited by the same method, working with my son Carlo, at my home in West London, where I am now.

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THE FALL

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On Boxing Day, in Rome, after taking a comfortable walk to the Piazza del Popolo, followed by a stroll through the Villa Borghese, and then back to the apartment, I had a fall.

Sitting at a table in Isabella's living room with my iPad in front of me, I had just seen Mo Salah score against Aston Villa. I was sipping a beer when I began to feel dizzy. I leant forward and put my head between my legs; I woke up a few minutes later in a pool of blood, my neck in a grotesquely twisted position, Isabella on her knees beside me.

I then experienced what can only be described as a scooped, semicircular object with talons scuttling towards me. Using what was left of my reason, I saw this was one of my hands, an uncanny thing over which I had no agency.

It occurred to me that there was no coordination between my mind and what remained of my body. I had become divorced from myself. I believed I was dying, that I had three breaths

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left. It seemed like a miserable and ignoble way to go.

People say when you're about to die your life passes before your eyes, but for me it wasn't the past but the future that I thought about – everything I was being robbed of, all the things I wanted to do.

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GEMELLI HOSPITAL, ROME

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Isabella and I live in London but we were staying in her apartment in Rome for Christmas, and it was there that I had my fall, sitting at the large round table, covered in books and papers, where she and I work together in the mornings.

From the bathroom, she heard my frantic shout, came in and called an ambulance. She saved my life and kept me calm, crouching down beside me. I told her I wanted to FaceTime my three sons and say goodbye, but Isabella said it wasn't a good idea, it would frighten and appal them.

For a few days I was profoundly traumatized, altered and unrecognizable to myself.

Now I am in the Gemelli Hospital, Rome. I cannot move my arms and legs. I cannot scratch my nose, make a phone call or feed myself. As you can imagine, this is both humiliating and degrading, making me a burden for others. According to my hospital report, my fall resulted in neck hyperextension and immediate

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tetraplegia. An MRI scan showed a severe stenosis of the vertebral canal with signs of spinal cord injury from C3 to C5. In layman's terms, the vertebrae at the top of my spine suffered a kind of whiplash. I've had an operation on my neck to relieve compression on my spine where the injury is, and have shown minor motor improvements.

I have sensation and some movement in all my limbs, I did not have what they call a 'complete break'. I will begin physio and rehabilitation as soon as possible.

At the moment, it is unclear whether I will be able to walk again, or if I'll ever be able to hold a pen. I am speaking these words through Isabella, who is slowly typing them into her iPad. I am determined to keep writing, it has never mattered to me more.

06/01/2023

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I wasn't a happy child but I wasn't an unhappy one either. Once I could read I was free. I could go to libraries every day, often accompanied by my mother, and I saw that books were a way out of my immediate surroundings.

Soon I learned to cycle. Alone, I could explore the streets and fields of the countrified semi-suburbs in which I grew up. It was a county called Kent, which had been bombed to hell not long before I was born.

In those days parents were less police-like. They gave you a penny at the beginning of the day and didn't expect to see you until the evening. I cycled all day, stopped where I wanted and talked to anyone who had a story for me. I am still like that.

The third element in my liberation was the discovery of my father's typing manual. My father himself had been a journalist and was writing fiction. His vigorous typing in his sexy shirtsleeves seemed impressive.

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One day he bought a little portable typewriter in a blue case of which he was incredibly proud. He swung it round and round, because it was light, and suddenly announced he was going to Vietnam to be a war correspondent like Hemingway or Norman Mailer.

I started to blindfold myself with my school tie and found I could type the correct words in order without looking.

It was exhilarating. I had been reading *Crime and Punishment* at the time, always a cheery go-to book for a young man, and as practice I began to copy out pages from this great novel.

At school I had been a disaster, but at last I had found something I could do. I never had the desire to write underwater stories, adventure stories or amazing tales involving giants, dwarfs, elves or mermaids.

I didn't know much about those things, but I did know the people around me. And I guess that made me into something of a realist. One day, looking out of the window at school, I called myself a writer.

I found the title suited me like a good shirt.

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I was keen for others to apply the word to me even though I hadn't yet written anything.

After all, at school many words had already been applied to me, words like 'Brownie', or 'Paki', or 'Shit-face', so I found my own word, I stuck to it, and never let it go. It is still my word.

Excuse me for a moment, I must have an enema now.

The last time a medical digit entered my backside was a few years ago. As the nurse flipped me over she asked, 'How long did it take you to write *Midnight's Children*?' I replied, 'If I had indeed written that, don't you think I would have gone private?'

07/01/2023

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Before my accident, when I woke up in the morning, the first thing I would do is make my coffee and go upstairs to my desk, which overlooks the street. Around the edge of the desk, in various pots and old coffee cups, I have dozens of fountain pens, pencils, markers; I also have many bottles of ink, in numerous colours, from the ludicrous to the sober.

I would pick up a pen and make a mark on a page of good thick paper, then make another mark, write a word, a sentence and another sentence, until I felt something waking up inside me. The writing zigzagged across the page in multicolours, as though there had been an accident in a schoolroom.

As I made these marks, I began to hear characters speaking; if I was lucky they might start talking to each other, or even amusing one another. I would feel excited and that my life had meaning at last.

I'm sure painters, architects and gardeners

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love their tools, and see them as an extension of their body. I hope one day I will be able to go back to using my own precious and beloved instruments.

Excuse me, I'm being injected in my belly with something called Heparina, a blood thinner.

I find that writing by hand, moving my wrist across the page – the feeling of skin on paper – is more like drawing than typing. I wouldn't want to write directly into a machine, it's too formal.

After a while, one word will push out another word, followed by another word, and more words and sentences may follow. I sit at my desk in my swirly Paul Smith pyjamas, and after an hour something I can use may have emerged.

When I read it through, something usually attracts my attention, which I can develop. I guess this method is now known as free writing or free association. You start with nothing and after some time you find yourself in a new place.

My hands continue to feel like alien objects. They're swollen, I cannot open or close them,

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and when they are under the sheets, I could not tell you where they are precisely. They may in fact be in another building altogether, having a drink with friends.

I have been moved from the ICU to a small grim side room. There is a picture of the Virgin Mary ahead of me, and the view outside the window, which I cannot see myself, is of a car park, motorway, and Roman pine trees, which look like parasols. I tell Isabella the place hasn't been decorated since Hemingway left.

I was low yesterday. Trying to dictate these words to Isabella, I became impatient with the slowness of the process. She is Italian and English is her second language, so she doesn't always get what I say.

Carlo Kureishi, the second of my twin sons, has now flown out to Italy, and is helping me with this dictation. He is in his late twenties and, like me, read philosophy at university. He enjoys movies and sport and is starting to make his way as a screenwriter. What I like about him is that he can type quickly. Normally, of course, I can write this stuff up myself. I can even spell.

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Isabella and I have started to argue. She is in the hospital with me all day, and is looking tired and thin, as she would in the circumstance of this terrible strain. When she turned to me and asked, 'Would you have ever done this for me?' I couldn't answer. I don't know.

Our relationship has taken a new turn, not one we could have anticipated, and we will have to find a new way of loving each other. At the moment, I have no idea how to do this.

A few months ago, Apple Music, on behalf of the Beatles, asked me to write an introduction to their book *Get Back*, to coincide with the release of Peter Jackson's Beatles series on Disney. For a long time I was stumped. What more could there be to say about the Beatles?

And then it occurred to me that those four boys, with their numerous collaborators, were able to do things together that they couldn't do apart. This is both a miracle and a terrible dependency. In my experience, all artists are collaborationists.

If you are not collaborating with a particular individual, you are collaborating with the

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history of the medium, and you're also collaborating with the time, politics and culture within which you exist. There are no individuals.

In this somewhat desolate Roman hospital, in a suburb of Rome, I am writing these words to try to reach someone, and I am, at the same time, attempting to connect with Isabella, to make a new relationship out of an old one. You'd think I'd have enough on my plate.

I wish what had happened to me had never happened, but there isn't a family on the planet that will evade catastrophe or disaster. But out of these unexpected breaks, there must be new opportunities for creativity.

If you were with me tonight, my reader, we would each pour a large vodka with a juicy mixer and drink and embrace each other with a little hope.

08/01/2023

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I sat up today.

I sat up today after eight days on my back.

Four physiotherapists came to my room. They started to move me with the determination of sitting me up. They turned me, and for a moment I sat on the bed, with my feet on the floor, staring ahead of me. I have to say, I felt proud and amazed and incredibly dizzy.

When I first came to London to work in the theatre, I was a stage manager on a magnificent production of Kafka's the *Metamorphosis*. Every night, seeing the actor trying to untangle himself from his new spiky black limbs, was like witnessing a macabre dance. Little did I know, years later, sitting up straight on the edge of a bed, I would undergo my own metamorphosis.

I feel crumpled and uneven. I slump. I used to choose my shirts carefully, in colours I thought suited me. I moved lightly as I swung around my city. Now I can't even do up my own buttons.

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The word 'vocation' comes from the Latin *vocatio*, 'a call, summons'. Here in hospital, where I spend nights and days with nurses and doctors, the word has gained resonance for me. Like many artists, I don't consider my work as a pastime or a job, but a form of integration into the world of others.

Sometimes at three or four in the morning, when I am my most sleepless, a charming young man comes and sits with me. He wears glasses and a face mask, and I doubt I'd ever recognize him on the street. Apparently, he is a highly trained pianist as well as a doctor.

He asks me whether he should become a professional pianist, or remain as a medical practitioner. This is a question I cannot answer, but since I have nothing but time available to me, it's something I can help him explore.

There are many interpreters of the classical repertoire, but for me, as an artist, one should try to create new things every day, things one has never done before.

So I said to him, in the morning when he is

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practising, he should try to create a new sound, one which came from himself.

This can be frightening, but fear is the engine of art. You may be afraid of presenting something personal to the world, but you can never anticipate how the other will receive it.

From what I could see of his face, he looked a bit anxious, and I wondered whether I had given him something, after all he had given me as a doctor.

I grew up in a mixed British-Indian household, and as a child I spent a lot of time listening to people speaking in a language I didn't understand: Urdu or Punjabi, mixed with cockney English. Not understanding Italian is frustrating, but I try to ask simple and straightforward questions like, 'When did you know you wanted to be a nurse or a doctor?' or 'When was the moment you realized you'd fallen in love?'

I find in these trying circumstances that the naive questions are the ones that cut through. I asked one nurse how she found her vocation. She said, when she was seven years old, a nurse

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came to the house and saved her mother, and at that moment, the girl realized she had to work in medicine.

I decided to become a writer when I was fourteen or fifteen years old. I never thought I'd be good at anything else, and sometimes I wonder whether having chosen so early excluded me from too many other things.

I could perhaps have become a barber, an architect, or Chancellor of the Exchequer. But a writer I am, and sitting here again in this dreary room for another week, like a Beckettian chattering mouth, all I can do is speak, but I can also listen.

I can wiggle my toes and move my feet up and down. My left foot is stronger than my right, from which there is less response. I can straighten and bend my left leg, but there is minimal movement in my right. I can move my arse and even jerk it about. As for the surface of my skin, I am a little numb below the waist, but I have sensibility all the way down. I am not in a neck brace and do not have the petrified look paralysed people can have. I am able to move

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my neck and shoulders, and can move my right arm and hold up my right hand a little, but it is weak at the wrist and hangs limply down. I can't close or open my fingers. My hands are inert, stiff and swollen, and they could just as well belong to someone else. I can move my left arm, but it is slightly dislocated and painful. There is not much range. The fingers on my left hand are hyperextended and I can move them a little. Again, I cannot grip anything with them. As far as I can tell, my brain is unaffected, and I can think as I did before.

Two of my sons, Kier and Sachin, have come to Rome and seen me for the first time in this state. Kier teaches piano and guitar; he's skinny, fair-skinned and with blue eyes. Sachin is darker and muscular, and writes on a TV soap opera. They were shocked, we all cried a little, but they tried to remain upbeat and humorous. No one knows whether or how I will progress, so it is difficult to predict what the future will look like for us as a family.

I wouldn't advise having an accident like mine, but I would say that lying completely

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inert and silent in a drab room on the outskirts of Rome, without much distraction, is certainly good for creativity. Deprived of newspapers, music, and all the rest of it, you will find yourself becoming imaginative.

Recently, in my late sixties, I had felt myself slowing down as a writer, but the ideas have not stopped coming. Characters, voices, situations – I'm as full of them as ever, if not more. So a break of a few days, with absolutely nothing in your life to distract you, might be a good form of shock therapy for a stuck writer. In fact, there probably are no stuck writers, just resting ones, and those who wait.

My friend Salman Rushdie, one of the bravest men I know, who has stood up to the most violent form of Islamofascism, writes to me every single day, encouraging patience. He should know. He gives me courage.

Since I began writing these pieces, numerous articles regarding me and my work have appeared in the world's press. It has been gratifying since they are mostly complimentary. It is a bit like experiencing the press coverage you

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might receive had you died, to have your work and place as an artist addressed and reconsidered. It is both moving and uncanny.

The only good thing to be said for paralysis is that you don't have to move to shit and piss.

09/01/2023

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Since I became a vegetable I have never been so busy. Last night at around nine I watched a few minutes of a film, which I enjoyed. Then I lost connection and everything went dark.

I fell asleep and woke at one and was conscious for the rest of the night. I had many ideas but since I can't use my hands and make notes, I have to remember them until the next day when I can shout them at Carlo down the phone.

This is how I write these days; I fling a net over more or less random thoughts, draw it in and hope some kind of pattern emerges.

This morning three very beautiful Italian physiotherapists came to my room. They wore clean white uniforms with orange trim. They put me in a blue plastic sling, hoisted me up and dropped me into a wheelchair. I was turned around and for the first time I was able to see the other side of my room. I saw the Italian sky through the window, some trees and a cloud and

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