Off the Beat

My life as a brown, Muslim woman in the Met

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NUSRIT MEHTAB WITH
ANNA WHARTON

torva

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For my mum. Her life was a blessing and
her memory is a treasure. She continues
to inspire me.

Contents

It is not our job as the public to keep ourselves safe from the police. It is the police's job to keep us safe as the public.

– Baroness Casey of Blackstock,
Baroness Casey Review, 2023

In the face of oppression I choose to stand with courage and uphold the banner of justice.

– Imam Hussain

Prologue

It was just before 4.30 a.m. on a chilly morning in early March and my car was weaving through the dark London streets. Most of the roads and buildings were still cast in shadows, though an inky blue sky was beginning to break through between the tall city buildings.

At my window, landmarks flashed by, though not the ones that tourists might recognize. These were the landmarks of my life, more specifically my policing life: an East End pub where I was thrown to the floor in a fight; Westbourne Road, Paddington, where I posed as a decoy to pick up kerb-crawlers; stations where I boarded trains in a niqab for undercover work in serious organized crime and counter terrorism.

Jigsaw pieces of a thirty-year career on the frontline of London's Metropolitan Police.

I was, by now, used to these early mornings: shift work had been the hallmark of my life during my rise through the ranks from PC to superintendent. It hadn't always been a steady climb, though I will come to that. But these days I was more familiar with pre-dawn starts in my roles as a commentator on breakfast television, and

as a lecturer to police recruits at the University of East London.

That particular March morning I was being driven to the old BBC Television Centre in White City where *Good Morning Britain* transmits to the nation. In thirty minutes' time I would be in make-up, and an hour or so after that I'd be mic'd up and ready to speak to more than half a million viewers across the country.

As we joined the A40, my driver turned up the radio just in time for the morning's news headlines. 'A new report has revealed that over ninety-nine per cent of police accused of violence against women and girls have kept their jobs,' the newsreader said. 'According to the report by the National Police Chiefs Council more than one thousand five hundred officers and staff have been accused of offences including sexual misconduct over a six-month period . . .'

I sighed. Not because this was news to me, but because so little had changed since I'd entered the force in the late eighties. Some of us have always known this, some of us have felt it personally, but what all of us have in common is that none of us had been heard, and this was the result. No change, a force in ruins, and nothing more than denial from the very top.

On arrival at the studios, I was ushered through the long, winding corridors of Television Centre. After make-up, I was led through to the studio itself. An on-air sign flashed red – an instruction for hushed voices – as we stepped over the camera wires that snaked across the floor. From the side of the set I watched as the presenters, Susanna Reid and Ed Balls, read from the autocue. The Met Police were top of the news agenda, as they had

been on many mornings for much of the last couple of years.

As I stood there, my mind went spinning back to my childhood growing up in east London. In my experience, the Met Police had never done anything for the Pakistani community, or any black or Asian community. What these white newsreaders were learning now, we had lived our entire lives. If flats on the council estate where we lived were burgled, we simply turned our furniture back up the right way and got on with it. If skinheads arrived en masse to pick fights in our streets, it was our older brothers who held back the tide of their hatred, never the police. We had simply never thought to call them because we knew their service was not for the likes of us. And as I stood on the side of that *GMB* set, waiting for the ad break during which I would be ushered into my seat, I wondered how the Met Police could possibly be respected now by anyone, of any skin colour.

The truth was that I had joined the police to make a difference from the inside, and when times were tough, when the institution threatened to break me, when I experienced racism and sexism, I stayed because I knew I wasn't the problem. I asked myself why racists and misogynists should keep their jobs while I made myself unemployed. I stayed for all the people who had ever experienced racism, misogyny and homophobia and those who had been victims of bullying. I feared that once I left there would be one less voice speaking out for minorities. But now, if the Met were closing ranks, if they were failing to acknowledge the scale of the problem, it was only by talking about my experiences that I could make a difference. As someone who had been on

the inside, I needed to suggest what I felt the force could do to change for the better. Because I believed – I *still* believe even as I write this – that the Metropolitan Police can be a force for good, a force for everyone.

A producer led me on to the set and I shook hands with Susanna and Ed. I sat down in my seat and settled myself in, in time for the cameras to cut back to the presenters after the ad break.

Susanna introduced the topic of the day, the new report stating that less than 1 per cent of police officers and staff accused of abusing women and girls had been sacked. Why? she asked me.

'It's the misconduct process that is not fit for purpose,' I told them both. I had seen it over and over with my own eyes throughout my career. 'So those systems and processes have to be changed. It's great that we've got this data, police chiefs have acknowledged it, the College of Policing has acknowledged it, but what I'd like to see is the chief constable and the Commissioner of Police taking it on board and saying, "Yes, we have a problem, policing is in crisis." '

Because policing *is* in crisis. That's what it comes down to, and there are no two ways about it, there needs to be a shift.

'The scale of cultural change here is absolutely enormous,' Ed Balls said.

And it is, but it is my firm belief that it's not insurmountable.

On live television time moves fast and within minutes our discussion was drawing to a close. But as Ed went to move on, Susanna interrupted him. She read slowly from her notes: 'The force's most senior female ethnic minority

officer . . . you would have thought that the force would try harder to keep you, but you had to go.'

For a split second I was caught off guard because, yes, you would have thought so.

'Unfortunately I'm not the only one,' I told Susanna. 'There are a number of us, and it just shows that this problem isn't something that's arrived today, it's been here a long time.'

To this day I think about all the reasons why I couldn't bring myself to stay in a force that time and time again has been found to be institutionally racist, sexist, homophobic and ableist. One that simply refuses to listen. The latest report to find this – the *Baroness Casey Review* – would be published just two weeks after that very interview, and I'd find myself sat on that morning sofa yet again, talking about what needed to change, all the while knowing the Met would ignore it, just like they had everything else.

So, if you can't change a system from the inside, you have no option but to try and change it from the outside. That starts with telling my own story as a brown Muslim woman in the Met.

1

Hendon

Hendon Police College is a formidable building. A bronze statue greets all new arrivals – Sir Robert Peel, the founder of the police service we know today and the reason officers are nicknamed 'bobbies'. He stands before a post-modernist entrance, Peel House, a concrete monolith seemingly held up by four gigantic cone-shaped feet, the very structure of it a monument to the strength and power of the service itself. Behind Peel House is a seventies office building surrounded by tower blocks where new recruits are housed while they complete what was then a gruelling eighteen-week training course. The same course I was there to apply for on that autumn day in 1987.

I could see then that Hendon was a place that would strike a sense of pride, respect, even foreboding into the hearts of many on arrival, perhaps all three. As I stood there, taking it all in, a group of young white men in

police uniform came out of the main building and turned left towards the campus. I imagined them as little boys in awe of their local 'bobby', growing up with that uniform in their mind's eye. To them, I thought, this must be a childhood dream finally realized.

That had never been my experience growing up. The honest truth was that I hadn't wanted to join the police, I actually wanted to be an air hostess. That's what I told the careers adviser at university.

'Why do you want to be an air hostess?' she asked, taking a drag on her cigarette.

I paused for a moment, imagining the glamour of working on airlines, the smart uniform, the impeccably turned-out hostesses themselves, the chance to see the world. The careers adviser looked me up and down as if reading my thoughts.

'Stop wasting your time,' she said, holding the cigarette between her lips and reaching for a leaflet from a pile next to her, 'you're too short and too big to be an air hostess.'

I shifted inside my size 14 jeans.

'Anyway, why would you want to be a waitress in the sky?'

She stuck the leaflet she'd reached for in my hand.

'The police are recruiting,' she said, 'go and do something worthwhile.'

And with that she stubbed out her cigarette and I got up from my chair. I was devastated that she had dismissed my dreams, but that wasn't unusual for a woman of colour to experience. I got up, the leaflet in my hand, and left her office.

My heart wasn't set on joining the Metropolitan Police

as I filled in the form, up in the bedroom I shared with my sister. I knew that the police service was not for people like me – a girl of Pakistani origin who had arrived in this country as a toddler, and who started school with no grasp of the English language. My mum spoke to us only in Urdu or Punjabi. I'd never seen a person with brown skin in a police uniform, let alone a female police officer.

So why did I apply? As a proud Londoner, as an East Ender, I wanted to make things better for people like me – those ignored by the police force who were supposed to keep us safe. Plus, I had grown up listening to stories of my uncle who had been a policeman back in Pakistan. I knew that this job could make a difference.

I didn't tell my mum or my siblings, just in case it didn't go anywhere. I only told Nina Chaudhary, my best friend from secondary school, who was supportive even though she couldn't really understand my sudden interest in the police force. I knew that the interview at Hendon involved a fitness test so I began to do some training down at the local track and pool, limping round at a snail's pace, out of breath and wheezing from the exertion, but determined to improve my time, day after day, week after week. A couple of months later I was running round the entire 400-metre track and had forgotten all about being an air hostess. Getting fit alone had given me a reason to want the police to accept me.

I checked in that morning at Hendon and was interviewed by three white middle-aged men in uniform who asked me why I wanted to be a police officer. I stumbled on my words as I answered their questions. I wondered how many new recruits like me they had interviewed,

how many people with my skin colour, how many females. All the recruits I'd seen walking around Hendon were white men.

After my interview, it was time for the physical. At the gymnasium we were put through our paces: sprints, press-ups, jumping jacks, and then the track for the run that I had worked so hard for. I surprised myself with how fit I had become and was relieved and thrilled when I ran faster than some of the other recruits.

Next, we were sent to see the doctor for the medical. The female recruits – of which there seemed to be just a handful among the group – had been told they would need to wear a bra and knickers for the medical examination. I had ignored that instruction, not seeing the relevance, and wore an all-in-one leotard and leggings under my T-shirt and jeans. I sat in the waiting room anxiously, but before long the doctor's secretary called my name and took me into the changing room, telling me to take off my clothes and go into the little room in my underwear. I walked through in my leotard and leggings to see an old white-haired man sitting behind a solid oak desk.

I stood in front of him as he looked down at his notes. He asked me some questions without looking up: height, weight, did I smoke, did I drink?

'Right, take your top off and touch your toes,' he said.

'No,' I said firmly, the shock apparent in my voice.

He looked up from his notes for the first time and opened his mouth to say something, but perhaps it was the look of defiance on my face that stole the words from him. I stood there, he sat there. I could see he didn't quite know what to say. It was clear he wasn't used to women refusing his orders. In that particular moment I wasn't

trying to find the logic in why female recruits needed to remove their bras, I was just affronted at being asked to do so. And he could see that. After an awkward few moments he dismissed me, writing something in his notes. I hurried out of the room.

Outside, another woman was waiting to be called. As I left, the nurse was showing her to the changing room and asking her to strip to her bra and knickers.

It seemed that my refusal to strip off had not stood in my way of being recruited, because a few weeks later a letter arrived at our Walthamstow home. I opened it with shaking hands, wondering if I'd passed or failed. I was so delighted to read I had been accepted by the Metropolitan Police, that I had achieved what I had set out to do. But that excitement was quickly replaced with a feeling of dread at having to then go and tell Mum.

I read the letter to her in our kitchen. She had never properly learnt English, either to speak it or to read it, so me and my siblings had spent our childhoods reading out to her official letters and school reports.

'What are you doing, *pagal kuri*?' she said – meaning 'crazy girl' in Punjabi. 'You really want to do this?'

This was the first time that I had told her of my plans and she was surprised to put it mildly, not least because the eighteen-week residential course meant that I would be leaving home for the first time. I could see on her face that she was concerned about my decision, but she kept the specifics of those doubts to herself.

'Well, if you're going to do this,' Mum said, adjusting her headscarf and going back to chopping onions and garlic, 'don't come back and complain about it, because you will.'

I'll always remember that moment because I never did go back and complain. Not once, not in all the years that followed, through all the ups and downs of my thirty-year career. It was tough, sometimes unbearably so, but I never brought my troubles back to our kitchen table. That day, holding that letter, marked the start of a new chapter for me, a new challenge – though I perhaps didn't realize then just how challenging it would be.

Why the hesitation from my family? Why did they not hold the Metropolitan Police in the same esteem that others might? To answer that question, you would need to know what was happening in London at that time. I arrived at Hendon in the late eighties, the decade that saw the Brixton Riots and the *Scarman Report* (which found the Metropolitan Police Service to be institutionally racist), and just a few years before Stephen Lawrence would be murdered while standing at a bus stop in south London.

It was an age of racism. It was the age of the skinheads, of the National Front who would march on my area in Walthamstow. We didn't see them, Mum saw to that, but as I said, it was my brothers and other Asian and black boys who would hold back their marches on our streets. The police never came to our aid when we called, and the odd time they did attend a domestic incident our mothers quickly shooed us back into our flats. They knew how easy it was to end up on the wrong side of an officer. Doors would slam closed, while everyone watched from behind the safety of their net curtains.

As children we quickly learnt that the police might be there to serve, but not people with our skin colour.

Officers were as white as the public they protected. They looked angry, aggressive. To me as a child, they looked like the skinheads that thundered down our streets.

When the New Cross house fire happened in 1981, thirteen young black lives were lost. Tensions spilled on to the streets and violent clashes took place between police and the black community just the other side of the river from where we sat watching on our TV set. I saw the anger emanating from both sides in that grainy black and white TV news footage. I had experienced it first-hand when I was three or four years old, walking home from the shops one Saturday afternoon with my mum and my sister. Her arms were heavy with bags of fruit and vegetables when we saw them from the end of the road – a gang of skinheads coming straight at us.

Mum's hand instantly gripped tighter around mine. She pushed us into a nearby phone box, pulling the door closed behind us. I remember her bloodless fingertips holding the half-moon-shaped handle with all her strength and I tried to grip it too, even though I could barely reach it, trying to help her, terrified as the men on the other side fought to pull the door open. Through the small oblong windows I saw their faces, shoved up against the glass – wild eyes, sharp teeth, shaved heads.

Mum ordered us in Punjabi to bury our faces in her clothes. But I could still hear them.

'Paki!' they spat. 'Go home!'

London was our home.

They kicked at the phone box with steel-capped boots and roared vicious insults. People walked by but no one stopped them.

How long was it before they'd finished having their

fun? A minute, two, five? Who knows. We emerged from the phone box shaking and crying. No one asked if we were OK.

Mum held our hands tight as we hurried home, and she put us to bed that night with beautiful stories so we wouldn't have nightmares – stories of her village back in Pakistan, of our grandfather's house and all the wonderful colours of its rooms. She told us how my grandfather was a respected man, how all the villagers sought counsel from him, how our family home was the centre of village life, how ladies would arrive each morning to sell twinkling bangles or silk scarves, or brought chapattis as gifts for her family, and mango, and dried fruits that glittered like coloured jewels, 'Like nothing you have ever tasted before,' she said.

This experience was one of an endless string of racial attacks that were ubiquitous for people like us. This was the London we knew. No wonder, then, that we didn't regard the police as the paragons of protection that they were to everyone else. They simply didn't view us as their responsibility.

Within months, I was standing outside Hendon Police College again, holding tight on to a bag full of clothes, and heavy with apprehension. For the next eighteen weeks this north London metropolis was to be my home. My cohort was shown around the campus, though it felt daunting, more like an army base. Two classes marched past us in unison, their captain calling out orders as they stopped and stood to attention. This was not what I had expected.

We were divided into two classes, each consisting of

around twenty new recruits. I glanced around at my fellow students, all in deep conversation with one another, while I watched on in silence. They all seemed eager to learn, but, inevitably, what most of them had in common was the fact that they were all white men. We were told that our intake had the largest number of non-white recruits the Met had ever had, but we still only made up a handful in a sea of white. In my class there were three of us: myself, a dual-heritage girl and an Armenian guy. In the other class were a couple of girls who looked as though they might be from a Mediterranean background and one black guy.

The dual-heritage girl in my class was Cherry Farley, and our eyes locked – we had clearly been making the same assessment of the cohort. We smiled at each other and I felt relief then, that there would be someone there I could connect with. Cherry and I were sharing a dorm in one of the giant tower blocks. The dormitories were divided into men and women and within each one was a communal kitchen and bathroom, then four or five individual bedrooms, each with a single bed. Cherry and I would end up spending a lot of time in each other's rooms every evening, revising for our assessments, ironing our shirts or shining our shoes for inspection the following morning. The other recruits preferred the campus bar, but Cherry and I noticed that we were never invited to join them.

Cherry became my confidante. She was a real gentle soul, an east London girl like me, though not someone you might consider a typical police officer. She was caring, grounded, and didn't push herself to the front. She observed everything and had a quiet confidence about her. Both of us felt we didn't belong there, which

is perhaps why we clicked instantly. I asked her if she'd also been requested to take off her bra at the strange medical exam upon entry.

She said she had. 'I didn't think at the time to refuse to do it,' she said, sadly.

There was an immediate camaraderie among the other recruits, based mostly around their drinking culture, so Cherry and I and some of the BAME men on the course were instantly identifiable as 'the outsiders'. And it wasn't just the new recruits propping up the bar: the instructors drank with them, as well as the recruits who were further down the line on their training course and who would gladly give out the answers to various assessments after a few drinks. Cherry and I realized early on that we either needed to drink to get ahead, or do what people of colour have always done and work twice as hard as our white counterparts. We chose the latter.

This 'othering' we experienced extended to the canteens too. At lunchtime the other recruits sat together, leaving Cherry and me and a couple of the other people of colour to sit separately with our food.

Even aside from the social hierarchies at Hendon, the course itself was tough. We were up early each day for classes, even earlier when we were parading. Parade happened come rain or shine, and when someone in our line got it wrong, our instructors ordered us to get up early and practise before class the following morning. We had never marched before, and we weren't taught how to do it, so you could often find us out on the main concourse at five o'clock in the morning or late at night marching up and down to get it right. Cherry and I would always look at each other with a sly smile or roll our eyes during

practice, though if any of the inspectors caught us we'd get told off like school girls. It felt so alien for us to be marching as if we were army recruits, but some of the men seemed to love it and took it so seriously, that and shining their shoes every evening. They behaved as if they were soldiers in the British Army.

It was for this reason that most cohort groups chose a peer with military experience as class captain so they could show them how to march. It surprised me just how much emphasis was put on military-style parades, and uniform inspections, which I came to dread, but looking back I think what they were trying to establish was a sense of the discipline and hierarchy that ran through the Metropolitan Police. A hierarchy that I would climb myself over the next three decades.

But studying until late at night and then parading in pouring rain not long after dawn had broken was not something that I relished. I would return home to east London each weekend having packed my bag for what I insisted was the last time, and telling Nina that I wasn't going back for the following week.

'You don't have to do this, Nusrit,' Nina insisted, 'but if anybody can, it's you. So go back out there and smash it – you're not a quitter.'

She was right, Nina always was, and every Sunday evening I would emerge out of the Hendon Central Underground Station with a holdall full of freshly ironed clothes for the week ahead, ready to do it all again.

I guess I had decided to approach Hendon as I had everything else in my life. I knew because I was a woman, because of the colour of my skin, that people didn't expect me to last. I was determined to prove the doubters

wrong, to keep showing up, that no one should underestimate me. It was up to me to decide where I belonged and where I didn't.

Our course took place over the summer, so Monday to Friday was spent in classrooms where the same hot air circulated and made our heads feel heavy. In those stuffy classrooms we learnt various parts of policing: how to stop and search; what grounds you need to do so; traffic offences; drink driving laws; violent offences; self-defence; and, above all, how to complete paperwork – reams of paperwork. Each module was followed by an assessment, and Cherry and I spent night after night in our rooms pouring over our books while we waxed our arms and legs and gossiped about our instructors.

There was a distinction at Hendon between the more experienced recruits and the newbies who had to wear their own clothes for the first two weeks. We were all tired of sticking out like sore thumbs and so there was a buzz about the place the day we were told we were getting our uniforms.

It meant, however, a new layer of anxiety when it came to parades. Every item of our uniform would have to be perfect, from our hats to the tips of our shoes, which we were shown how to buff to a shine. We would be inspected every morning. Cherry and I would stand in our dorm using masking tape to tease any bits of fluff from each other's tunics before parade.

To receive this hallowed uniform, we were sent to a lady in a Portakabin on site who must have seen every shape and size before. Around her neck hung a tape measure which she wielded deftly, measuring students up in seconds and handing them a pile of uniform that would