

Asif

(Punjabi man 42)

My brother and I were ‘encouraged’ to study the Asian 4: You know ‘Physics, Chemistry, Biology and Maths’. So, dad’s generation who put us on the map could put their feet up in old age. I can’t stand the sight of blood me. It were always Saif who helped dad with the barbeque. I’m practically vegan me but I can’t say no to mum’s lamb karahi. I was good with numbers, so I went into accounting which made dad proud and Saif followed me. Even our names are anograms of each other. I’m (*spelling it out*) A, S, I, F and he’s S, A, I, F . He always followed me.....

(*change of tone when talking about his dad’s funeral*)

We’re meant to be stood **shoulder to shoulder** for the final **namaz e janaza**, forming a fortress of bodies praying together for the final goodbye. Instead, there were only 10 men plus the Imam at the graveside, with plastic markers to keep social distance. Muffled prayers whispered from lips hidden behind goggles and masks; it was like virtual reality. At the end, the women laid flowers with gloved hands on the fresh grave. Dad’s **janaza** was live streamed on Facebook globally. 15000 people joined in and multiplied our prayers.

First loss in the family. Hit us hard. Dad was 71, fit for his age apart from the usual Asian ticker/Type 2 diabetes. Him and his mates would joke about whose sugar readings were the highest while stuffing themselves with another jalebi! ‘Oh, I’ll just inject a few more units of insulin today. It’ll be alright!’ The Asian four for that generation are ‘Heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure and stroke’.

It started with a temperature, then his blood pressure fell. We were like if he doesn’t have covid, he’s bound to catch it in hospital. We kept him at home. That night he asked for a glass of water and went peacefully in his sleep. He

weren't tested but it went down as Covid 19 and when 4 more of his friends dropped within days of each other, there was no doubt. Pillars of the community - struck down together like a house of cards. Friday prayers before lockdown, they had stood **shoulder to shoulder** at the mosque like they had all through their life since coming to this country as young men. Telling Pakistanis not to socialise is like telling fish not to breathe in water. Word is getting through now in the community, cutting through the fake news trending on Whats app groups. People are finally staying apart.

They say the disease doesn't discriminate but why is there more of us, BAME as they call us, falling like dominoes? It's hard data they need. Number crunching. That's where you look for answers int it?

Saif started to feel a bit ill. Tiredness, fever. When the coughing came the storm broke. His missus called the ambulance. They put him on that CPAP. They say it's like sticking your head out of the window of a fast-moving car and trying to breathe. They tell you not to put your babies on their tummies, but it was the picture of grown men with their beer and biryani bellies, lying prone with their faces down- ventilated that I'll never forget.

When they told him, they needed to put him into an induced coma, he agreed.

Saif had already signed up for treatment trials. He was randomised to get an extra treatment of either antivirals, steroids, immune drugs, or an antibiotic.

I wanted to tell him I'd take his place in a flash.

As a kid I made him play cricket with me. Same rules. He would bowl at me for days to get me out and I'd knock him out in 10mins. 'Fair and square' I'd say, not giving any allowance for the four years between us.

Saif progressed. Every day, baby steps. When they brought him back, it were a miracle! After dad, I couldn't have seen my baby brother.....

He left hospital in a wheelchair- clapped out by the staff. His hair grown and tied back in a pony, his face beaming-A research hero! It were on national television. He didn't even know he had been in a coma.

'I was with dad', he said. 'He asked me to take his hand and guide him to where he wanted to go' Then apparently Dad had told him 'My journey ends here son. You need to turn back'. Alhamdullilah, we got him back!

He's donating his blood plasma now he's recovered, thinking of others as usual.

Dad would have accepted it was his time. That's what they believed. There's gonna be a reckoning when all this is over. Our community are losing our foundations. Our faith has been tested but we have trust in our creator and each other.

The sun's out and my boys want to go to the nets. Younger one is a bit of a comedian. He could be the next Guzz Khan. Who'd have thought a bearded muslim Brummie would be the face of uber eats? Each generation is breaking the mould. I don't mind what my lads do, as long as they can bowl like Wasim Akram!