A close up of text on a black background

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**Excerpt: When You’re Smiling**

by **Nazira Vania**

shortlisted for the 2022 SI Leeds Literary Prize

NELSON MANDELA PARK

THE MARCH TO FREEDOM IS IRREVERSIBLE

Hasina ponders the sign at the gate as she enters the park with Javed to continue their stadium-bound journey.

‘Daddy?’

‘Yes, Hasina?

‘Does “irreversible” mean something that can’t go backwards?’

‘No, Hasina. That would be *un*reversible. Like do and *un*do.’

‘Oh…. What does *ir*reversible mean then, daddy?’

Javed doesn’t answer. She doesn’t ask again. He often runs out of things to say when she asks him questions like that. Sometimes she thinks she might be getting cleverer than him. After all, she never misses a day of school and always pays very close attention to what her teachers say, while he spent all his time messing about at school and left when he was fourteen. According to what her mummy told her, anyway. And his English isn’t very good either, because mummy often has to correct him.

She adds ‘irreversible’ to the list in her mind of things to ask about on her next library visit, alongside that word her mummy said earlier as they were leaving the house. What was it again? *Miss-car-ridge?* Something like that. The librarian will help her work it out.

Hasina tucks the thought away and takes a good look around. Her heart leaps. There are people with blue shirts everywhere, flowing through the park together like a river, going to see the team they all love. Excitement surges through her veins. She is a part of that, a part of them. She is marching with the Blue Army!

She continues looking around and notices fans nodding at each other as they join the procession. It reminds her of what her teacher said about how in the olden days people used to tip their hats as a way of saying hello. Does that mean that all these fans know one another? Maybe Leicester fans are one super massive family, like all those people at the boring weddings that she attends with her mother, where everybody seems to know everybody else no matter how many hundreds of people are in the room. She tries to catch the eye of someone from the Blue Army so that she can exchange hellos as well, can introduce herself as a newcomer to the family, but no one nods at her and her father. Perhaps those people don’t realise that they also support Leicester. After all, she isn’t wearing the proper shirt and scarf and hat, and Javed is worse because he isn’t wearing any blue at all. At least she has made an effort to fit in by cladding herself from top-to-toe, inside-to-out, in the right colour for the occasion. It hasn’t been enough to get her noticed though, but she won’t let herself get upset about that. It is just a simple misunderstanding. One that will be cleared up as soon as she is sitting amongst them in the ground. Then there will be no doubt whatsoever that she is one of them, one of their big happy family.