

The dream never changes; the same few frames from a horror cartoon.

First he's falling in slow motion, cartwheeling into the sludgy grey-green water, scarecrow clothes flapping. Then, splayed out face down on the canal's surface, he splutters and gurgles. Finally he sinks helplessly into the weedy bottom, hair drifting, the last bubbles of life leaking from his mouth.

As I always do, I woke up sweating.

I can't help it. Two or three times a week I have to come and sit on the bench by the canal where the Virginia used to be. It's quiet and tree-lined, an oasis in the suburban desert. Dad's always going on about making hajj next year if he can afford it. Me, I think the canal's better. Why go all the way to Mecca when you've got to make your peace in West London?

It had started as a joke. He had looked so dirty, like he hadn't washed for a year. He was waving his stick at us and muttering, even before we'd started on him.