

The Only Person You Should Trust

*This essay is an excerpt from my forthcoming book *Zero Ground: The Handshake*, a memoir and manifesto examining trust, performance, and vulnerability in the modern world. Blending personal narrative with cultural critique, this piece explores laughter, memory, and the question of what makes us believable to others, and to ourselves.*

At times I want to scream.
But these days, I settle for groaning every night
as I sleep,
in my sleep,
sometimes in my dreams,
where I make most of my art.

It reminds me of my mum as she grew older,
her aches and pains were audible.

Sometimes I questioned if it was for attention.
For sympathy.

I stop if I catch myself groaning
like a politician realising the mic's still on.

But I have always laughed heartily.
A laugh, pure and disarming
is my gift to the world.

One day, I was watching the sitcom Friends on tele.
My mum wanted to watch her favourite Pakistani soap.

I said,
"Can we, for once, not watch women crying?
The writers keep making them choose violent men, then moan about it.
It's never empowered women.
Just pain on repeat."

She pretended not to have heard me.

I muttered, "You should know better.
You were married to an activist."

I marvelled at my stance.
Then promptly laughed at a joke by one of the Friends.
Hard.

When I was done laughing, my mum said:
"That laugh of yours is so fake, Sarmed.
Don't laugh like that."

I was 49 years old.
She was a tiny, frail woman.
But it felt like she punched me in the stomach.
And it hurt.

I wasn't laughing fakely.
That 'was' my laugh.
Why would she say that?

I protested.

She groaned.

I was upset.
I left the room.
I heard her, changing the channel.

A year after my mum passed away,
I heard my laugh in a video someone had recorded.

It felt fake.

But I was sure I had meant it.
I laugh from my base chakra.
It's involuntary.
I discover that I'm laughing as it happens,
not before. It isn't planned, or planted.

I started checking my laugh in all the old videos.

It amazes me that people trust me.
Make deals with me.
What does it say about them?
Making deals with someone with a fake laugh.

Should I trust them?

*Sarmed Mirza is a multidisciplinary artist and writer based in Glasgow. His work blends visual art, personal history, and cultural critique. He is currently preparing for a group exhibition at The Tabernacle, London, in June 2025, featuring his series *Zero Ground: The Handshake*.*