

If it isn't me

Bobby Nayyar

At first you hear the word as a tapping on your shoulder. In time it descends to a whisper in your heart. Ever present and all longing. Repeated over and over at times of dejection like an incantation. It is summer and you are walking up College Road away from your school in Handsworth to your home in Handsworth Wood, the connecting roads like corridors for Asian families making the move from terraced to semi-detached homes. Streets changing like the fall of dominoes, one house after the other and the other. At that time your road was filled with white families. Your family moving in was an exception that soon became a rule. Unaware of the socio or the economic, you walk to avoid the cracks in the pavement.

You remember the heat, the shimmer on the asphalt, the cerulean in the sky, as College Road narrowed to a vein by cars parked bumper to bumper on either side of the road, causing traffic to stop start and crawl into passing-places. The drop of sun pressing down on every accelerator, revving every engine that had to wait a second too long. At first you hear the word as a tapping on your shoulder. You stop and resist the compulsion to turn around. Instinct tells you to take a moment to process. The tap has touched the beating of your heart. A softness in her voice arms you. A girl's voice. You turn. She stops. Her feet square, body caught rigid less than ten feet from you.

She is twelve or maybe thirteen, in a school uniform just like you. Cheeks flushing red, blonde hair tied back, blue eyes lowering as she realises that she is stuck in front of you and you are stuck in front of her.

'I wasn't talking about you,' she says to the pavement.

You look to the other side of the road. To the passing cars. To the shops and the street signs. There is no one else there. It is just her and you. You sigh and turn. And you ask yourself, 'If it isn't *me*, then who?'

You turn and begin to walk. And she begins to walk. You daren't look back because somehow you are now the threat. Only when you are on your road do you look behind you. She has gone but the word is still there and it follows you home, sits down next to you as you eat in silence, and is in your bed before you lie down to sleep. It isn't the first time and by no means will it be the last. But it is the most memorable.

Bobby Nayyar

Bobby Nayyar was born in Handsworth, Birmingham in 1979. He read French and Italian at Trinity College, Cambridge, and Comparative Literature at the University of Chicago. He has been published in the anthologies *The Book of Birmingham*, *Mango Shake* and *Too Asian, Not Asian Enough*, and journals including *Wasafiri*, *Aesthetica* and *The Woven Tale Press*. He founded Limehouse Books in 2009, publishing his debut novel *West of No East* in 2011 and *The No Salaryman* two years later. In 2016, he published his debut poetry collection, *Glass Scissors*, which received a Word Masala award. He lives in London and works at the writer development agency Spread the Word.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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