

Thurloe Street

Dipali Das

Nilu wriggled out of Veena's tight hug, distracted by the pavement, and began to play hopscotch. Ravi came into view from the kitchen holding a Safeway bag, his hands stained with turmeric; the faint aroma of *panch phoron* spices followed him down the hallway. He stepped out onto the doorstep.

'What's this?' Veena asked.

'Pakorras. Flask of coffee. Extra milk. And a blanket.'

'I'm only going to Bradford.'

'If you break down, and that car has form, you'll be freezing. Do you want another jumper?'

Veena held his gaze momentarily. He had no idea. 'Thanks, I'm fine.'

'Two nights - she won't even notice.' Ravi nodded towards Nilu, who was jumping up and down, lost in a world of chalked numbers.

Veena allowed herself to be pulled back inside the hallway. They hugged and kissed, leaving Ravi slightly flustered by the intensity.

By the end of the street, Veena was lost in her thoughts, wondering if she could go ahead with it. Oblivious to Ravi on the doorstep, waving and waiting and waving again, she got in the car and sat for a moment, taking several long breaths. The tightness in her chest refused to budge. Maybe best not to go.

The passenger door swung open. Presuming it was Ravi with more food, she turned and watched the bulky frame of Kam squeeze into her Morris Marina.

'Turn the heater on. Been waiting ages.'

Kam blew on his hands repeatedly as Veena delicately started up the car. It sputtered to life as Kam turned the fan dial to max and depressed the cigarette lighter. She hated smoke in the car but knew better than to protest as he lit his roll up and inhaled and exhaled, long and deep like a yogi. The low sun emphasised the depth of the scar by his jaw. She stopped herself from staring.

'You said six o' clock, Kam.'

'Couldn't wait to see you. How's Nilu?'

'Like you care?'

'Mary Poppins looking after her? Told him what you're doing?'

'No.'

'Good girl.'

'He trusts me. Fuck knows why.'

'Come here.'

Kam leaned over and began to kiss her face. The combination, inside the car, of his size and the taste of tobacco was overwhelming.

'Get off.'

Veena pushed him off with all the force she could muster, but she knew Kam was letting her. They both ignored the hard metal object she'd felt inside his coat pocket.

'Be like that. You ready, Vee? Are you?'

'Yes.'

'See you by the lamp post, behind St Edwards. Be careful, kid.'

Kam climbed out of the car. He turned and gave a comedy-style wink, then wandered into a back alley. Instantly reappearing, he blew a huge double-handed kiss and dived back again into the alley. Veena couldn't help but smile as she drove off to the meeting point.

Hours later, he hadn't come. She was waiting in the darkness. She followed the path of the raindrops, their shadows cast though the windscreen by the nearby lamplight trickling onto her scarf and coat, following the contours of her body. It was both soothing and distracting. A memory of Nilu's face appeared in the rear-view mirror and Veena realised she had to get back to her daughter. The engine started first time. The wipers clicked on. Two arcs cleared away the rain, revealing two men walking towards her, one of them Kam. He had that jig to his walk when he'd done something either exciting or disturbing, or both. Veena switched off the engine, placed her forehead on the steering wheel and silently screamed.

Dipali Das

Dipali Das is a British Bengali writer of plays, short stories and poems. Past and present careers include radio frequency engineer, teacher, workshop facilitator, traveller and mother. Her plays have been performed at Dundee Rep, Royal Court Theatre, Royal Exchange Theatre and Birmingham Rep.

The first Writer in Residence at the AIURRC in Manchester Central Library, she facilitated workshops for the award-winning project, *Kotha and Kantha*, focusing on Bengali history and heritage.

Southern Voices is an educational organisation raising awareness of socio-political issues from a 'southern' perspective. Dipali worked on the project *Shadows of War and Empire*, looking at the role of Black and Asian soldiers during the First World War, and conducted outreach sessions in schools and community groups across Greater Manchester.

Awarded an MA in Film and Media in 2020, she explored the representation of women in Indian cinema, pre- and post-Independence.

A recording of this story can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

