
# **A Mouthful of Silence** (extract)

by **Reshma Ruia**

shortlisted for the 2014

SI Leeds Literary Prize

Twenty-eight years ago, I left Bombay to make my way to America. I stopped in Manchester to see Gupta, an old school friend, who was in the second year of his accountancy degree. I was going to be there for a week, see how things were and then move on.

'Why don't you stay longer?' Gupta asked. His eyes were lonely.

We sat in the bus shelter eating our fish and chips, waiting for the number 215 to take us to the one-bedroom flat Gupta rented in Levenshulme.

'Manchester's small and cosy. It's easy to make money here, to hell with America,' he said.

I checked Gupta's face to see if he meant what he said, and I stared at the sky grey with rain and the dull huddle of buildings around me, and I thought, he's right. It'll be easy to shine in a place as gloomy and small as this.

'I'll stay for a bit!' I slapped his back and said I'd get a job, make a few quid and then carry on to America. It wouldn't hurt to have English pounds in my pocket.

We were like brothers those days, Gupta and I, sharing rooms, whining about the cold and the thin English girls with their bony thighs who giggled at our accents but let us squeeze their breasts in the cinema halls.

I turned fifty-five last year.

'Fifty-five's a big number. You're getting on, old man,' Gupta said when I met him for a drink after work. He sipped his orange juice through a straw, like a girl.

'It's only a number,' I said, staring at his grey lips sucking in the juice. 'There are things I'd still like to do.'

'Like what?' he said. 'Don't tell me you're still banging on about America? You've been dreaming about it long enough.'

I pushed the bowl of peanuts towards him and shrugged.

It was early evening and the Victoria wasn't busy. A boy in a black biker jacket stood fiddling with the shiny knobs of the fruit machine by the door, and the woman behind the bar was polishing beer glasses. Her bright pink lipstick was too young for her face. There was music playing, but it was new stuff, full of banging drums.

I finished my beer and got up to buy another. When I came back, Gupta was still waiting for an answer. He was an accountant, and he liked to get to the bottom of things.

'Is Geeta throwing you a surprise party or what?' His eyes stayed on my face. I got the feeling he'd not been out much lately. He was careful with his pennies.

'Fat chance,' I said. 'I'll be lucky if she remembers. Anyway, it's no big deal.'

'I've an idea,' he said. 'Forget the bloody party. Just hire a fancy car, a Lincoln or a Cadillac and drive up to Scotland. Have a break from the business. Get away from the damn family. There'll be plenty of Scotch, and I've heard the girls are easy.' Gupta cleared his throat and smiled. He was in a good mood because I'd bought him two rounds of orange juice and it was a Thursday, which meant he'd soon be going home to have sex with his wife.

.....

I thought of Gupta's words as I drove back home. A hearse passed me on the motorway. I looked at the blurred faces inside the cars that followed. The rain on the windows smudged their faces, streaked down their cheeks like tears.

Manchester was a mistake. I should've carried on to America

'Why do you want to mess with America?' Father had said thirty years back. 'It's a Godless place. Stay back. Bombay's booming.'

But I'd made up my mind.

'I want to try my luck in America,' I'd said. I'd thought of the film studios in Hollywood, hungry for a fresh face, and then I thought of my job as shipping clerk in Wadia & Sons. I told him I was sick of changing three buses each day and pushing files around. I wanted something better.

'What madness is this, wanting to be a Hollywood star?' He jabbed his finger against my chest. 'You've got an Indian face, not a Hollywood face. Get used to it.'

Father was sixty by then, an old man, and I was his only child. I understood his desperation. I kept quiet and let him rant on. Mother would've backed me, told me I was right, but she was dead and gone.

‘I’ll be back,’ I promised father as we stood in the queue at the State Bank of India. I watched him draw out his savings. Eight thousand rupees for a one way ticket to New York via Doha and Manchester. Travel didn’t come cheap those days.

‘I’ll come back rich and famous,’ I promised him, slipping the dollar bills inside my wallet.

Father shook his head in a way that showed he didn’t expect to see me again.

The day I left, he broke a coconut for good luck and pressed a silver coin into my hand. At least pretend to be sad,’ he said. ‘And wipe that silly grin off your face.’

But I made the mistake of breaking the journey in Manchester and meeting up with Gupta. I got caught up in the business of buying and selling frocks. And America turned into just another name on a map.

.....

Gupta was right. Turning fifty-five was a big deal.

So, the following week, instead of going through the unsold stock at my warehouse, I went to an auction in Stockport where I bought a personal registration number for my car: PK1. I outbid some Paul Kennedy by two thousand quid. I didn’t tell Geeta about the cost; I just said it was a present from a grateful customer in Ireland.

‘The Irish are kind, just like the Indians,’ she said. Her hands dipped in and out of a big glass bowl of flour.

I wanted her to go outside and look at the car with the new number plates, but she stayed put.

‘Later. Later,’ she said. ‘I’m baking bread.’ She lifted her flour-painted hands proudly.

‘What’s wrong with Warburton’s?’ I said.

I knew she’d make a mess; the bread would burn or stay soft and uncooked in the middle. She’d always been a lousy cook.

……..