



**SPREAD
THE WORD**



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Nomad
by
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A long, long time ago, many miles across the ocean, the island of Lanka was ruled by Ravana, the demon king. Ravana was fearless and powerful, and he had ten faces. Each face wore a different expression, each conveyed a new aspect of his personality, and you were never sure which one you would meet.

From all across the island, Ravana's people travelled with petitions for the king, along dusty tracks in jolting bullock carts, through the deep shade of the jungle, and across soft white sands edged by the roar of the surf. Many roads converged and met in front of the royal palace, where a throng of people streamed through lush gardens towards the stone pillars of the entrance - All ages, all castes, men, women and children, native peoples and foreigners, all seeking an audience with the king, all trembling with terror.

NOMAD

The wind has picked up bringing the cold. My mother is chewing her lip, worried that we have missed the bus. I huddle a little closer to her and wish that we had something to eat.

At last, a double decker rounds the corner, and my mother smiles.

“This is it. Good!”

She steps forward and raises her arm. The 10A rumbles to a stop. As she climbs aboard, I hoist myself up, using the metal pole at the end of the step. It’s like the pole on a helter-skelter, except that you can’t slide down it.

“Can we go upstairs, Mum? Please?”

A moment of uncertainty, but then she nods and smiles. We climb to the top deck and settle ourselves at the very front for a grandstand view. The bus sweeps elegantly around The Green Man Roundabout. Dusk has fallen and Leytonstone High Street is a blaze of light from shop fronts, restaurants and cafes. We are alone, cocooned in the warm fug of unopened windows and stale air.

There is a sudden clatter behind us.

“Any fares please?”

The West Indian conductor weaves his way down the aisle, nimble as a fairground roustabout riding the waltzers. His uniform lends him a military air but his smile dispels any reserve.

“Where to, Ladies?”

“One and a half to Claybury Hospital, please.”

His eyes flicker away from my mother to rest on my face for a moment. He checks again.

“Claybury? Claybury Mental Hospital?”

My mother nods icily.

“Yes, please. One and a half.”

He sets the fare on the ticket machine and rolls the handle. *Whirr click whirr*. The ticket unfurls like magic.

My mother rummages in her purse for the correct change.

“Thank you.”

Deftly, he tips the coins into his leather satchel. The bus swerves round a bend and, laughing, the clippie grabs the guard rail.

“Looks like we’re in for a bumpy ride.”

He winks at me and heads back downstairs.

My mother starts to fold the ticket into her purse.

“Can I have it please?”

She frowns.

“Well”

“Please. Please. I won’t lose it.... Please, Mum.”

She relents, and passes the ticket across, content with snapping her purse shut and storing it safely in her bag. I roll the ticket into a tight tube. It seems to go on and on, like the dark road outside the window. We are driving down unfamiliar streets and I am not certain where we are.

The bus rolls up at a stop and judders to a halt.

A new voice:

“Give me a minute to get up top, will ya? Me legs ain’t what they used to be. Thanks, Sonny.”

A heavy thumping echoes up the stairwell and, after a moment, an old lady emerges huffing and blowing.

“Oh my Lord! Must be getting old. I used to run up them steps, when I was a girl. I always sit on the top deck. You can’t beat the view from a London double decker, I says.”

The bus starts up and she rolls along the aisle towards us.

“Phew! Well, ain’t it a blessed relief to sit down?”

She plumps into the seat opposite, and spends five minutes clucking and arranging her bags around her. A warm musty smell wafts into the air.

“Well, I must say I do like Snaresbrook for shops. My sister, she can’t understand it. ‘Doris!’ ‘Doris!’ She says. ‘Where we live, we’ve got the fish shop and the green grocers, we’ve got Percy Ingles up the road, why d’ya want to go traipsing on a bus down to Snaresbrook?’ But I says: ‘You can’t beat the newsagents in Snaresbrook for sweets now can you, Ethel? You can’t get sweets like those in the High Street, now can you? And I am partial to pear drops,’ I says to her, ‘and you can’t beat aniseed balls, if you’ve got a

head cold, now can you?’ Nothing better for a cold, unless it’s Fisherman’s Friends and I don’t much take to them meself. My husband, Albert, he used to swear by Fisherman’s Friends, but me, meself, I prefer an aniseed ball. Nothing like an aniseed ball to stop a dry cough. Nothing like it.”

She settles into her seat nodding confidentially. Muffled in a brown astrakhan coat, mushroom hat perched on top of her grey perm, she smiles benignly at my mother and me.

“Would you like a sweetie?” She asks, proffering a white paper bag.

I shake my head, uncertainly.

“What do you say?” My mother prompts.

“No, thank you.” I whisper.

“How about you, Dear?”

“Not at the moment. Thank you.” My mother answers politely.

“Well, pardon me, if I do. They’re barley sugars.”

There is a rustling and a slight slurp.

“Barley sugars used to be my Albert’s favourite. He couldn’t resist them. ‘Sweet, but not as sweet as you,’ he used to say when we was courting.”

She smiles gently to herself.

“So, where you off to, Ducks?” She asks.

I look at my mother, unsure how to reply.

“We’re visiting relatives,” she announces firmly.

“Oh, that’s nice. Whereabouts, Dear?”

“Woodford Bridge.”

“Oh, that *is* a long way. Nice area though.”

“Yes.”

There’s a slight pause, as my mother neglects to extend the conversation.

“In’t she lovely?” The old lady gushes. “Look at them big brown eyes. Is she yours?”

Embarrassment creeps slowly across my cheeks.

“Yes,” my mother answers, without looking at me.

I unroll my ticket into a long paper curl.

“Oh, in’t that unusual? Where’s her Dad from then?” Doris queries.

“He’s from Ceylon originally. He’s studying accountancy here.”

“Oh! Oh, I see.... In’t she lovely? And what about you, Dear? You don’t come from round here either, do you? You don’t sound like you do – So nicely spoken.”

“No. I was brought up in Cornwall. My father is a clergyman,” my mother adds for good measure.

“A clergyman? Well, bless me!” Doris coos, reassured as to our respectability.

“I s’pose they was a little surprised when you... when they met... when....”

She trails off.

“Well, it takes all sorts that’s what I say. And love makes the world go round, don’t it?” She smiles brightly and glances out of the window.

“Oh Lor’! ‘Ere we are.” She stands up hurriedly and pulls the bell cord.

“Listen to me gassing on and I’ve almost missed me stop! Nice to meet you, Dear.” She hurries to scoop up her bags.

“Bye bye, Darling,” she waves at me and reaches across to pinch my cheek. “Such a pretty little thing! Ta ta, Dear. Have a safe journey.”

And she lurches off towards the stairs, without waiting for my mother’s faint ‘goodbye’.

We sit in silence, watching the featureless eastern suburbs move leisurely past the windows. Victorian terraces give way to Victorian villas; Victorian villas give way to ‘30’s semis and Tudorbethan fantasies. Then, the houses thin out and, eventually, disappear in a hinterland of grassy playing fields, canal towpaths and odd pieces of waste ground.

We come to a roundabout thick with traffic. Lorries, vans and buses converge in a muddled stream.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“Charlie Brown’s roundabout, I think. I’m not sure really, but it’s not long now. I recognise this bit from before.”

My mother lapses back into silence, watching intently, as the bus weaves its way through the tides of congestion.

We're almost across, when I glance to my left and glimpse an encampment, clustered under sparse hawthorn bushes at the roundabout's edge. A white pony and a shaggy brown horse crop the grass next to two caravans, an old land rover and a flatbed lorry.

"Gypsies," my mother remarks, making no other comment, as the bus finally struggles free and drives on up another darkening road.

I remember that these are 'my people'. My father told me. "The gypsies came from India," he said. "They crossed the subcontinent thousands of years ago and wandered through Persia and the Middle East, until, at last, they crossed the Bosphorus and entered Europe, where they have been despised and persecuted ever since. They have lost much of their history now, but their music echoes Indian raga. They speak their own language, Romani. They are proud, free, treacherous; and we must treat them with respect, when we meet them, for they still carry magic."

I imagine a gypsy child watching the bus from the window of her caravan - A gypsy child always on a journey, whose home is both everywhere and nowhere, endlessly a stranger, never belonging, a perpetual outsider. Like me.

My mother reaches up to ring the bell.

“Come on. We’re here. Time to get off now.”

I climb carefully downstairs, one step at a time, and jump off the idling bus into a wintery drizzle. Marked by lampposts, a tarmac drive stretches away into the distance, and a light blue sign proclaims ‘Claybury Hospital’. My mother lifts her head, and pulls my hood over my hair.

“Daddy will be pleased to see us,” she announces to no-one in particular, as she leads me by the hand.

I have the feeling that I am about to cross the border into a new land, but I’m not sure who I will find living there.

About the Author

Kaveri says: I began writing as a child. I fell in love with words. They were an escape. My first published work was a poem in a local competition anthology when I was fourteen. Then I stopped writing poetry and began writing essays.

I started to write for myself again after my first child was born. It was unexpected. I snatched moments to write at the breakfast table or in bed late at night. Since then, my writing has begun to take on a life of its own. It has adventures. One day some poems ran off to the theatre to be read by actors. Another time, a girl made the words into a bharata natyum dance. My writing has travelled to the Czech Republic on a coach (http://www.bata-ville.com/main_2.html), it has put me in a film, and taken me to read to audiences at the Barbican & Tate Britain. Short fiction and poetry have journeyed in brown manila envelopes to the editors of literary reviews and magazines; other pieces have made it into anthologies and collections (<http://www.peepaltreepress.com/books/red>). Once in a while, my writing has been shortlisted and longlisted for prizes (Wasafiri New Writing Prize 2013 & Spread the Word Life Writing Prize 2017). I never know what it will do next. Words still provide an escape, but, they offer so many other things now. Most importantly, they are the start of a conversation. I'm just waiting to see who I'll get to talk to next ...