

HOW TO HOST YOUR EUROPEANS

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Your father does not know that this whitey exists in your life, let alone the absolute fact that said whitey is the love of your life. Your mother knows him—knows *of* him, actually—as an office friend. You’ve been dropping hints, retelling his jokes to her, talking to her of his general saviour-soul, his antifa, anti-war stance, that sort of thing—all in the feverish anticipation that your mother will want to find out more. Your mother is too clever to fall into your trap; you can give her that. Her universe will not entertain the idea of any non-Tamil, why, even any non-Jaffna Tamil boy in your life—so, instead of whitey, you could as well be describing a cat. This has been your situation for the last six months—and you’ve been sat on your ass, not trying to do much more about it, save the incessant chatter. You’d have let this go on—she does not ask, you do not tell, whitey stays in the closet—except that whitey has gone ahead and ruined it for you. Whitey’s told his parents over the Easter break, they are coming to meet you rightaway.

You’re secretly angry with whitey for not taking your permission but you don’t fight especially when you see how grinny-happy he is about the whole invasion. As if exchanging a favour, you promise whitey that you’ll break the news to your mother the night before the impending arrival, to put her in a spot, but mostly to let her make up her mind either way very quickly. She may ask to meet them, or she may curse you—all of you: her daughter, the whitey, the whitey’s parents—to death under the garbage truck, one of two extreme scenarios. You channel your anxiety into battleplans—You’ll pick them up from Eurostar, you’ll check them into their Airbnb, you’ll take them for a walk (weather willing) in the Epping Forest. The next morning, you’ll get them here to visit you in your natural habitat, Ilford. This is a running joke—here, East Ham, and possibly a fifty other pockets across London, whiteys will look out of the place, like they need a passport to enter.

You’ve chosen Wanstead as their buffer-zone entry-point—where old white people’s care homes and hipster cafes co-exist peacefully. They will still feel at home. You want to avoid what they call culture-shock. The London that’s home to you, the London you’re taking them to, is not the tourist trap: Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, National Portrait Gallery, Thames cruise. You tell whitey that if they like you, and more importantly, if you like them, and rule out their being racists, you’ll bring them here, to the south of the borough, where the colour gradient changes and loses its whiteness. You pretend not to hear when he says all white people are not racist.

You want to be as light-hearted as your whitey. You came from a place where bombs fell through the night, where death picked out random targets. Here, there are knives, and from not-so-long-ago, samurai swords. Tamil gangs once warred on these streets, one was even called the Tigers. You feel personally slighted; you feel everything here is just the mere husk of a life you left behind. You’re superstitious, and think to yourself that like the rains, you’ve carried the curse of sudden death with you across the seas. Some years ago, a five-year-old Tamil girl was shot in the chest walking distance from your home. Your British home. This March on Ilford Lane, a man was stabbed ten times and left for dead on the snow.

You'll tell your whiteys all these stories—without a trace of fear, without making London sound unsafe or dangerous. You'll tell them there is going to be hot-spot policing and stop-and-search here, this is how Britain becomes Europe. You'll tell them you hate your journeys into the continent, being asked to show your papers, being considered a shoplifter, being avoided even by the beggars. You know that when you stand apart, you're going to be asked to step aside. *Belong, belong*, goes the voice inside your head. The same voice, that in your mother tongue reminded you to stay defiant, that told you to not go weak in your knees at the sight of Sinhala army checkpoints, that told you to be proud of who you are. You know that if your Europeans love you enough, and value your opinion, all of your rage will not offend them.

You'll take them out to Saravanaa Bhavan, teach them to eat with their hands, the way your whitey has loyally learnt to do. You'll give a haphazard tour—ruthless colonialism meets immigrant kitsch—Churchill uncle's statue, Murugan temple, fabric shops where all the brown girls go when they get married, Valentines Mansion, landmarks to show Redbridge as the birthplace of the East India Company. Your Europeans will find this fascinating, they happen to be from the country that slaughtered Congo.

You'll take a detour, go to an absolutely run-down place to show your whiteys the All Nations Church on Ley Street. You, and only you, know that it is right opposite your house. You'll tell them that you believe in God the way you believe in men: you do not take them at face value. You'll make it clear that this is not your church, you only pray in Tamil. This church has three billboards with fading words. HOW DO I FIND GOD? AM I GOING TO HEAVEN? WHO WAS JESUS? Your Europeans will probably laugh at these questions. You'll check their mood that moment, tally it with your mother's mood from the previous night, and if all goes well, you'll go, your European entourage in tow, and knock on your front door. If your whitey is lucky, your mother will make them tea. If you're lucky, she'll start asking you a lot of never-ending questions.