



**2019 Longlist**

**Neater**

**by**

**K Devan**

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“I’m gay”

“I’m queer”

“I like men”

It takes me a while to realise how loudly I am speaking to myself. Loud enough to make everyone else on the bus shift nervously in their seats. As the driver stops I catch the smile of a young woman getting off the bus. She looks at me through the window, eyes full of concern as she readjusts her resplendent gele. She nudges her husband, softly with her elbow, as if encouraging him to look too. His attention remains fixed on a fantasy football game on his phone. As the bus moves away she starts to mouth something. Perhaps good luck. More likely the number of a good psychiatrist.

I run through the conversation in my head. Versions of it spread out in front of me like the branches of a sprawling tree. I could knock on her door and tell her on the doorstep. I could take her to the garden and tell her by the roses. I could scrawl a letter and hide it in her bedroom. What if she doesn’t find it till late at night? The grief washes over. A pain shoots around her chest. I hope she’s been taking her aspirin.

How do I tell her that my roommate, Daniel, is actually my boyfriend of seven years? That we share a bed. I’m the phantom yoghurt thief at work. Last night I went to a bar dressed in dungarees and wearing eyeliner. I’m still lying about having read Infinite Jest to all my friends. The mosaic of my life is made up of so many different pieces not just this one rainbow coloured tile. Yet it is this one fragment that she will use to define me, for the rest of time.

It was a photograph of her that pushed me to this bus ride, to her door. Hastily taken by my dad, her son, on his new phone. She was sitting on a plastic chair on the patio. The sun was deep and low in the sky. She looked so weak. The silk of her sari hung loosely from her shoulders like vestigial wings. In her frail arms her great-grandson, a tiny baby, and at her elbow a disembodied hand supporting her from the edge of the photograph. Even the proud beak of her nose had withered away. Her mortality hung around her like a necklace of pearls. The garden shone behind her in the photograph. That magical space where I spent all those long summers with her as a child. The allotment an alien land teeming with eyeless worms and hostile bees. The rose bush on the back wall a door to a distant land, locked with a password I never managed to find. The sprawling apple tree, producing such perfumed but bitter fruits, an unclimbable ladder to the clouds. The North London palace, once boasted of so proudly, big enough to sleep eight but now only one. It must be a prison for her. I heard they turned the study downstairs into her bedroom. That the books, when being moved, poured out cascades of dried flowers and leaves. Summers of abundance sealed in shades of sepia and chocolate. She told them to throw it all away.

My parents know that I'm coming today. Dad called me this morning to warn me about how fragile she was. How Indian she was. The woman who had raised him and his sisters. My aunties who had burnt bras, marched against apartheid and married English men. Then divorced them, continued to write Christmas cards to in-laws and single handily raise their children. I'm still not sure what he meant by bringing up her ethnicity. My ethnicity.

We arrived at my stop. As the bus doors open I catch sight of myself distorted in the glass pane of a what used to be Mr Singh's mithai shop. The friendly but greasy store now a hip cafe with brass cafetières and succulents planted directly into wooden tables. For the owner of a sweet shop Mr Singh had been a suspiciously thin man. The excessive amounts of sugar in his life might have explained his choice of bold neon turbans, though. I was never sure if Mr Singh spoke English or any language at all. His response to orders often involved one of his deep laughs and then a series of conflicting hand gestures. In the sunlight the silver leaf trapped under his nails sparkled. I did occasionally see him at our house, making deliveries for grandma's numerous summer parties. He would always give me a small paper bag filled with the shards and broken ends of sweets. She used to speak so highly of him when presenting his work on one of her ornate silver trays. How both of his daughters were barristers and went skiing every year in Switzerland. Maybe he did speak then.

I still can't believe how much time I spent in her house growing up. Waking her up in the dark depths of the night to ask how cigarettes kill goldfish even though they don't have lungs. Learning to fold samosas from circles of crumbly pastry into dense pyramids, ready to be fried. Screaming at her once, in front of her friends, because she didn't know how to spell 'pyjama' when I was writing to Santa. The word and clothing an Asian import, I found out recently. Yet it's been years since I last took my shoes off in her porch and stepped across the threshold.

Daniel had called a number of times. I expect he thought the deed was done. It always seemed so easy in the movies. Like the words were said and then the reaction, whether good or bad, was immediate and all surrounding. There was nothing about what happens if you say the words and there is no reaction. A gulf. A chasm of apathy.

Daniel had his told family many years ago at his birthday party, though we had only been dating for a few months. His cake had just been blown out and smoke hung around the room like incense. Was Daniel wearing all white as well? It felt oddly consecrated. He started to make a speech, spurred on by his mother who was holding a flute of champagne high above her head. He thanked his parents for the wonderful day and spoke in length about how moist the fruitcake looked. Then, as if he was moving through honey, slowly started to wrap his arms around my waist and introduced me as his boyfriend. In the space of a heartbeat, mine suitably quickened, the air shook as his entire family cheered. Daniel, gleaming, gave me a dry kiss on the forehead. How platonic, I later thought on the train home. His grandfather immediately told us about his great-uncle, rumoured to have died in the arms of his male lover in wartime Berlin, and how he was glad we had found each other. His parents came and congratulated us, filling our cups till they overflowed. Even his aunty, the vicar, came to offer her blessings and tell us the church welcomes all. If anyone in Daniel's family did have any concerns, they were certainly not allowed to express them on that day. Keeping the integrity of their family was the first and only unspoken rule. The surname that existed in leather bound books, carved into Scottish stone and even immortalised on Wikipedia. A name which stretched through

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the labyrinth of time and instead of a spool of golden thread led Theseus with an everlasting ribbon of the family tweed.

There was a cyclical nature too in Daniel's family. When his sister dropped out of college and worked in a bakery, she wasn't a failure. Her great-great-grandfather once owned a flour milling factory and she was continuing the legacy. When Daniel's father was caught having a rather pedestrian affair there was no talk of a divorce. Just a quick run of counselling and then it was never spoken of again. After all grandfather had been caught kissing a stranger in Knightsbridge station, it was just an inherited momentary lapse in judgement.

Cyclical too were my thoughts of that photograph of grandma. Coming home from work I saw the setting sun behind her in the harsh light of the lorry cutting into my cycle lane. In the Turkish greengrocers behind our flat I could smell the blooming roses of her garden in the bright hijab of the girl behind the counter. At night I mistook Daniel's hand, peaking from beneath the duvet, as the one that stretched out to support her in the photograph. Was there something almost colonial about this drive to tell her the truth? A question she had not even asked. I felt like I was conquering her image of me, tearing it up and laying down new boundaries. I imagined family events where she would walk into a room and people would stop talking because they were whispering about me. Her questioning dad about any potential future wives for me and him wishing he could melt into the wallpaper and disappear. I owed it to her. I exist solely because of her. There may be thousands of versions of me refracted across time and space but today it is this me who tells her

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the truth. This child who spent his summers in her house dancing to the Spice Girls and eating entire boxes of fish fingers.

The house grows closer and closer. There is no stopping, I am unable too. Pushed by an invisible ancestral wind I float up the stairs. My feet not even touching the gravel. My hand brushes against the door but is too weak to make a sound.

Nevertheless, the handle of the door slowly starts to turn. A pain shoots around my chest.

She's framed by the darkness of the house. The woman who spent weeks on a boat crossing the sea from India because she couldn't afford the plane. Swapped textbooks in Delhi for heavy machinery in London. Cleaned toilets whilst wearing gold bangles and one toe ring embedded with delicate rubies. Left hours before her husband in the morning but still prepared him, his children and whomever else he had invited into their house breakfast, packed lunch and dinner. A woman who, unlike the rest of her family, refused to anglicise her name.

"My name is Sita, two syllables, rhymes with neater".

Her pale blue sari is embellished with copper embroidery and the bindi on her forehead is a round ruby circle. How can she look so perfect when she can't walk up a flight of stairs? She looks down at my hand and I worry for the briefest moment that she can see a club stamp from last night. If the words 'G-A-Y', 'QUEER RANGER', or 'MAN HUT' are branded onto my skin, in that oddly indelible ink, then there would be no need for discretion today. Instead she places my hand in the arches of hers. An oyster closing slowly over her overgrown pearl. We walk, hand in hand, past the



closed door of her new bedroom on the ground floor. The celestial and dusty smell of incense hangs in the air.

She's silent and I wonder if I should just start the conversation. Start by telling her of what happens in the clubs that stain both my skin and memories. The laborious adventure of clubbing. Waiting for the bartender, toilet, smoking area, a good song. Waiting to fit in. Last night had been no different. Daniel had gone to pick up some vague amphetamines and although supportive, I was unwilling to take part. Not from any moral standpoint though, as I too had ducked into many dark alleyways in the past. I was afraid of arriving here today dull and blunted. Unable to express the true depths of my feelings about Daniel, myself and her.

I spent a lot of time alone on the dancefloor whilst Daniel was on his hunt for pills. I watched couples fall in and out of formation, a shirtless man dancing on a table, the tired bartender arguing with a customer who had underpaid her. Not being white had one exclusive benefit in gay clubs, you were invisible. Sometimes it was a relief to be able to fall between the cracks, to slip into the museum and not be noticed next to the pieces chosen as the treasures. Yesterday though, amongst this sweaty soup of love and acceptance, I felt the most alone I ever had. With the beat of the music I could feel her photograph pulsating inside of me. Trying to saturate and push out the life I had tried to create. One that was unwilling to accept me. A couple of men, furiously snogging, tumbled past and knocked into me. A glass fell from the smaller man's hand and I watched in horror as the red wine seeped into his tight white shirt. His face sharpened instantly and he pushed away his new partner, who was happily lost in the haze of the dance floor. He shouted at me but luckily his voice was lost in

the drone of the music. I ran out of the swamp before he could say anything else and headed to the smoking area to hide.

Outside I wedged myself between a bouncer and drag queen handing out flyers for her show, hoping to merge and disappear into both of them. I checked my phone but there was no word from Daniel. Maybe he had been kidnapped by his drug dealer and was being sold for his organs. Or he had been stung by an undercover officer and needed me to distract the police so he could escape. I wondered how quickly I could make a Molotov cocktail from the contents of the smoking area. Predictably, the stained man appeared in front of me. I smiled meekly. He pointed at the large stain on his shirt, started to laugh wildly and I realised he was far drunker than I had thought. It suddenly felt much more dangerous.

“You owe me...” he slurred, his hand grasping my shoulder for support rather than sensuality. He lit a cigarette and I felt his eye grade me from head to toe.

“What’s your deal?”

Thankfully, without waiting for a response, he told me about himself. He was a doctor, 26 years old and from Godalming, Surrey. In London for a conference about congenital cardiac disease. He lived with his parents, doctors too. He chuckled after he told me this and looked disappointed when it was not reciprocated. As if I should have known about medics multiplying in the petri dish of suburbia.

“I’ve never been to a place like this before” he stuttered. In the corner of my eye, I saw Daniel emerging from an alleyway further down the street.

“It’s amazing in there! I mean...” he motioned to the drag queen next to us and mouthed “t-r-a-n-n-y”

I looked quizzically at him, surely a doctor would know better?

“So where are you from?” he continued, with fervour.

“Here, in East London!” I said proudly, trying to silence the siren that had started to go off loudly in my head.

“...but, like, where were you born?”

“Oh, North London”

“No! Where were your parents born?”

I felt like a jilted bride, walked down the aisle but pushed into a row of pews at the very last moment.

“I mean, you’re obviously mixed, so like half black. But the other half, I just can’t tell.

So ambiguous. Exotic. You remind me of Aladdin! Disney’s Aladdin?”

In an instant I folded into myself. Daniel waved from down the street but I could not wave back. The cigarette smoke hung around the stranger like a dragon blowing hot air whilst he guarded his most cursed treasure.

“Don’t look so glum mate! I heard they modelled him on Tom Cruise”

On my journey home I thought about how I should tell this story in the future. I settled on embellishment. On fantasy. I would make myself a valiant knight who never tired of battling against the endless hoard. This knight would not have laughed with the stranger. Or allowed himself to be drawn into a discussion about how refusing to date black guys was just a preference, not racism. This knight would certainly not have bought an entire bottle of wine for his foe, whilst being told about his amazing gap year in Bali where the “weed is killer but the men are hideous”. I didn’t manage to find a good ending for the story though. Would the knight ride home on his faithful steed (Daniel) or return to the dancefloor, smeared in blood and sipping a cocktail, held in his enemy’s skull, through a bendy straw?

The patio tiles are damp when I step outside in my socks. She asks me to cut some roses for her, as she can no longer walk up the rocky steps. Her voice is softer than I remember it being. There is a new tenderness, a reverberation that bounces almost mystically off her palate and into the air. A holy sound. Long rolling constants that cause the hairs on the back of my neck to lift up. Instinctively I put on a pair of pink plastic slippers lying near the back door. They are small but by arching my feet I can squeeze in. As I hobble over the grass I become acutely aware that I must look like a hairy pantomime dame. I turn around sheepishly, terrified I have let another clue slip. Rather than looking at me with disgust though, she smiles serenely.

The bones of the garden are still intact but they have softened. There is no longer the crisp line between the grassy verge and manure enriched beds. A patch of fresh turf marks the grave of the allotment. The shed she painted hot pink now school uniform green. Until recently she had poured herself into this garden. This oblong had become her land, her country. As granddad's business had started to bloom, she had been forced to give up work and return home. Her salary was no longer needed and she had a duty as the wife of the house. An entombed matriarch. So she reluctantly hung up her starched power suits and said goodbye to the factory she had arrived as a cleaner in. Dad told me there were a few weeks of lavish suppers before suddenly she disappeared for an entire weekend. Many phone calls later it had transpired that she had escaped to Brighton, desperate to be an audience member of Gardener's Question Time and had stayed in a B&B run by an elderly widow named Jean. Jean had taken a shine to grandma and given her a bag of black tulip bulbs before she boarded her train back to London. Upon her return grandma

revealed that she had secretly been attending horticulture courses at the local college and wanted to become a gardener. This was not allowed but the garden was sceptically handed over to her by her husband. From then onwards the land was torn up and reformed, solely by her hand. The new vegetable patch, planted with courgettes, aubergines and tomatoes, produced such a glut in the first year that entire weeks were dedicated to picking and pickling. So large was the harvest that the postman, initially threatening to formally complain about the heavy seed catalogues he was delivering almost daily, started to bring his own empty jam jars to be filled.

One spring, a thin thorny stick appeared by the back wall, assumed to be another order from a catalogue. When it flowered and the beautiful roses filled the garden with perfume, grandma was congratulated for her green thumbs by her shocked family. Except for dad, who recalled being shocked. For this was the very same rose he had seen on the school trip to a castle the previous year. The trip she had accompanied him on as a parent volunteer and he had avoided her at every opportunity, except once when he needed money to buy a keying. After a week of him pestering her at the school gates, she finally revealed the truth to him. Whilst the other visitors had been distracted by a minor member of the Royal Family, unrecognisable if it were not for the wall of security, she had snuck behind a barrier and taken a cutting of the rose with a pair of secateurs hidden in the folds of her sari. "Repatriation" she replied when he accused her of theft.

Trekking upstairs, to find a vase, I can't help but notice that the emptiness is profound, as if an uninvited and malingering relative. One bedroom is still made up

for visitors but the rest have closed doors and dusty handles. On the walls and ceilings there are oily fingerprints and scuff marks. From a time when so many had coursed through the corridors of this house, giving it life. Or at least moving the air around. In her old bedroom there are numerous cardboard boxes filled with belongings. The vase stands on the windowsill, surrounded by a ring of soil from the ghost of a potted plant. One of her old wax jackets lies in an open box, a large slash in the sticky fabric from when she fell over trying to weed the garden last year. I put it on, hoping for an emotional moment but instead it just feels itchy. I press my head against the dusty window, unsure and unwilling to proceed any further. I don't have to tell her today. I could just let her die without ever knowing. She seems so blissful. Spending her last days potting around the kitchen, combing her ivory hair, reading large print library books. Her role in all of this is so minimal. From the window, I can see fully how drastic the changes to the garden have been. It has been aggressively shaved and pruned, as I had this morning. Edges blunted. Even the apple tree, once wild and full of nesting birds, is now a perfect green sphere. Looking down I can see the point at which the thick trunk meets the ground and it makes me think of Henri.

Henri was my first love. One of the builders who fixed the roof when I was nine or ten. There were other men too who came that summer; a fat one who threw cigarettes into the pond and a terrifying bodybuilding builder who used to fart loudly. But Henri's name is the only one I remember. He wore skin-tight silver lycra when he cycled his bike. He was a bad boy who didn't wear a helmet, which I knew one day I would have to scold him for. I observed Henri for the first few days from behind bushes with my plastic binoculars. Initially suspicious but actually, truly, in love. Unsure in that way children often are of their exact feelings. I watched him take his

boots off every time he entered the house and line them up neatly outside the porch. I listened to him learning the names of everyone in the family. I realised slowly that all I wanted was for Henri to spend time with me. I would purposely bump into him and try to start a conversation but he would only ruffle my hair or smile in response. Many days later, I think, Henri was walking around the garden barefoot and I saw that another builder had thrown his shoes into the tree. With ease, Henri scaled the trunk and retrieved his shoes. It was then that I realised what I needed to do to get Henri's attention. I had to climb that tree to show him that I was just as strong and interesting as he was.

Of course, I failed at every attempt. I even tried to use the step ladder in the shed, but it was too heavy for me to lift. On the last day of the building I lay defeated on the grass, my skin grazed and bleeding from the rough trunk. I tried, with the last of my strength, not to cry and focused instead on the apples growing with the leaves, blushed delicately pink like the sunset. A flash of light bought my attention upstairs, where a window had just been opened. Standing in the clear glass was Henri, completely naked. He had uncoiled his long dreadlocked hair and stood lithe and exposed, bathing in the sun like a snake. My eyes widened as I looked at him whilst he tucked his penis into his cycling shorts. He vanished into the dark depths of the room before appearing moments later, leaving the house by the front door. He cycled away without saying goodbye. I pushed my face into the soil and let my hot tears flow, knowing that they would at least feed the roots of the tree. I heard the backdoor open and thinking he had returned, I leapt up onto my feet before grimacing in pain from the cuts on my knees. It had just been grandma, arriving

celestially in a white cotton shirt and wellington boots. She lifted up my face and pushed a digestive biscuit into my mouth.

“What have you done to yourself my gulaab?”

I turned my head away, furious at myself and the nickname she had for me. She noticed the cuts on my hand and dabbed them with the corner of her shirt.

“The builders were strong men, yes?” she said, pinching one of my fat cheeks, “But like my apple tree, they grew from just a seed”. I fell into her hug, my arms shaking from both fatigue and sadness.

Closing the door of the bedroom softly I let my hand rest on the door, so that I leave one more fingerprint. On the table downstairs there is strangely no food on offer. I pass her the vase as she sits down on the far end of the table, her knees crunching like tissue paper. On the hob a pot slowly boils. Jars of spices cluster around the counter: cinnamon sticks, green cardamom, dried mint, crushed black peppercorns, rolled tea leaves and jewels of rock sugar glinting in the afternoon sun. In the sink two metal cups lie upside down and freshly washed. They were part of my grandfather’s tiffin box, one of the few precious items they shipped over with them. He had been too embarrassed to take them to work though and they had been relegated to toys for his children. Items of such beauty. Engraved with our surname and embedded with beaten copper flowers and leaves.

It all comes flooding in. What does she know of my world? Only of the sin that drenches it from centuries of revulsion. Colonial courts and dirty words. Husbands coming back to the villages with syphilis from brothels, but ones filled with boys. How could she know? Of Warhol, Ginsberg, Kahlo, Foucault, of Audre Lorde. How would



she know? Married to a stranger at seventeen, wrenched from her town, country, continent and future. Thrown onto a cold island where people swore at her family in the street. Doors closed in her face, both physical ones of wood and others more secretive, made of arched eyebrows and tight lips. What's the point of me telling her when there is so much she has not told me? When her history is much darker and still unvoiced.

Then she looks at me. Her silk rustles in the kitchen like autumnal leaves. Her bangles jangle meditatively. There is no soil under her nails but in a terracotta pot on the windowsill a delicate green sprout wobbles around. Her deep coffee-coloured eyes are speckled with gold from the garden outside. They tell me of the third gender hijra. Krishna transforming into a woman and sleeping with a king. Putting her son in a dress and mascara so he wouldn't be stolen when they were on the boat. Blue Lord Shiva with a fur loin cloth, hot red lips and a topknot. Eyes unblinking. A time before India was India. When temples of eroticism were built and worshiped within. Before ships came and told them how to eat and wash. How to live. Before jailhouses were erected and filled with the same people who had been made to build them. Before men who had never set foot on the land divided a map with thick lines. An inheritance, long hidden. A time before her but written deep inside. Passed unspoken. An unbroken line of ancestry as long as anyone else's. A history of a people that laid dormant for two hundred years.

She readjusts her sari. The chai is ready. She catches it just before it boils over.

## About the author

K Devan is a writer living in East London and a recent graduate of the Faber Academy, where he entered on a full scholarship. Additionally, he is the current Jason Chin Scholar at the Nursery Theatre. His work explores sexuality and ethnicity, through an intersectional and post-colonial approach. Find him on twitter: [@k\\_devan\\_writes](#)