



That Asian Kid

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Jeevan tells us he's taking a short cut through the woods on the way home from his boys' grammar school. He must be back to give Maji, his grandmother, her insulin shot, but maybe there's time for a smoke. Laughter on the path behind him. Two of his teachers - Mr Green, his best, Mrs Greaves, his worst. That's odd. Never seen them together at school. Jeevan hides in a holly bush ? mustn't be seen with a cigarette. They talk, she's upset, says some kid has sent the Head an anonymous note accusing her of marking down his grades unfairly. She sobs into his chest, he comforts her. What?! No! Buttons getting unbuttoned. ?Huffing and puffing and panting?. Gross! They're ?at it?, even though it's a ?freeze-your-nose-off? January day. All over. Then she's saying, ?You promised me you'd talk to her.? He says she misunderstood. They're gone.

Except Jeevan's got it all on video on his phone. And he knows first-hand who wrote that anonymous note. All that in two short chapters. A time bomb is ticking. A tale fit for a tabloid.

But Jeevan isn't a tabloid kind of guy. He's from a middle-class home. His parents are second generation Indian, hospital doctors, liberal-minded. His sister is reading Medicine at Oxford and Jeevan hopes to follow her. He's working hard on his GCSEs, his grades are As and A Stars, except for English Lit with Mrs Greaves. Nothing he does pleases her. She finds fault with his work and with him; she complained to the Head that he answers back in a ?belligerent manner? ? and got him his first ever detention. She gives him Bs and Cs; even his classmates who get As say his work's better than theirs. He has good friends; Jonathan (aka ?Dread?) is half-Nigerian, half-English and Sandi is Sikh. They look out for each other, they listen, talk things through. The school is predominantly white; there's no racial tension and the staff (especially Mr Green) teach well and are well-liked. It's only Mrs Greaves.

By nature, Jeevan sees many sides to any question. Since he's the narrator, we follow his mind as he works through all his increasing dilemmas ? especially what to do with that video. We sit with him through the pain of interviews with the Head. Inevitably the pace slows and the friends' conversations about Jeevan's problems risk becoming circular; readers may well be impatient for more dramatic action. That arrives when Jeevan (by dint of some improbable lip reading) works out that Green and Greaves plan to meet in the woods again; he's there in the holly bush, phone poised. This time, Greaves is blatantly racist: ?You can't let these coloured kids win. Look at them all ? acting like they bloody own the country.....that Asian kid [Jeevan] with his jumped-up, know-it-all attitude...? Green cannot believe what he's

hearing. Is she deranged? Her behaviour hints at that. It's not that such primitive racism wasn't around in the UK ? we're in 2016 ? but here, Mrs Greaves' language seems implausibly crude, something of a cliché ? maybe an anachronism - so that she risks becoming a caricature. In turn, that diminishes the vindictive threat she presents to Jeevan's academic and personal future, threatening to weaken the conflict and tension at the core of the novel itself.

The time bomb (the fumbling sex in the woods, red lacy knickers and all) duly explodes, posted on YouTube, then Twitter, WhatsApp and the rest through a barely explained mistake by a minor character, rather than a considered decision by Jeevan. It goes viral. Kalhan is at her best as the news races throughout the school. From that point, despite setbacks and misunderstandings, truth must out.

Source URL (retrieved on Jan '20): <http://edbtjyw.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/239/childrens-books/reviews/that-asian-kid>

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