

Speaker - Monwara Ali Wordsmith - Veronica Dewan

I love trains, the excitement as they ease into the station, lean towards the platform. I like the quiet zone, to sink into a window seat. It is one of my favourite ways to relax, delighting in the countryside of forests, streams, gentle hills, fields of corn.

Salisbury is my hometown. I am a Gateline at the local railway station. Most people think that I just press a button to let people in or out, but it's much more than that. I watch vigilantly for any danger. I make sure people are safely getting through the barriers and, if not, I will release them as quickly as possible if they get trapped. I'm the first port of call when they need information about their journey, or if they are meeting someone off a train. I look out for vulnerable people and will alert my colleagues to get them the help they need.

Magic happens when journeys connect us. In close proximity to people who we don't know. Though we may not exchange a word, we can learn something new about the world, sensing anticipation, a surge of elation, witnessing loved ones embrace.

Railways are part of my heritage. My grandfather worked on the railways in the early twentieth century and now here I am in the twenty-first century welcoming you from near and far.

My mother and I arrived in Salisbury in the 1970s. We were fleeing war and famine after a war of independence broke out in what was formerly East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. My father was already running a successful business here. He and his friends opened the first Indian restaurant in Salisbury and soon he started his own restaurant. This is where we came, from Bangladesh, to live above the restaurant in Fisherton Street with the staff.

A quiet town with little diversity, I don't remember very much about my first few weeks. I do remember it was winter and from wearing cotton dresses and running around barefoot, I had to adjust to being covered up in scratchy woollen dresses with tights, and shoes that pinched my feet.



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I was enrolled in a school without knowing a word of English. Luckily, I'm a fast learner. The other children were curious about me. They would ask if I had white bits under my clothes like they did when they had a suntan, some of them asked if I could wash off my colour. At secondary school I was the only one with a different skin colour in a school of 700 white girls.

It was a horrendous time to be growing up, when a political party was trying to make us out to be invaders who were taking over the country.

To arrive at the station. See only strangers. No-one to greet you. A crowded train. You have to stand. Have to queue for the exit. Can't access your app. Some travellers don't hold back.

Then I see you. Baby with the ginger hair. Your smile so sweet. Your smile stays with me. My day gets brighter. It makes my day when you smile at me.

I understand journeys are not all straightforward.

Disruption strikes fear in my hearts. It could be leaves on the line, too hot, too cold. People scoff when there are delays. They don't realise how dangerous it could be. The accident in the Salisbury tunnel in 2021 where two train crashed was due to something on the line that had prevented the brakes from working properly.

Everyone needs to be safe. A place of refuge and sanctuary. Women escaping domestic abuse. May be running away alone. Or with children. Maybe being followed. Needing urgent help. Arriving at the station empty-handed or with a suitcase or several bin bags.

If you are this person, you will receive support. You will be treated with humanity and with respect. Station staff are sensitive and aware. You and your children will be given free travel across UK rail networks for you to reach your chosen destination. We will help you. If you are this person, we will help you get to a sanctuary.



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My sanctuary is my allotment, my happy place. And for all the hard work and demands it makes of me, it soothes me. While digging, pruning, weeding, harvesting, this is where I set the world to rights. In quieter moments at work, I dream about my allotment, planning and plotting what I will plant for next spring and summer.

Yesterday I was walking home from my plot at the allotments with my harvest of squash, leafy greens and some potatoes. I had a bunch of flowers that I had picked to take to a friend.

As I got to the junction I stopped and waited to cross the road and a van pulled up alongside me. The driver sticking her head out the window asked "Where did you get your plants"? I replied that I'd grown them, she told me my flowers were very pretty and I thanked her. As she drove off she said "We thought you had nicked them!" Too stunned to say anything I gave out an uncomfortable laugh.

I tried to brush it off as I walked home, but the more I thought about it, the more it bugged me. If she was joking, then it was a very offensive joke, and if she was serious, why would she think that? Would she have thought or said that to someone white who was walking from the direction of the allotments with flowers and veg? Why did she instantly jump to the conclusion that what I was holding couldn't possibly belong to me?

I enjoy my days off, taking the train. The biggest treat is looking into people's gardens where so much imagination is sown. Once the train was diverted and I saw the most enormous swimming pool. I didn't know people in England had so much wealth.

When my father arrived in the UK in the sixties he went to work in the mills in the north of England. One day, on a road trip to Bristol, my father saw the countryside, rolling hills and forests surrounding Salisbury, it reminded him so much of home he decided to settle here.

