

SHEREEN PANDIT

SHE SHALL NOT BE MOVED

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I swear, if it hadn't been so late, I'd have done something about it. Or if the previous two number 201 buses hadn't vanished into thin air². Or if it hadn't been so cold. Or if I didn't have Mariam with me, her almost turning blue with the cold. Yes, I would definitely have done something about it, there and then. I would have given him a piece of my mind. And them.

But the thing is, it was late, and the buses hadn't come for more than an hour. And this being London, it was pretty darned cold and there was Mariam, shivering next to me. So I was highly pleased, I tell you, when that bus finally pulled up. I paid. That's another thing, it was the last change I had on me and I couldn't afford to get chucked off, could I?

Anyhow, this bus finally comes, I put Mariam up alongside me, while I pay. Then I try to move her along into the bus ahead of me. Only, we can't move. The aisle's blocked by this huge woman, with a pram³ in the middle of the aisle. She seems to be Somali, from her clothes – long dark dress, hair covered with a veil, like what nuns used to wear, arms covered to the wrists, nothing but face and hands showing. The driver shouts at me to move down the bus, only I can't because of the pram. I'm about to say to him, well get this woman to move out of the way – it's one of those modern buses with a special place for prams – when I see what the problem is.

There are these two women, sitting in those fold up seats in the pram space. White, fifty-ish, wrinkles full of powder and grey roots under the blonde rinse, mouths like dried up prunes⁴, both of them. One of them's wearing a buttoned up cardie⁵ like Pauline in Eastenders⁶. The other one's wearing a colourless crumpled and none to clean mac⁷ of some kind. The big-breasted, big-bottomed type. Both looked strong enough in the arm to lift a good few down⁸ the pubs every night.

They're sitting right under that notice which says: "Please allow wheelchair users and those with prams priority in using this space". Which means, these two are supposed to get up so the Somali woman can put her pram in the space left when their seats

¹ Britain Rewritten: Stories of a multi-ethnic nation. Reclam 2007.

² vanish into thin air: sich in Luft auflösen

³ pram: Kinderwagen

⁴ prune: Pflaume

⁵ cardie: short for cardigan (Strickjacke)

⁶ Eastenders is a British soap opera that has been running since 1985.

⁷ a mac: a raincoat (short for a brand called Mackintosh)

⁸ to lift a good few down: to have quite a lot of beer at a pub

fold up. Only, they're staring hard out of the window, pretending they haven't heard a word of what's going on, and if they did, it's nothing to do with them.

As I said, they didn't look like the kind to tackle unless you wanted a real scene. I wouldn't have put it past the likes of them to use some pretty rough language, regardless of whether there were kids around. Me, I don't like exposing Mariam to unpleasantness. So I turn to the driver, who's still yelling down the aisle from behind his glassed in box. I reckon it's his job to tell the women to move. I mean why should I do his dirty work?

There're two empty seats right opposite the women. They can just move over the aisle. I look hard at them, trying to will⁹ them to look around. They finally can't resist looking round to see the havoc¹⁰ they've caused. They're still trying to be nonchalant, but you can see this gleam of satisfaction in their eyes, their mouths growing even thinner as they jam their lips grimly together, as if to say: "That'll show you who's boss!"

I take the chance to point the empty seats out to them. Politely. I'm doing as my mum said when I was young, always show them we're better. So, even though I've got a small kid with me, I'm not scrambling to grab the seat. Usually I let Mariam sit down because buses jerking around can be dangerous for kids, especially kids like Mariam, small for her age and skinny to boot¹¹. But do these old so-and-so's take the seat I'm pointing out to them? Not likely. They look at me, then look at the seats as if they're a pile of dogdirt I'm offering. Then they mutter something to each other, turn up their noses and stare out the window again, like it's nothing to do with them. The Somali woman, meantime, has squashed herself tight up against the side of the aisle, just below the stairs. If anyone really wants to, they can squeeze past and go on upstairs. Her face is tight too. Lips set. Eyes blank. Head held high. She looks like a haughty¹² queen. She's done her best to accommodate¹³ other passengers by leaving them what inches she can, and now she just shuts off and looks into space.

Through all this, the driver's been yelling on and off. Finally, his door swings open – the glassed-in bit leading into the bus, I mean. Right, I think, here he comes, he's going to make the old witches move. He's not scared of them, big strapping bloke, he doesn't have to be scared of anyone or anything. Besides, he's got right on his side. They can't even complain amongst themselves, let alone to his employers that he's taking sides with the Somali women just because they're both black.

But oh no! He comes at this Somali woman and yells at her that either she folds up the pram or she leaves the bus. He's all over her, leaning right into her face and shouting. I reckon he's going to hit her. I hate violence and I turn Mariam's face away. I don't like her seeing ugliness like this. The Somali woman doesn't give an

⁹ will sb. to do sth: jmd. dazu bringen, etw. zu tun

¹⁰ havoc: mess, chaos

¹¹ skinny to boot: very skinny

¹² haughty: proud

¹³ accommodate: (hier) Rücksicht nehmen

inch. Except to turn aside disdainfully¹⁴ because this bloke's spit is flying in her face. Pulling her wrapper more closely about her, she says scornfully¹⁵ that she's not doing either. And you can see why not. Her baby's asleep in the pram and she's already got another small one hanging onto her. One hand on the pram, another on the toddler.¹⁶

Her face is full of contempt¹⁷ for this driver, but her voice isn't rude or loud or anything. Just firm. She's paid, she's got these kids, she's staying put. He shouts and storms. Eventually he gives up and goes back and starts the bus so it jerks and she and the kid and the pram nearly go flying, except for the pram being stuck. Me, I'm totally shocked at his attitude. I'm really building up a head of steam here¹⁸. If it wasn't for all the stuff I said before, at this stage I really would have given him a go. But he's gone back and there's nothing I can do about him.

I tell the Somali woman to sit down in the empty seat, thinking she can at least hold the small one on her lap and maybe I could steady the pram while Mariam sits next to her. She shakes her head wordlessly. It's like she's used up all her words on the driver. I reckon maybe, in spite of her looking so proud and firm, she's too timid to give the women a go. Maybe she's worried, being black and a foreigner, probably a refugee and all. Maybe she also doesn't like a scene and is already embarrassed enough by the women. Maybe if she'd said something to them directly, I would have backed¹⁹ her. But how could I go and attack them out of the blue, make them move, if she's not saying anything to them?

The two women, deciding that they aren't having enough fun, start a loud conversation with each other about how they're not getting up, no way. Cardie reckons to Mac that "they" – meaning women with prams, or does she mean black women – just pretend "they" want to park the pram and then snatch the seats. "They" want everything their way. Definitely black people this time. And on and on they go. I'm fuming, amongst other things, because Mariam is being subjected to all this racist hogwash²⁰. But what's the point in having a go? It'll only lead to a row lasting the whole bus ride and I probably will get chucked off then for stirring²¹. Even if I'm in the right. They can say what they like about anti-racist laws, but I've yet to see them stop people like these two slinging their poison around.

I look at the other passengers in the second half of the bus, past the stairs. All white. No-one's saying anything, no-one's seeing anything, no-one's hearing anything. Not their business. Mariam starts to nudge me and whispers to me to tell the driver to tell the old witches to move. She doesn't call them that, though. Calls them "those two ladies". Ladies my backside.

¹⁴ disdainfully: verächtlich

¹⁵ scornfully: verächtlich

¹⁶ **toddler: small child**

¹⁷ contempt: Verachtung

¹⁸ building up a head of steam: becoming powerfully angry

¹⁹ back sb.: give support

²⁰ hogwash: Unsinn

²¹ to stir: (here) cause trouble

Mariam's language is polite, but this is a kid with attitude²². Got it from me, I guess. I used to be known as a kid with attitude too. They can have our seats, she says loudly. I nod, but say nothing. Mariam decides to go on, so I feel like really nudging her hard, only I don't hold with hurting kids. They are the problem, she says even more loudly. I look at them again, still saying nothing. I'm still thinking that with the Somali woman saying nothing to them and the driver on their side, I'm going to end up outside in the cold with Mariam, minus the fare, if I take them on.

This is what I'm thinking, but not saying to Mariam. Kids, there are things they just don't understand. I mean, Mariam would definitely not get to her dance lesson on time and then she'd be right miffed²³. And then there's the busfare and the fees and the time and everything all wasted.

Mariam glares at the women. She glares at me. I know what she's thinking. How many times have I told her to stand up against wrongdoing. How many times have I pushed her into standing up against bullies at school, whether they're bullying her or someone else. And her only such a small kid for her age.

We try to bring her up thinking about right and wrong. Like how many times have I told her that I'm only living in this miserable country because I'd got into trouble back home, fighting for our rights. There are political posters and slogans all over the house. One of them's got Pastor Neumuller's speech: "First they came for the Jews...."²⁴ and all that. She knows, all right. She knows that I should be speaking up for this Somali woman.

And here I'm saying nothing, doing nothing. Every once in a while, when people get on and mutter about the aisle being blocked, the driver shouts at the Somali woman. She stands there like a rock. Cardie and Mac have restarted their loud conversation about "them" wanting to take everything over. I laugh in their faces and start agreeing loudly with Mariam, but I don't say anything to them. The bus is filling up. At a couple of stops some pretty yobbo²⁵ looking types get on. You know, tattoos, earrings all over their faces, hair sticking up. The type that I can't afford to get tangled with. I don't fancy a boot in my face. Or in Mariam's. While those two probably watch and cheer. The yobbos just squeeze past the Somali woman. It's a couple of blokes in collars and ties²⁶ that swear at her before they force a path upstairs, nearly making her let go of the pram and fall. You can't always tell by appearances²⁷, can you.

Then the bus empties a bit. Another middle-aged woman gets on, about the same age as the two troublemakers. But this one's sort of frailer looking. Now my mum, when we were kids, she'd only have given us what-for²⁸ if we didn't get up and offer our seats to older people. I've still got the habit drilled into me. I don't like Mariam

²² attitude: (here) a clear moral opinion

²³ miffed: feel treated unfairly

²⁴ A line from a poem by Martin Niemöller (a German pastor who opposed the Nazi regime)

²⁵ yobbo: (umgangssprachlich) like a rowdy

²⁶ blokes in collars and ties: Typen in Anzügen

²⁷ tell by appearance: beurteilen aufgrund der äusseren Erscheinung

²⁸ to give what-for: streng zurechtweisen

getting up, like I said, in case she falls, so usually I give up my seat. But this time, I sit tight. Mariam gives me a questioning look, then makes to get up for this new old lady, but I pull her down. Call me a reverse racist if you like, but if those white women won't get up for the Somali woman, then I'm not giving my seat or my kid's to one of their kind. No way. I didn't start this.

Now they start a loud conversation about the "their" manners²⁹. Meaning me. I glare at them and say nothing. I can feel Mariam wriggling with impatience for me to mouth off at them. But I reckon with the driver on their side, even against this poor woman with her pram and her kids, what chance have I got? He'd probably call the police for me, if I gave them lip³⁰. And guess whose side the police would be on! So I glare and sit tight. I stare straight ahead, like this old lady standing is nothing to do with me. I can feel my lips tighten with satisfaction at getting back at the other two. See how they feel when it's one of their kind getting a dose of it.

But I'm feeling right small inside. I feel like a real sod³¹. Not only for not standing up for the Somali woman, but for not giving my seat to the old white woman. Plus Mariam starts hassling about getting up for the old woman. I almost blow my top³² at Mariam. I mean, can't she see what I'm doing? Standing up to them? I pull her down again and glare at her, whispering "No!" fiercely at her as she struggles to stand up and give her seat to the old woman standing.

Then I feel like a right idiot, getting upset at Mariam. The kid's only doing what she's been taught. I make my excuses to Mariam, but she's not taking any notice of me. She doesn't exactly look like she wants to cry, like when she's mad at me, though. Her face is just the same as usual, not swelling up and going red like it always does before she starts to cry, but her eyes have that sad, lost, grief-stricken³³ look. I sit there feeling right helpless. I'm trying to remember where I know that look from.

The bus is coming to a main shopping area, people are walking around with holly³⁴-printed plastic bags full of goodies. That makes me remember when Mariam had that look on her face. She had it when she woke up in the night last Christmas and found her Dad stuffing her stocking³⁵. I feel sick at the thought of what she's thinking of me. The thing is, what can I do? You can teach kids to stand up against bullies, but sometimes they've got to learn discretion is the better part of valour³⁶. I start to explain, but Mariam isn't taking any notice. She looks again at the old woman swaying about on the bus, trying to hold on to prevent herself falling. Then she gives me a look – like I've chucked away her favourite teddy bear.

At last we get to Woodgreen and the troublemakers get off, slinging a last few barbs over their shoulders. At that, the Somali woman finally snaps. She lets go of the pram

²⁹ manners: Manieren

³⁰ to give lip: to speak to someone rudely and without respect

³¹ a sod: a mean person

³² blow one's top: getting very angry

³³ grief-stricken: extremely sad

³⁴ holly: plant used for decoration at Christmas

³⁵ Children hang empty stockings up on Christmas Eve so that Santa Claus can fill them overnight.

³⁶ discretion is the better part of valour: Vorsicht ist besser als Nachsicht

and leans out the doorway and shouts “racists!” after them. They’re still hurling abuse at her, as if they were the injured parties, as they disappear into the crowd, everybody staring. But thank god, it’s Woodgreen and the sea of faces staring interestedly at us is as much black as white.

The Somali woman starts to struggle to turn the pram so she can get off too. I offer to help her, muttering to her that she should report the driver. What’s the good of that, she says bitterly. But why do you think he’s taking their part, I ask her, because I am truly confused. I mean he’s a black man. The black woman is clearly in the right, so, as I said before, he can’t get into trouble with the company if he tells the white women to get up or get off.

The Somali woman gives me a long look: “Because he’s a slave,” she says. “He is a slave,” she repeats loudly through the still open back door of the bus, at the driver collecting fares from passengers boarding at the front. I realise from her attitude that they probably already played it all out, she and the women and the driver, before I got on the bus.

“But me,” she says, looking at me hard again, “I am not a slave. I would rather die than be one.” Her voice is like granite, hard and unmovable. Every word falls heavy as a stone between us, cuts into me like a diamond.

I feel my face turn red as I take Mariam’s hand. All through Mariam’s class, that woman’s words go round and round in my head. I reckon it’s me she’s called a slave too, for not sticking up for her. And the thing is, I’m not even mad at her if that’s what she’s saying. I’m just upset at myself for not doing anything.

And then there’s Mariam. People reckon kids forget things quickly. But I know Mariam. All afternoon I sit there watching her. I want to tell her she still shouldn’t let people walk all over her, just because they’re white, or stronger, or richer, or anything. I don’t want her not to stick up for other people if she sees wrong done to them. But I also want to tell her that you can’t always do that – you’ve got to pick your moments. Then I ask myself what’s the good of raking it all up³⁷ again? What’s done is done.

After her class, Mariam asks to go to the bagel shop for a hot buttered bagel. This is our usual routine, our little treat. I suggest an extra special treat instead. I take Mariam for a pizza and let her have Coke as extra, extra special. She looks puzzled for a moment at all this, but then she’s yakking away, back to her usual bouncy self. I reckon there’s nothing like a special treat to let kids forget bad memories. Soon she’s blowing bubbles into her Coke through her straw. She’s got a smear of pizza tomato on her cheek.

So why can’t I forget the whole thing? Is it because I imagine a bit of Mariam’s look of this afternoon still about her every time she looks at me?

³⁷ rake sth. up: bring something unpleasant up again and talk about it