

Kamal Sangha

Ethnic Cleansing

AMAR AND HIS FRIENDS spent most of the summer hassled by police. A few minutes after the shopkeepers' shutters were down a patrol car invariably pulled up on the corner where they swapped stories to keep themselves going. Two officers told them it was an offence to be brown and think you owned the streets.

PC McKenna loved these moments. He got a real buzz out of it. He would brag to his wife after they made love, smoothing his hand across her throat, and then snap his fingers—*Like that!*—after he spun the air with a restraint technique tacit in standard police training manuals.

Each night Amar came home his parents turned to him from two, low, wooden stools in the kitchen; they cut loose threads and made final adjustments to garments for a local manufacturer. Cloth dust filled the air and weakened the light. Amar thought they looked like the two people in a painting in the local museum: solemn and sullen and still working after a poor dinner. He couldn't handle it and went straight back out after he finished eating.

His mates practiced dance steps to the music coming out of the late night record shop, totally skint bar a few cans of lager placed in one of the open doorways. If the owner was out they would go in and request a medley of made-to-measure grooves. Then they would dance as pair, trio, quartet, full tilt, right up on the beat.

McKenna watched them on a monitor at the station. He would study their mouths for a pulsing tirade or a self-incriminating rhyming couplet about cops. Often he got confused as they mixed Punjabi and English. It was enough to make him snatch his fags off the desk and take out his truncheon and thwack it against his palm before he slid it back into the holster.

The boys were really going for it. The late sun was still strong and happy sweat poured out of their faces. One of them suggested they regularly practice, he reckoned they could make it as an outfit dancing at birthdays and weddings. Suddenly everyone agreed and started talking quickly about what they could achieve. It was great to be alive.

McKenna brushed his trousers as he stepped out of the car. He was six four and proud of his body. He used to have a partner but now did the rounds alone—back up was only a gesture away. In meetings with local community leaders and liaison officers he would stiffen to the word multicultural, thinking, how did it get this far: these black cunts with their halting English and local clout; their grandfathers, who used to polish his one's boots, obedient to all non-verbal commands under the Indian sun. In spite of the changes this was his patch and his people before him: the clubs, the pubs, the market, the boys brigade. Now there was a temple, restaurants, women in orange silk. When was the last time he'd seen hopscotch.

McKenna approached the dancers. A few people stopped and watched from the other side of the street. He put his foot on the kerb and tapped almost to the music, just stopping himself in time. He balled his fists and kneaded them into his sides, smiled and shook his head.

Amar stood in the dark of a doorway blowing smoke out into the street. He watched McKenna pick up the glow of the cigarette. One of his mates carried on dancing. The others clapped in unison and nodded to the beat. The lone dancer stopped mid move, arms

extended up past his head, fingers splayed, swivelled and turned to his friends. Ar-ee-pa! The boys threw back their heads and laughed, lapping it up for all it was worth. McKenna was old hat, a knackered emissary from some totalising, racially fucked up confederacy.

Another song, another remix. A different dancer veered towards McKenna and came to a halt a foot or so, frozen in dance. He looked at the boy's face: pouted lips and dilated eyes. A knowing smile slithered into his head and he began to work out which bones he could cleanly break.

Amar stepped out of the doorway with a can in his hand and took a long swig. The lone dancer collapsed his arms and asked for a drink. He took it out of the back of Amar's hand while Amar simultaneously took a can out of the hand of another, a swift, cool, balletic move dazzling audiences around the world. McKenna licked the inside of his mouth. He hoped to sit in front of a cool pint as soon as all this was in the shade. He looked straight ahead and pointed at Amar's chest.

You: put that in the bin.

An old Punjabi folk song played in the record shop. Amar's father hummed it as a dirge about farm hands pushed off the land where they ate and sang at the end of the working day, lightened by some home-made brew.

Amar lobbed the can at a bin attached to a lampost. It bounced off the edge and a gush of lager splashed McKenna's upper body. One of the boys was about to rejoice but another pulled him down and told him to cool it.

McKenna didn't even flinch. He stood still with his hands on his hips, legs at ease. He ignored the lager on his arm and shirt and rolled the can with the sole of his foot towards Amar.

Pick it up—now!

Amar clicked his tongue in his mouth. For months McKenna had pushed him around, stopped and searched his dad's car umpteen times—makin him go down to the station to show his documents, waitin at the front desk and slappin him down and showin him the front door and tellin him to sort out his boy in front of other officers.

McKenna dabbed himself with a hanky and wiped his sunglasses. He might just let it go this time until he got him on his own: a couple of strategic blows between chest and navel—where there would be no marking. Nothing that would show up in court. C'mon junior, let's do it, right now. Jesus! I don't know what's worse: you, or a bad meal in a restaurant.

The can stopped two thirds of the way to Amar. It was cheap shit and he didn't like the taste. McKenna was ready—the colour of a dark bruise. He wanted a knock out in the fifth and a briefcase of broken bones.

Amar eyed the can and stepped towards it. He swung back his right foot, making sure he got his toes right underneath, and smacked it as hard as he could. It sped through the air and hit McKenna full in the face.

Later that night a doctor announced the death of Amar Singh Dhillon. His parents shared a mug of hot milk to help them sleep. They were not waiting for the telephone to ring.