

## BEAUTY BY RAPHAEL SELBOURNE

### **Note:**

The 19-year-old, illiterate Bangladeshi woman Beauty Begum has left her home in Wolverhampton to escape from her family. Not knowing where to stay, Beauty is helped by Mark, a young English skinhead and ex-prisoner, who has rescued her from an assault by Asian youths and gives her shelter in his own home.

[...] Mark waited for her and remembered the few English lessons he'd had in jail; how he'd struggled with some fucked-up spelling rules and spent hours on his bed after lock-in getting his head round it; and how he's taught that lad he's shared a cell with. If Beauty knew the alphabet it  
5 would be a start. She'd know the sounds each letter made, alone and together. He felt confident he could do it, and he was happy to help her. It would give him an excuse to be with her. Sit near her. It didn't go any further than that [...]

Spending some time with her would be a good thing. She'd get to  
10 know him more and see that he was a good bloke.

Beauty came in and sat on the sofa. 'Promise you aynt gonna laugh?' she asked.

Mark saw the begging look in her eye. 'Do' worry. I dey learn till I were sixteen misself.'

15 He took some paper from the printer and searched for a pen on the computer desk.

'D'you know the alphabet?' he asked.

'A-B-C stuff?'

Beauty knew she would sound thick at first. There was nothing she  
20 could do about it. But she did know the alphabet.

'Giw on then,' he said.

'What?'

'Say it.'

'Loud?'

25 'Uh-huh.'

She recited it steadily to the end.

'Thass all right,' Mark said. 'Can you write it?'

She could, but not very well.

'Both ways?' he asked.

30 What did that mean? Big and small?

She could do that as well. She told him what the problem was. She knew the letters, but when they were put together it didn't make no sense. Even her own name. How could bee, ee, ay, you, tee, why make 'Beauty'?

35 Mark listened. It was like diagnosing engine problems. He searched for a simple explanation. Each letter made a different sound, he told her.  
[...]

Beauty asked him how she was supposed to know which way to say some of the letters, like 'c' and 'g'. He told her she'd get used to it. He'd keep it simple to start with, he promised, and wrote three-letter words on  
40 a piece of paper. They sounded them out slowly together.

[...] [Mark] wrote all the three-letter words he could think of. Beauty sounded out each one, letter by letter, over and again until the words took shape before her. M-a-n. Man. D-o-g. Dog.

45 She sat cross-legged on the parquet floor and read the words to him, surprised and delighted each time the snaking letters revealed their meaning. The tiredness from her sleepless night vanished. She felt awake, the room seemed brighter, everything was clearer, not just the words on a piece of paper.

*I aynt mental.*

50 *I aynt got learning difficulties.*

*I aynt dumb.*

She could read. Not well, but she could do it. Mark was patient. He went over the letters with her until she got it right and didn't need his help.

55 Hours passed. He made tea and rolled cigarettes. She took one to please him. It tasted horrible and first and made her head spin.

Then he called out words from the list and she tried to write them down, repeating each word over and trying to work out the letters. It was harder than reading but when she got it right it felt good. 'l' and 'E' were  
60 difficult.

Mark watched her fingers grip the pen as she wrote. He willed her on and planned what to introduce next. He was pleased with her progress and his skills as a teacher. When he was satisfied she'd got the hang of it he introduced some harder stuff. Two letters together, like 'st' and 'th'.

65 Beauty's finger hurt from pressing the pen. She stretched and leaned back, brushing against his leg.

She was happy. She wanted to tell her little sis that she could read, and her mum.

No one had explained it to her like Mark had. Maybe she hadn't  
 70 wanted to listen. Her family told her she was dumb, so she had been  
 dumb for them. It helped block them out, their noise and shouts. Then the  
 old man said she was mad, so she was mad for them.

No one had been patient with her or encouraged her like Mark did.  
 No one had ever asked her how she got on at school. They didn't ask  
 75 Sharifa either.

Mark was different. How was it that a stranger had done more for her  
 than her own family? She knew he liked her, but he looked at her from far  
 away. The white *gunda* was shy. He was a tough guy but he couldn't hold  
 her eye for long. [...]

**Source:**

Selbourne, Raphael. *Beauty*. Birmingham: Tindal Street Press, 2009, 267-270

**Annotations:**

- l. 4 lad: informal: boy or man
- l. 10 bloke: informal: man
- l. 11 you aynt: non-standard: you aren't
- l. 13 do': non-standard: don't
- l. 13 dey: non-standard: didn't
- l. 14 misself: non-standard: myself
- l. 19 thick: informal: stupid
- l. 21 giw on: non-standard: go on
- l. 27 thass: non-standard: that's
- l. 49 mental: informal: mad, crazy
- l. 49 I aynt: non-standard: I'm not/I don't have
- l. 61 to will someone on: to encourage someone
- l. 63 to get the hang of something: to understand and become able to do something
- l. 72 the old man: Beauty's father
- l. 75 Sharifa: Beauty's sister
- l. 78 gunda: derogatory: hooligan