

Anita and Me

The story revolves around Meena, a British Punjabi girl, and her relationship with her English neighbour Anita as they grow up in the fictional Midlands village of Tollington in the 1970s. In this extract the narrator, Meena, has been caught stealing sweets by her father and he is returning her to the shop to own up to her crime.

9 'I'm not lying, honest, papa!' I pleaded as he took my hand and pulled me towards the kerb, briefly checking for traffic along the twisting country lane. It was hot and I could feel beads of sweat and fear threading themselves into a necklace of guilt, just where my itchy flesh met the collar of my starched cotton dress. Papa did not look angry, he had the air of a man on a mission. He was walking along with that jaunty air that my mother said had made her fall in love with him, a hop of optimism in his walk that belied a sensitive, introspective-looking face. His features effortlessly combined those same contradictions of vulnerability and pride, the sharp leonine nose that swooped down towards the generous questioning mouth, meeting in what looked like the fleshy imprint of a single teardrop.

20 I scuttled after papa along the single road, bordered with nicotine-tipped spiky grass, the main artery which bisected the village. A row of terraced houses clustered around the crossroads, uneven teeth which spread into a gap-toothed smile as the houses gradually became bigger and grander as the road wandered south, undulating into a gentle hill and finally merging into miles of flat green fields, stretching as far as the eye could see. We were heading in the opposite direction, northwards down the hill, away from the posh, po-faced mansions and towards the nerve centre of Tollington, where Mr Ormerod's grocery shop, the Working Men's Club, the diamond-paned Methodist church and the red brick school jostled for elbow room with the two-up-two-downs, whose outside toilets backed onto untended meadows populated with the carcasses of abandoned agricultural machinery. There was only one working farm now, Dale End farm, bookending the village at the top of the hill, where horses regarded the occasional passers-by with mournful malteser eyes.

32 From the crest of the hill, on a clear day, you could see the industrial chimneys of Wolverhampton, smoking like fat men's cigars, and sometimes glimpse the dark fringes of Cannock Chase, several square miles of thick conifers bristling with secrets and deer, where every so often, forgotten skeletons of ancient victims were discovered by local courting couples. But the horizon gradually disappeared as we marched down the hill towards Mr Ormerod's shop, down into the valley of ... I wished I'd never gone to Sunday School, I wished I did not know the name for what I was now feeling. Sin. One word, three letters, eternal consequences. Unless I confessed all now. I swallowed and looked around, as if for help. There was my home, halfway down the hill, standing on the corner of the crossroads, one of the miners' tithe cottages huddled around a dirt yard which was the unofficial meeting place for our small community. There was the small overgrown park next to the Yard, where the swings and rickety slide were watched over by the witch's hat of an ancient metal roundabout.