

DEBBIE'S CALL

By Manasi Subramaniam (India)

As I step out of the bus and walk, along with a hundred others, into the giant industrial complex in front of me, I pause to wipe sweat off my face. For two hours, I have stood on the bus, because there were no vacant seats. My working day has just begun, and I am already exhausted. Everyday, at five in the evening, when the sun sets and my little brother comes home from school, I tiredly step out for work. But I am thankful I have a job—my salary is already higher than my father's, and I work, I am told, for a large bank that has offices all over the world.

I walk towards my desk practising my accents. I have two accents—a British and an American. I call them the clip and the clop. Depending on where the call is from, I use a different accent. I do not know if my accents are very good; I have no points of reference—I have never travelled and we have only recently bought a television set. Sometimes, I am so entrenched in what I do that when I talk to friends on the phone, I say 'Thank you for your patience' or 'Feel free to call me with further queries'. They laugh and tell me that my life has become a call centre.

My British name is Sara and my American name is Debbie. I could use the same name for both types of callers—my boss says it wouldn't make a difference—but it's more interesting for me this way. I use different names, different accents, even different personalities. Sara is an independent girl who does not need men, while Debbie is married and has three children. They are both clever and if they ever met, they would not get along.

I sit at my desk and switch my computer on. The phone rings. I clear my throat before answering. This is a Debbie call. 'Hello,' I say, my voice higher than usual, drawing, 'I'm Debbie. Thank you for calling. How may I help you?' The first call of the day is my favourite. I'm at my best. Later, my responses will become mechanical.

The American at the other end explains his problem to me. With my response-manual, I have all the answers. As the call draws to a close, I look up and see my friend Pavithra coming towards me. Smiling at her, I absentmindedly say into the phone, 'Can I be of any other assistance?' As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I realise that I have accidentally switched accents. Nervously, I repeat the question with the drawl.

The caller does not respond for a moment. Then, he snarls, 'You're not fucking American, are you?' I say nothing. Although it is just a phone call, I am frightened. He goes on: 'What are you going to do with my bank details, you bitch? You won't get anywhere near my family. I'm changing banks right now. You can go tell your fucking people that you got nothing out of me.'

I apologise, as though I have done something wrong, and I flip through the response manual foolishly. There is a lump in my throat that does not let me speak when I try to say I am not who he thinks I am. The American continues with a string of expletives that I have never heard before. 'You people are sick,' he says, 'and you'll pay. You will die.'

As he goes on, I hang up. Debbie has already died.