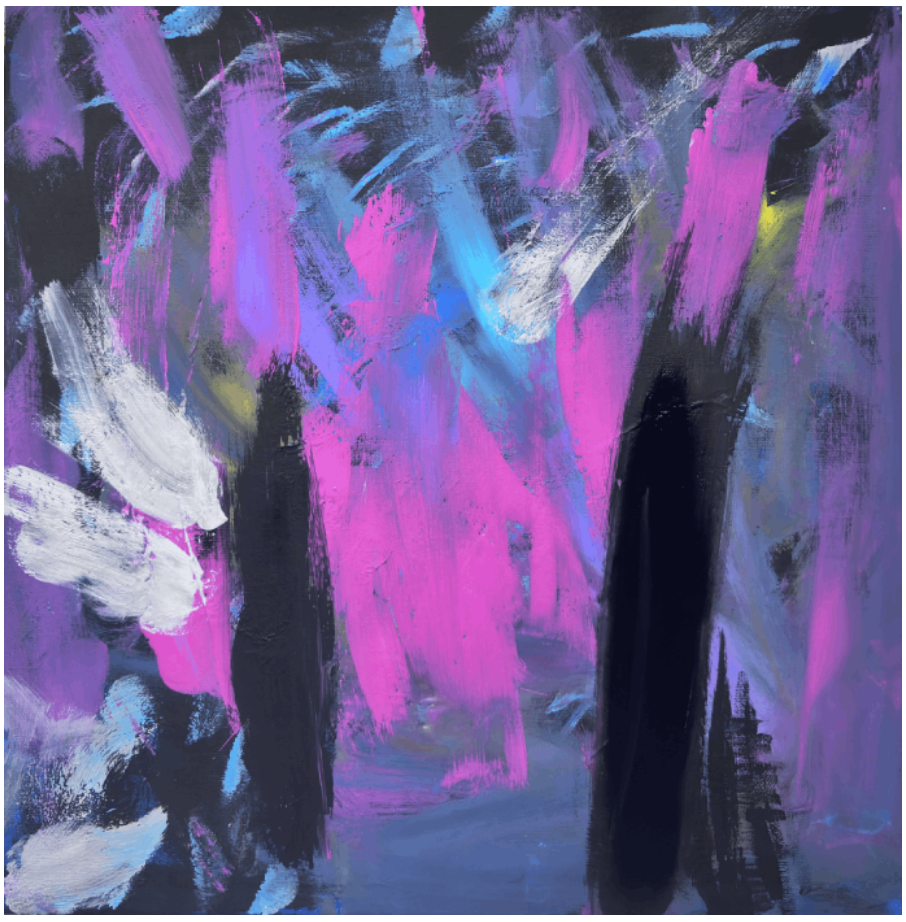
ESSAY

# Dave & Dave

by Abhiram Kuchibhotla



"Pulse" by Tetiana Yatsechko-Blazhenko

*Tint Journal*, no. 16 (September 2026), www.tintjournal.com

Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

Picture, if you will, a couple of acres of woodland. A large swathe of bright chartreuse, a gently sloping bowl dotted with copses of hawthorn and oak trees that were used by the students either to make out, thanks to the dense undergrowth, or to take an urgent leak after having had one too many beers.

The jewel in the centre of this valley was a large lake with a JCB excavator lying at its bottom. Our seniors claimed the man-made crater had been accidentally flooded before the equipment could be recovered. Swimming in its murky waters was prohibited because of the many geese that called it home, but someone would jump in once in a while, if only for the bragging rights of having broken one of the easier rules to break. They knew campus security wouldn't chase them down the trails that ran alongside the lake.

I was Dave for a day. Not by choice or for a ruse, but because he had bestowed it upon me. I'd told him my name was Meghdoot, of course, and even shortened it to the proverbial 'Megh' I offered to my classmates. He had tried his hardest to pronounce it, enunciating it as the usual 'Meg,' which always made me feel like a blonde from the American Midwest with a passion for horses. There was also the shark from the eponymous movie, but I found the former funnier to envision. After a few rounds of going back and forth and failing to aspirate the consonant, he asked if he could call me Dave for the day with a huge grin. He was missing all four of his upper incisors, and I could see the pink of his Adam's apple. I returned the smile, and asked him what his name was.

"Dave!" he said, grinning again.

I took this to be a gesture of respect. Having failed to call me by my own name, he had decided to share his. I said he most certainly could, and thanked him for the joint.

My weekend had begun with a visit to a friend's new apartment. I had taken the bus there, apprehensively watching the white and red flags on poles or clamped between windows fluttering in the wind, and helped her move the furniture around. After getting back, not having had the time to eat anything all day, I decided to go to the bar on campus. I picked up the only margherita pizza I could safely afford and carried it to the wooden tables by the lake.

I moved to Norwich in September a year ago for my master's. My safety as an international student and perceived immigrant had been all but guaranteed as long as I stayed within the university grounds and surrounding areas. But with graduation approaching and the lease for my on-campus accommodation set to expire, I was a bit scared about moving out. All of the Indian students I had met that year shared the same fear — there was a clear wave of discontent rippling through the Kingdom that was United. When I finally moved into a new



Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

house three weeks later, there were riots being stoked in London, a mere two hours away from our idyllic paradise, by the likes of Tommy Robinson.

But back to the day in August when I was Dave, I walked down the field behind the academic buildings, steaming cardboard box in hand, and spotted a couple of classmates already at my favourite table. There had been a semi-concrete plan in the class WhatsApp group to hang out that I had forgotten about. They cheered upon seeing me and thrust a can of cider into my hand. I sat down and made small talk, offering them a slice, and a classmate I knew well passed me a joint.

I took a drag, excited, and praised the stuff. She pointed at a bald man in blue shorts and no shirt standing by the lake.

“It’s his,” she said.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Don’t know. He came by and struck up a conversation. Started rolling midway.”

I nodded my head a couple of times, unwilling to flout social mores I had barely understood in the year that had almost passed. Perhaps it was completely normal to have a stranger be part of a gathering and share his weed, no matter his appearance.

Before I could ask any more questions, the man turned round and walked back to the table.

“Good stuff, eh?” he said, pointing at the joint in my hand. “That’s that wedding cake right there.”

I told him it sure was and became Dave. The original then asked if I was a writer like the rest of the group, and where I was from.

“India,” I said. “And yeah, I’m a writer too.”

“Oh really? India? I’ve been there, you know, back in the seventies. Took the hippie trail up north in those jeeps. You know, the really solid ones. The ones that Tata made.”

I couldn’t stop the surprise from leaking in. “The Tata Qualis? That’s the one you’re talking about, right? The white ones with the decals — yeah, they stopped making them, but they’re still around in places like Rishikesh.”

“Rishikesh, yeah!” he exclaimed, getting the pronunciation just right. “You’ve been there, too, huh? Cause I see you’re smoking this with no trouble, heh-heh — your friend’s already on it. All hash and pipes up there in the mountains, but that’s a clean high.”



Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

I was pulled away from our conversation before I could say anything else. I passed the joint back to him and cheered the poets that had just rocked up. It was a bright, beautiful evening. Someone pulled out a bottle of Pimm's, and another of rosé, only to find out we had no glasses. The shop on campus was closed by three on weekends, so I volunteered to go get some from my room, considering my accommodation was the nearest. I skipped back across the field and through a gap in the bushes, firmly in the grip of the wedding cake and cider, only stopping to say hi to the butterscotch-coloured rabbits peeking out of their burrows.

I returned with all the mugs, glasses, and protein shakers I could muster, and a bottle of cheap vodka that had been languishing at the back of my cupboard for months. Dave was sitting on the grass next to the bench with a tattered canvas satchel in his lap, rolling a cigarette. I poured a generous measure of vodka into a steel glass I'd brought all the way from home and offered it to him.

He looked at me in surprise.

"Hey, you shared your weed with us. I'm afraid no one has any mixers, though," I said.

"Shit, I had no one to smoke it with, Dave. And who needs mixers for vodka?" he replied with a chuckle. "Thanks. I appreciate it — anything to keep the shakes at bay, you know? Smoke's good, but liquor's better."

I didn't ask him what he meant by 'shakes.' He asked me to sit down and passed me the cigarette. We sipped on the vodka as he rolled another big, fat joint with plenty of tobacco.

"We'll keep juggling between them — the joint and rollie," he explained.

"Sure, sounds good."

"So what do ya write about?"

I paused for a second. "Um, sci-fi, mostly. I'm working on a novel."

"Oh, yeah? What's it about?" he asked.

I could see the interest in his grey eyes . "It's… mostly about god," I said. "But with a little technology. Little cyberpunk spin on things."

"Hey, sounds interesting. You a believer?"

"Uh, no, not really."

"Me neither. I believe in aliens, myself."

"Aliens?" I exclaimed.



Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

He looked at me seriously, his eyes glassy from the joints we'd already burnt through. "I know what you're thinking," he said. "I'm no conspiracy theorist, Dave, I'll tell you that. But come on," he continued, balling up a piece of rolling paper in his palm. "Look at this little sphere. And look at all of this around us," he said, waving his other arm at the bench, lake, grass, and trees. "That's the universe. And we're this paper. Are you seriously telling me we're the only ones in this universe?" he demanded.

"No, I get what you're saying."

"It's the government, Dave. They've definitely made contact, but they're keeping it from us. Instead, they tell us that people who look like you are taking our jobs from us, and that it's all going to shit because you're here. And you've only been an angel to me, kid. You see my shitty fucking Nikes and old farty face and what do you do? Give me a drink. I mean, hell, I was a student here back in the day. I put numbers together and brought in money from all over the fucking world. You didn't want us in your country either, right? But did we stop? And it wasn't even legal back then. No visas. It wasn't no fucking free market."

His words cut through me, arcing like electricity down my spine. I didn't know what to say. The truth was that there was no word except beggar for the homeless in India. Not to mention that he was exactly the kind of man I would have kept my distance from, afraid for my safety. I felt ashamed for thinking what I had when he clearly hadn't.

"I'll drink to that," I said, raising my mug. "To taking the blue-collar jobs… because the white ones were refused to us."

"Hell yeah!" he said, thrusting the joint at me. "And hit that too, Dave. Here's to a future of working as call centre employees or supermarket attendants or cleaners at the fucking carnival, man. I like you. You're a good kid."

We worked our way through the bottle of vodka after that. You could have dressed up the conversation we had in fancy terms if you liked — existentialism and all that jargon. But there we were, two inebriated citizens alienated by the systems we were governed by and adamant about the existence of real aliens out there. Real aliens, not ones decreed to be so by state lines. Maybe he was simply lonely, an alumnus back for the nostalgia, another product of the loneliness epidemic in the UK.

A few of his friends loped up as the sun set, dressed in all black and holding paper bags with bottles in them. Only a few of my classmates had stuck around till that point, and when they were pressed by the former for any remaining alcohol, Dave stepped in.

"Nah, don't bother, lads. They're with Dave here," he said, standing up and pointing his thumb back at me.



Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.

“You named Dave, too?” they asked incredulously, laughing and leaving us alone after that. I chatted with my friends until everyone agreed it was time to head out. Dave came by as I was packing my bag and told me to give him a call if I ever wanted to smoke up.

“Ma grows it in the trailer,” he said. “And I’ll let you have a quarter for forty.”

“Hey, that’s cheap,” I said, putting the glasses and mugs away. “Let me get your number, actually.”

“You’re damn right it is. Eh, don’t remember my number,” he said, rocking back and forth on his feet unsteadily. “Why don’t you put yours in and give yourselves a call?”

I took his old HTC phone and dialled my number a few times on the cracked screen. He didn’t have any credits left.

“It isn’t working, man. Maybe I’ll catch you on campus?” I asked.

“You got it, kid,” he said. “I’m around all the time. Just come by the lake, yeah?”

I assured him I would, turning around and waving goodbye on the walk back.

“See ya, Dave!” I yelled with a wink.

“See ya, Dave!” he yelled, winking back.



Copyright © 2026 by Tint - ESL Literary Journal and Association.