

# ***NOT NATIVE***

*SHORT STORIES OF IMMIGRANT LIFE*

*IN AN*

*IN-BETWEEN WORLD*



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*Wising Up Press Collective*

**Wising Up Press**

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# CONTENTS

## *SONS AND FATHERS*

THE END OF THE ROAD	3
ASHES	13
INTERVIEW WITH THE WORLD'S OLDEST MAN	21
DO YOU REMEMBER?	27

## *ON DISTANT SHORES*

WHERE THE GRASS IS GREENER	41
INDIAN UNCLE SAM	49
HOLI DAY IN AMERICA	57
IN THE NEW WORLD	63
THE MISSING HUSBAND	71
THE VISITOR AND THE NEIGHBOR	79

## *SCHISMS AND SURPRISES*

FRAGMENTS OF GLASS	89
RIVER OF SILENCE	95
MEMORIES OF MISSION VALLEY	105
ANIL'S VISIT	113
WHAT SID KNEW	123

## *AT CROSS PURPOSES*

MIGRANT	131
THE PLOT	139
THE LAST STOP	147

HIDDEN LIVES	151
BRAHMS IN THE LAND OF BRAHMA	161
<i>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</i>	171
<i>AUTHOR</i>	173



## *THE END OF THE ROAD*

When the express train pulled into the station, its wheels screeching in protest, Giri's father stood up and said he was going to buy some bananas. It wasn't a long stop, so Giri's mother told him to be careful and not go far from their coach. "Don't worry" were his last words before he stepped onto the platform and disappeared into a crowd of hurrying and arriving passengers, red-uniformed porters carrying suitcases, relatives saying goodbye or hello, and vendors crying, "Chai . . . coffee . . . chai!" She never saw him again.

At first, as the train started moving again and he didn't show up, she thought he was in another coach. Perhaps there hadn't been enough time to get back. But when the train, having left the station, gathered speed, she became agitated and wondered aloud whether she should pull the chain. A co-passenger cautioned her, saying that she'd get penalized if it wasn't an emergency. No need to worry, he added soothingly, because he hadn't seen her husband linger at the fruit stall. There were no corridor connections, so he must be stuck in another coach. When the train made another stop, hours later, and there was still no sign of her husband, the co-passenger, his face red with embarrassment, offered his apologies and went to look for the train conductor. The conductor who came over was sympathetic, but he said there was little he could do at this point. If her husband remained missing, she'd have to contact the police.

Giri was waiting on the platform with his grandfather to receive his parents—although only his mother, of course, her face somber, got down from the train and told them why her husband wasn't there. By now she was not only worried but furious as well. He'd deceived her. Despite his assurances and calm demeanor, she realized that Giri's father hadn't taken his pills for a couple of days.

At home, after giving him his pills every day, she'd wait until he swallowed them—and though he protested sometimes, darkly grumbling that



## *INDIAN UNCLE SAM*

Standing near the revolving baggage carousel, as he nervously waited for his mother and sister, Prakash unfolded the note and read it again. *Got to have the rent by Tuesday. If you cannot pay, you'll have to vacate the apartment. Sorry.* He'd found it that morning, wedged in the crack of his front door, just as he was leaving for the airport. Brad must have left it there last night. The terse ultimatum stung, considering that Brad, the manager of Sunrise Apartments, had seemed to understand Prakash's dilemma when they'd talked the previous week about his outstanding rent.

"I need another month to sort things out, Brad," he'd said. "Diwali is coming up."

"What's that?"

"A festival of lights that's big in India. My mother and sister are visiting from there. I can't ask them to cancel their trip . . . would be very awkward. We're going to celebrate Diwali. They bought their tickets weeks ago."

"I understand, Praycash. Good wishes to you on this happy occasion. Unfortunately I have no control; I only work in this place. But I'll speak to the boss and let you know."

The place, Prakash couldn't help thinking, was beginning to look bedraggled. The property used to be well maintained, but that changed after the staff cuts—and now, sitting in Brad's office, he could see the uncut lawn and unpicked trash in the parking lot, where there weren't as many cars these days. Sad. In the wake of the economic downturn, more apartments had fallen vacant in recent months, casting a pall on Sunrise Apartments, which had been Prakash's home for over two years.

At the airport, Prakash was putting the note back in his pocket when he spotted his mother and . . . wait a minute! The other woman *wasn't* Sujata, his sister; she looked like Chitra. It *was* Chitra. Stunned, Prakash waited as they looked around uncertainly, but when they saw him, he quickly stepped



## *RIVER OF SILENCE*

Leaning forward from the edge of the terrace, with her heels raised and right arm outstretched, she saw them first—and knew, even before they stopped and looked up, that they weren't passing by. They were coming to the house. One was a man—sturdy and dark, with thick hair that was fully white—and he had a pained expression, as if he were watching the beginning of a disastrous stunt. But the boy next to him was grinning. Taller than the man, with curly black hair and a slender body, he was wearing tight pants and a light brown T-shirt with writing on it. Meena couldn't read the words, but she could see the dark pools of his eyes as he gazed up at her. He crossed the road, without looking away, and the man followed him.

It wasn't a big house despite the two stories, and the boy didn't look concerned. The man, though, was alarmed. Yes, there was a gap in the terrace wall, but did he really think she wouldn't be careful, that she would slip and plummet to the ground? If she came across as an acrobat or a diva, poised for a spectacular climax, he was like an agitated fan. Vigorously waving his arms, he shouted warnings, prompting Meena to step back and return to her chair. It was only a few yards away, in a safe corner, over which the drooping, full-leaved branches of a jackfruit tree formed an agreeable canopy. It was her favorite spot. She picked up her book, just as the man and the boy, who seemed to be about her age, walked up to the front door.

Later, when Meena thought about her stay in the village, she realized how uneventful it would have been if these two visitors hadn't shown up that day. Bored by the place, after the novelty quickly wore off, she was spending a lot of time reading, desperately waiting to leave.

The doorbell rang, and she heard voices. Opening her book, she settled back in the wicker chair. Meena decided to give her dad and great-aunt a chance to speak with the guests, but at some point she'd have to go down and meet them. Over dinner the previous evening, her dad had mentioned that



## *MIGRANT*

The loud ring, waking Gopal in the middle of the night, was so unexpected that at first it didn't seem real. Then, reaching for his phone, he wondered if something terrible had happened somewhere to somebody he knew. An accident, perhaps, or a death. But when he pressed the button to talk, all he got was the dial tone. Was it a misdial, then, or a dream? When he heard the ring again—distinctly, jarringly—it chilled him to the bone, and for the first time Gopal wished he had a gun. Unbelievably, it was the doorbell. After lying still for what felt like a long time, paralyzed by uncertainty, he got out of bed and walked gingerly to the living room. Strange as it might sound, given his misgivings, he was ready to open the front door.

But he was jumping ahead. To understand what happened next, Gopal would have to go back and talk about Sam's Diner. It was called Sam's, almost always, just as its owner, Sampat, was simply known as Sam. An affable bear of a man, with twinkling dark eyes and a stylish drooping moustache that accentuated his rakish looks, he was a decade older than Gopal. While they weren't close friends, Gopal got to know him fairly well because, as a bachelor who disliked cooking, he ate regularly at his restaurant.

Sam was gregarious and attentive, never failing to greet diners and ask how they liked the food. He remembered not just the names of his loyal customers but also the dishes they preferred, which sometimes appeared magically on their table even before they'd spoken to a waiter. It seemed as if he knew most of the people worth knowing in their township, whose main artery went past the restaurant and led to a multilane highway, where you could see—if you stood on the commuter rail station's platform and looked down—a glittering river of steel surging towards the city. Like many residents, Gopal avoided the highway and took the train to work.

It didn't take long for Gopal to realize that Sam's extra attention went to folks who had some standing in the community, and it was on *their*

## *AUTHOR*



Murali Kamma is the managing editor of *Khabar*, a monthly magazine catering to the Indian-American community in the Southeast. While he did dabble in fiction as a youth (a few early stories appeared in an Indian magazine), it was his life as an immigrant straddling two cultures—and his work as an editor—that inspired him to pursue it more seriously. After graduating from Loyola College in India, he continued his education at the State University of New York at Buffalo. His stories have appeared in numerous journals, including *Rosebud*, *South Asian Review*, and *Lakeview International Journal of Literature and Arts*. He has enjoyed interviewing, among other authors, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, William Dalrymple, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Pico Iyer. A naturalized U.S. citizen, he lives with his family in Atlanta.