Into The Night*

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The island of Meridian was still thirty minutes away, but Kallikulam Ramaswamy Iyer had already done enough neck stretches, shoulder shrugs, hand wiggles and toe scrunches to limber his joints for this lifetime and the next.

He was tired. He was eighty-two years old and had relaxed his ancient Brahmin joints through many a stressful hour, but the last few days had been some of the worst: first, a thirteen-hour flight from Mumbai to Sydney with a three-day layover at Singapore, then a four-hour flight in a boomerang-shaped aeroplane from Sydney to Fiji's Nadi airport followed by a two-hour ride in a catamaran ferry to Meridian. Far away.

Ramaswamy shook his head. Why had Ganga decided to settle so far away? She'd always been peculiar, his daughter, this bright-eyed girl they had raised from mustard seed through plaits and school bag to first-class first and first menses, this wild daughter of theirs that squeezed their hearts so, squeezed it till he'd sworn not to love her anymore, but of course it was all talk, as the missus would verify, for wasn't he here in the belly of a fish, going to a land of cannibals for the sake of their bright-eyed girl who only thirty-seven years ago had begun a mustard seed as modest as an ant's fart.

"Think in English," advised his wife. "Tamil will only make it harder for you to adjust."

Oh, listen to the Queen of England. Who was the matriculate, madam? And who was the Sixth Standard twice fail?

A wave of laughter surged through the boat. It was beginning to irritate him, these periodic laughs. What were they laughing at? And why was it funny? A passenger in the adjacent seat, a sleek cheetah of an Indian girl who'd been gesturing with her silver thimbles throughout the last half-hour, lifted her head, blinked rapidly and smiled. She looked tired too. What was she doing here, alone, so far away from home and husband?

He continued to brood. She could've stayed. There were plenty of jobs for Hindus in India. Even a job in Europe would've been acceptable. But

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the South Pacific! Meridian was so new it wasn't even listed in his Rand McNally 1995 World Almanac. Who could've foreseen when he left Kallikulam in 1962, barely nineteen years old and with ninety rupees in his pocket, when he'd left his parents, dressed in their starched best, left them behind and forever at the Thrichedur railway station, who could've foreseen this final migration, three score and three years later, to a land without elephants, to a land without ancestors, who could have foreseen?

"Stop beating that drum, sir," said Paru. "Fall on your knees and thank your Krishna-bhagavan that you have such a sterling daughter. You're in her care now. So chin up and get ready for the next innings."

You? What had happened to the 'we'? His wife Paru had been younger by ten years. By all logic she should have been on this boat, not him. But of course, the 'we' of sixty years plus had ended at the Sion Electric Crematorium in Mumbai.

He flexed his neck. No. That had just been the disposal of the end. The end had come with a shopping list. Paru had sent him to buy groceries and when he returned, it was to a world without— No, it was no use dwelling on that day. Today was the first day of the rest of his life.

He sat, resigned, as another rash of laughter broke out. The girl was also laughing. She must've sensed his inspection, because she turned her head in his direction. Her eyes were milked over, like the white, dead corals he'd seen near Fiji. Pity struggled with revulsion in his mind. O God, what was the matter with the girl's eyelids? Why was she rolling them up? Almost like a lizard. Poor girl. Ramaswamy quickly turned his head. So there were handicapped people in the West as well. But then, Earth itself was handicapped now, broke and broken.

People may say what they want, thought Ramaswamy, but fate was blind. Why else would this beautiful girl be blind, why else would he have had to leave India, and why else would the last conversation with his wife have been about potatoes, brinjals and coconuts and would he, for God's sake, please, please check the tomatoes before buying them, because the last batch had been overripe and practically rotten. It could've been about anything, and it had been.

He didn't mind that his wife had died. She'd become tired, worn out. Nothing had interested her anymore, not even their fights, and her insults had stopped being insults and begun to feel like the instructions of someone departing for an immensely long journey. She'd become weary, Paru had, his wife of sixty years and seven lives, weary of waiting for Ganga to amass the papers and travel-credits 'to bring you home, Amma. I love you, please, please hang in there, okay?' Why, had his house been any less of a home?

Had he not taken care of his wife? Paru wanted to let go, and he'd gotten tired of holding on for the both of them. He didn't mind. But she hadn't left empty handed. She'd taken his memories with her. That he did mind.

It meant that he now had to recollect things, and could no longer rely on a shout ("Paru!") and an answer. For instance, what was the name of the school he'd attended in the 1940s? Had they first talked in the Esso canteen, or had it been that monsoon day when he'd offered her his umbrella? What was the name of his last American boss at Esso, the year before it became Hindustan Petroleum? He clearly remembered the fellow. Especially his laugh. The fellow would laugh, a great big honk of pure evil, revealing a panoply of white, red, yellow, lead glint and a couple of canines sharpened by decades of insatiable meat-eating. But what was his name?

There was an announcement being made, but the accent was impossible to understand. It was clear though they'd almost reached. Through the giant windows, he could see bits and pieces of the skyline. Passengers were busy getting their things together; a few were busy blinking at each other. Maybe that's how they said goodbye in this part of the world. The blinking reminded him of ants on a sugar trail. The catamaran docked with a bump and jerk.

"We've reached," said his co-passenger. "You can unbuckle now."

"I know," said Ramaswamy, smiling and blinking. "That's what I want, that's what you want, but that's not what the buckle wants."

"Here, let me help. It's been a long journey, huh?"

And before he could say anything, she leaned over and began to struggle with the belt. Her hair glistened as if they were coated with glass. He couldn't help touching a strand, and she glanced at him. "Careful. The alloy coat is not quite stable yet."

"Are you married?" he asked.

She frowned and didn't answer. "There!" She detached the belt. "Come, Appa. I'll call Aaliyah and let her know we've reached."

Appa? Yes, of course. This was Ganga, his daughter. How could he not have recognized her? The hair was a factor, yes. But still. What was happening to him? He was so astonished by the lapse in memory, he forgot to be terrified.

"I'm okay," he said, furious with Paru. It was all her fault. Fresh resentment began to ooze from the wound of his recent loss.

#

He'd been here before, a stranger in a strange land. In 1962, he'd stepped

out on Platform Number 3 at the Victoria Terminus in Bombay, with the smell of soot in his nostrils, a roll of bedding and an aluminum trunk full of good advice. He'd survived the first strange day, and the second, and the third, till a season had passed, and he'd become part of the very strangeness he'd seen on the first day. On his way to work, he'd sometimes see himself stepping out of a train, on this platform, on that platform, from this village, from that village, going everywhere and going nowhere at all.

So why did this transition feel so different, as if he were doing it for the very first time? Perhaps strangeness simply could not be gotten used to. Especially if the strangeness lay, not in the miracles of the place, but in its small-small things.

The miracles were manageable, because they all had a familiar feel. Buildings that supposedly chatted to each other about energy, politics and life. Or, for example, the 'bubbles.' They were cars with skins that quivered and become teardrop-shaped as they picked up speed. His daughter had tried to explain how it all worked: drive-by-wire, gyroscopic gaddabaddoo, Gandhi's loincloth, and pure unadulterated ghee... Who knew how it worked? He could tell she had no idea either. But they were just inventions.

Ditto for the hearsee. It was just a binoculars and headset rolled into one. With the hearsee, you could see what other people were seeing, hear what other people were hearing, assuming they had hearsees too. It used a "nictating membrane" and of course wireless. Wireless was a must. He'd had the idea himself one afternoon, so he wasn't too surprised.

No, the strangeness lay in other things, once familiar things. It lay in Ganga. She had so many friends. He'd always hated that word: friend. It excused everything and expected nothing.

One friend– Aaliyah– seemed to be a permanent guest. Another "friend" was practically an animal; she lay curled on the sofa, her skinny, thimbled hands working ceaselessly– thinking about the mathematics of relatives in general, Ganga claimed– getting up only to feed, and that too eating things directly from the fridge, all the while standing on one leg like a flamingo and eyeing him cautiously, as if she half-expected an ambush. They were many others, all women, with made-up names, Tomi, Rex, Lace, Sharon, and once, just once, a slender man with a sharp Aryan nose, high forehead, and a girl's name. Ramaswamy had asked him why.

"Because I am a girl," he'd replied.

Dinner was a nightmare: meat and wine all around him, overcooked rice, undercooked vegetables (they crunched!), rubbery yogurt, and cold metal spoons. The first time he ate with his hand– thoroughly mixing the rice and buttermilk by hand, relishing every wet squelch, and licking the fingers at the

end– it'd been impossible to ignore the long watchful silences, rapid blinks, the Flamingo's high laugh, and most hurtful of all, Ganga's startled expression. As if she didn't know. As if she too hadn't eaten the Tamil Brahmin way, his way, the correct way, once. As if she'd forgotten.

He had a room at the end of the hall on the first floor, tucked away from the rest of the house. The girls mostly lived upstairs, rarely coming down, and if they did talk to him, it was only to ask him idiotic questions about festivals, the caste system and Hinduism. He had to watch his answers. Otherwise:

"That's rubbish," Ganga would begin, knitting her brows. "If you look at the facts..."

The facts were these: Brahmanism was bad. The West was good. Everything he said was superstition. Everything she said was science. Those were the facts. S'all right. He had his beliefs, she had hers. She called her beliefs 'facts,' and that was all right too. If science was all-powerful, then why she did grovel before the Evolution God? Evolution this, Evolution that. The girl knew a lot, but she understood nothing. As people said, just being able to talk about a trunk didn't make you an elephant.

But most of all, it was the silence that was intolerable. So many circuits of the house, so many cautious in-the-doorway peeks into bedrooms, so many against-the-light inspections of their mail, so many cups of microwave chai, so many naps and then to painfully go up, down, around and about the house circumnavigating the hours, the day, the month. Occasionally the house would pass on messages in Ganga's voice or Aaliyah's voice, and he'd feel like a house pet, expected to mewl and bark at the sound of his master's voice. He never responded when they called, shuffling around silently, refusing to be happy for their sake, and fully aware that irrespective of whether he responded or not, every room in the house was visible to their lizard eyes.

The silence of his Mumbai apartment had always been bordered with faraway horns, shouts of neighborhood children, Paru's telephone gossip and the imminent possibility of tea. This silence had weight. Sometimes he cried.

#

Ramaswamy lay in bed, facing the wall, the coverlet pulled all the way to his neck, and quietly burbling in a mix of English and Tamil:

"Appa?"

He froze.

"Who are you talking to? Are you alright? Are your legs hurting?"

When he turned, he saw Ganga in her nightdress, her face lit from below by the room's night light.

"I'm okay. Just thinking, that's all. About the good old days."

She sat down besides him and put a hand on his chest. "Not able to sleep?"

"How much sleep can I do?" He hesitated, and then spoke in a rush. "Ganga, I want to go back to Mumbai. I can't live here in this freezing cold and twenty-four hours of rain. Everything is backwards and upside down. From the nose via the back of head to the ear, as people say. A simple man like myself only needs his two servings of rice-curds and a glass of water. That I can get for myself. Why I should be a burden to you? I am going back."

"We can't have this conversation over and over again. Haven't you been watching the news from India? And there's no one there to take care of you. In a few years, your health problems are only going to get worse. If anything happens–"

"Krishna-bhagavan will take care of me as he has all these years."

"Don't be childish! Amma took care of you all these years, not your bloody bhagavan. So at least give credit where it's due."

He was pleased to see her voice rise and her accent veer into its natural roly-poly South-Indian roundness. Ha! Not such a suit-and-boot madam after all. He remembered roly-poly; he'd walked this little girl back from kindergarten every day, pig-tails and upturned face, hopeful smile and Appa, Appa, please can I have some kulfi, Appa.

Where had it all gone wrong with Ganga? Was it the day he'd found her smoking with the sweeper's boy, a Shudran, whose polluting dirty hand also happened to be inside her unzipped pants? Or was it when she'd burnt her Maths degree merely because her college had changed its name from the Indian Institute of Science to the Hindu Institute of Science? Or was it that black day when she'd left India, a month after renouncing her citizenship– he hadn't know it was possible– and in her fierce embrace, he'd sensed an irreversible letting go.

"I should've disciplined her more," thought Ramaswamy, "but as people say, a donkey never has a tiger for a father."

"Can we go to a doctor?" he asked.

"Now?"

She nictated and geometric patterns flashed across her eyelids; the room seemed filled with a new awareness. He sensed there were others in the room, watching, listening, perhaps even commenting on him.

"Appa? Are you in pain? I can call an ambulance–"

"No, no. I just wanted to get an estimate of how much time I have left."

"No one can tell you that!"

"Not even biology?"

She smiled and touched his face. "Not even biology."

What was the use of it then? He lay back on the bed and turned to face the wall.

"Appa? Look at me." She shook him. "Look at me." And when he did, she continued in the same calm voice. "I know it's all very strange and new to you. And Amma is not here to make it easier. But life is change, and we have to adapt. Otherwise, we might as well be fossils. Evolution–"

"What is this evolution-evolution you keep brandishing like a stick?"

"It's a theory that says we don't need a story to explain how we all got here. It was first clearly explained by Darwin–"

"Speak in Tamil, Ganga. Speak in Tamil."

He listened to her fantastic tale about fish that had grown lungs and learned to walk on earth, a Xerox machine called DNA in every atom and what not. As she talked, her alloy-treated hair furled outwards, a controlled motion that had nothing to do with the wind or any natural shake of the head. Somebody was playing with her hair. He closed his eyes.

When she said 'cells,' he imagined tiny telephones, but when she said 'chromosome,' 'molecule,' 'recombination,' and 'species,' nothing came to mind at all. He marveled that she could swallow so incredible a story but refuse to accept the simplest, most obvious explanation understandable by the stupidest child: God did it. But he didn't want her to stop talking.

"Ganga, this Evolution God, is it Christian or some other religion only? And if it is Christian, then who is Jesus?"

She was silent for a few long seconds, and when she spoke, it was quiet enough to be almost a sigh. "Aaliyah is right, Appa. If you're to see, you must have the right eyes first. The first step is to set you up with a visor. It won't be as good as having a hearsee, but it's better than nothing. It'll be easier to see how it all fits together. Maybe a tour of Galapagos, my research lab, fossil museums... Let's see."

#

He was here, on the battered bench of a battered park, banished for the day, because the house was being energy-audited, and they didn't want him blurting something to the inspector.

It was good to be out, even though the sky was a sickly bluish-gray and the wind was one tooth too sharp. The park was bordered by book shops, clothing stores, cafes and open-air restaurants. He'd picked a spot on a de-

serted side of the park, because the smell of burning meat reminded him of the ghats of Benares.

Ramaswamy carefully removed the visor and the thimbles from their case. As he stared at the "vision field," it began to shear, as if it was being stretched from opposite corners. The eye had to keep moving, otherwise the visor would lose focus. His arthritic fingers found it hard to gesture the thimbles to manipulate the visor's controls, and after a while he began to get confused with the colored flags, training wheels and little rotating astrology-type signs. The view filled with tiny windows and he blinked helplessly as he tried to regain the original view.

"Don't worry," said Paru. "A spectacles is no match for a Senior Clark from Esso."

Abruptly, a gut-wrenching image of water, wood, blue and sky filled his vision field. And tentacles. He caught a glimpse of lettering: "Marine Research Institute." He jerked back in his seat, reaching out to clutch something tangible.

"Hey! No linking," said a voice. "This is a research channel."

And then his view shifted back to the park and its threadbare green. He regained his breath, and with it, triumph. He'd just used somebody else's visor, or more likely, hearsee. So this is what "surfing" the I-net was all about.

It took a while to retrace his steps, but he managed to get the screen full of windows again, and as it scrolled past, he blinked. And blinked. And blinked. In most cases, he got wobbly images of edges, shadows and corners of rooms. But even when he got a nice view, such as the one from the tourist staring up at the statues on Easter Island, or merely a bizarre one, like that young girl who stared fixedly at different parts of her naked body, what did it matter? Most people seemed to be sitting on equally battered benches staring out over equally battered parks. What did he and they have in common after all, other than a mutual acknowledgment of being lost? He was everywhere and nowhere.

"It is not our time," said Paru, sounding subdued. "Give it a chance."

His visor filled with fifty scattered circles. Ganga had explained that in "idle mode" the visor would show the GPS coordinates of people in a half-a-mile radius. A window popped up, reminding him to "fill in his profile."

"Do what it says," said Paru. "Put up a sign saying you want to chit-chat."

"Keep quiet! You should be sitting here suffering, and I should be in your Madras-coffee loving head. Irresponsible, selfish cow."

He tried to describe himself but didn't get very far. The "wizard" asked for

his Myers-Briggs type, whether he was an introvert or extrovert, whether he was an active or a passive voyeur, and on and on. What kinky things turned Ramaswamy on?

Elephants, thimbled Ramaswamy. Temples. Obedient children. Early morning showers. India. Brahmin culture. Decent women. But then he got diverted with the memories of all the delicious foods he would never eat again.

The bench was still slightly wet, perhaps from the early morning rains. The colony's park in Mumbai had always been chock full of people: retirees, teenage lovers, food vendors, toy vendors, mating dogs, laughing clubs, children running about everywhere. The sky looked dark, swollen, a child about to cry. Perhaps global raining was around the corner.

The visor queried his current mood. He selected the most depressed face he could from the samples in front of him.

"I took it all for granted," he thought. His head had begun to ache.

A teenager sat down at the far end of the bench. He had an open, cheerful face framed by a halo of curly black hair. He nodded in Ramaswamy's direction.

"Waz," said the kid. Then he stretched out his legs and made himself comfortable.

The visor claimed the kid's name was Krish and then went on to bug Ramaswamy with a variety of options. Irritated, he took off the visor.

"Excuse me, is your name Krish?"

"Like da tag sez, heya?" The boy seemed a little puzzled, and his eyelids nictated. His expression brightened. "Ya-i-c. Welcome to Oz, uncle."

"I'm Ramaswamy. I'm from India. Tamil Nadu. Are you also from same?"

Krish shrugged. "Maybe. Me's from Wooshnu's navel, maybe."

The boy's accent was not Indian. In fact, Ramaswamy could barely understand what he was saying. "Are you having school holiday today?"

Krish grinned and shook his head. "Waz school? You's the headmaster? What you be teaching, Master Bates?"

Ramaswamy laughed. Kids were scoundrels no matter where they were. "Bad boy. You need to be more disciplined."

"Nuff sport." Krish scooted over. "You's wanting da elephant, heya?"

The boy's eyes were so merry and his smile so infectious, Ramaswamy also found himself smiling. "Heya. Heya. What's this 'heya'?"

"Gimme the izor, dear." The kid reached for the visor, but something about

his expression made Ramaswamy snatch it away and put it in his shirt pocket.

Krish shrugged and unbuttoned his pants. "Assayway you's want." He grabbed Ramaswamy's hand and shoved it into his pants. "Go on. Sample all you's want. Undred per cent desi juice on da tap, uncle-dear."

Later, Ramaswamy would puzzle over the fact that the boy's penis had been hard and erect. But it was only one of the many puzzles.

A police car swooped out of nowhere, a blaze of whirling blue lights and piercing siren. The next ten minutes were a terrifying blur. Two officers jumped out of the car; one ran after Krish, and the other fumbled for his handcuff.

His boss from Esso! How was it possible? The same beefy expression, the same grayish-white whiskers, the same sozzled eyes. Mr. Gregory! Just remembering the name after all these years was mildly orgasmic.

"Mr. Gregory, Sir!" Ramaswamy shot to his feet and was ready for dictation.

"Move again assole, and you'll make my day." The cop pointed an object that resembled a TV remote at Ramaswamy.

But Ramaswamy had already realized his mistake. Of course this policeman wasn't Mr. Gregory. His boss had already been middle-aged when he, Ramaswamy, had joined as a young assistant clerk.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were my boss from Esso. I came here to take some fresh breeze only."

Ramaswamy tried to explain how his hand had ended up in the boy's pants. The boy clearly needed a doctor, he had a rash of some kind. Perhaps he'd thought an Indian would help. But he was only a retired clerk from Esso, his daughter's dependent, practically a beggar himself. Esso's health insurance had barely covered Paru's treatment; there was nothing he could do for random lost-eyed Indian boys. If the officer would be kind enough to call his daughter, Ganga could confirm every detail. When Ramaswamy reached for the visor in his pocket, the officer tasered him.

#

In time, the pain faded, as did all direct memory of the incident. In time, a woman in blue came to apologize, and she began to talk about punking clubs, sadistic voyeurs and clockwork porn. He understood little, and was grateful when Aaliyah stepped in to keep it that way.

"Do you remember, Appa," Ganga asked him, a few days after the nightmare, "do you remember a terrace, a girl, and a sweeper's boy?"

Of course he remembered. It was the day his daughter's eyes had begun to terrify him. The boy had been beaten to an inch of his life. Deservedly so. There was no comparison.

"Why do you drag up that incident over and over. Nothing happened."

"Do you know that his hands were just as accidentally placed as yours? That I was the guilty one?"

"I don't know anything... Tell me what to say."

"What's the use then?" She nictated and turned away. "Never mind, Appa."

When the cold rains came, as they often did in this age of carbon, he liked to sit by a corner window of the house and watch the banana tree in the yard make short work of the water. The rain, as thin as cow's milk, rolled off the tree's bright green plates, as ineffective as a mother's Tamil on a child's unrepentant back. Sometimes the Flamingo would creep up and crouch by him, her eyes blind in thought, her bony fingers ceaselessly working on the general problem of relatives.

"What is the solution?" he once asked the Flamingo, in Tamil, "if the ones I love hate what I love?"

The Flamingo said nothing. Perhaps she hadn't heard. It was moot in any case, for the problem was intractable. Change was inevitable; it hadn't been, but now it was. Call it evolution, fate, choice or chance. If that was the only way the world would turn, so be it.

But acceptance wouldn't come. The darkness crowded him from all corners, the light of his understanding curving upwards along its walls and returning in an ever-tighter loop. Soon, he would be beyond the reach of all stories.

"Amma," Ramaswamy would shout, forgetting himself in his despair. His mother: a chequered six-yard sari, a raspy voice, wrinkled hands, jasmine-scented hair and the comfort of her sari's corners. "Amma!"

Sometimes his daughter would turn up with a glass of Horlicks. In her nightdress and short-hair, she resembled one of those Goan ladies in India, brown as a coconut but all white inside. She would pretend to listen to his burbling, her eyes blinking absent-mindedly, her hair furling like snakes as they flexed and re-flexed into one of her many styles. She had many styles, but she looked a widow in all of them. She would tell him fantastic tales from science and biology, offering truth when he longed for comfort. He would pick a fight, say outrageous things, insult her friends and all that she held dear, and sometimes Ganga would lose her temper.

"Speak in Tamil," he'd urge. "Speak in Tamil."

Then Ramaswamy would relax. Ah, familiar words. So familiar, so sweetly familiar. He let the ferocious alphabet fall, splish-splosh, all around and galosh, the rain of words, in one ear, out the other, the gentle splash of words, how he missed her, Paru, his comfort, his eyes, how he missed her, his compass, his all, as he walked, ever faster, into the night.

— The End —