

Weather Permitting & Other Stories



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Pratap Reddy



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For my wife Shashi and my son Raj

Contents



Her White Christmas	<i>. I</i>
The Toy Flamingo	<i>17</i>
Birthday Blues	<i>33</i>
Ramki and the Christmas Trees	<i>45</i>
Demon Glass	<i>61</i>
Going West	<i>73</i>
Weather Permitting	<i>93</i>
The Tamarind Relish	<i>121</i>
Mango Fool	<i>133</i>
In the Dark	<i>145</i>
That Which is Written	<i>159</i>
For A Place in the Sun	<i>173</i>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	<i>197</i>
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	<i>199</i>

Her White Christmas



Wearing a thin, hand-knitted cardigan over her crumpled sari, Prema Sudhakar looks all of her sixty-odd years. It's late in the evening as she anxiously scans the collage of unfamiliar faces besieging her in the foyer of Pearson airport.

A young south Asian male enters the terminal but, noting his beard, her glance slides past him. The stranger walks right up to her.

"Hi, Mom," he says.

"Shyam! I didn't recognise you!"

Relief floods over Prema, moistening her eyes.

"Have you been waiting long, Mom?"

"No, only a few minutes. Yet, why are you late?"

"There was a traffic jam," Shyam says glibly.

"I was hoping you'd have changed after moving to Canada. Where's Shilpa?"

"She's at work."

"In her condition, she shouldn't be going to work, Shyam."

"Mom, things are different in Canada."

Shyam takes charge of the luggage and they proceed to the parking lot. Out in the open, Prema shivers.

“You’ll need warmer clothes, Mom. Snow is expected next week.”

“Do you think I’ll get to see a white Christmas?”

“I’m sure you’ll have your wish. The two winters I’ve seen were pretty bad.”

“Will I be able to see the Aurora Borealis, too?”

“Aurora who?”

“Idiot! To think that your mother was a Geography teacher!”

Prema, like many educated Indians, had grown up reading books written almost exclusively by British and American authors. Travelling overseas is a dream-come-true opportunity to see firsthand what she had enjoyed in an armchair.

“By the way, how’s my sister Apu?” Shyam asks.

Apu lives with her husband in an Austrian town with an unpronounceable name but a picturesque river front. They were both artists and had a habit of washing up in the unlikeliest of places.

“Shyam, it’s you who ought to be telling me how Apu is. She lives abroad like you.”

“Maybe, Mom, but Europe is pretty far from Canada. At the moment, we can’t afford to visit her.”

Haze hangs like a giant’s breath over the city. Prema feels they have been driving forever, tailing a never-ending procession of red lights. The car slows as they turn on the street where Shyam lives. In the thickening dusk all the houses look alike in their drabness, pinpricks of light oozing out from within.

Shyam stops the car and steps out to open the car-door for his mother.

“Welcome to Canada, Mom!”

Prema trembles as a gust of polar wind washes over. She follows her son, her shoes crunching over fallen leaves. They enter a narrow row-house, one of many pressed together like slices in a loaf. Inside, an enormous staircase fills the hallway.

Prema sits down on a stool, and unbuckles her shoes.

“Mom, you relax in the living room while I fetch your suitcases.”

Prema chooses to potter around the house: a few spartan and mismatched pieces of furniture—procured exclusively from garage-sales—are deployed here and there. On the kitchen countertop there are a pile of flyers and two unopened envelopes addressed to a Jojo Mbele.

The glass front-door closes with a slam. Shyam comes in, lugging two enormous suitcases.

“Mom, would you like dinner?”

“I’m full,” she says, pulling a face. “I had something called Asian vegetarian meal on the plane.”

Shyam unearths a packet of frozen rotis and a dish of leftover curry from the fridge. While he’s heating them, Prema, who has already nosed around the kitchen, sets the table.

When he finishes his dinner, Shyam roots out a card from a kitchen drawer.

“Let’s call Dad,” he says.

Shyam fetches a cordless from the living room. Peering at the telephone card, he dials, disconnects, and dials again. He does this repeatedly while Prema regards him like an implacable deity.

“We use a card to call India. It’s much cheaper.”

“I’m not surprised,” Prema says.

“It’s ringing! Hi, Dad! I’m good. How are you? ... Mom, talk to Dad.”

“Hello! I’m fine ... I guess she must be OK, she has gone to work ... yeah, you’ve heard it right. Is the maid coming to work every day ... I know it’s only a day since I left India ... Goodnight ... Yes, it’s night here ... Goodbye!”

Shyam takes the receiver from his mother, and both of them move out of the kitchen. They pause in the hallway, as though waiting for the next move. Shyam is tired and wants to rest, while jetlag has made his mother disoriented and restless.

“Mom, you must be exhausted. May I show you to your room? It’s on the second floor.”

“I’ll wait for Shilpa.”

“It will be midnight when she returns.”

“I don’t mind. How does she come back?”

“I pick her up from the factory.”

“No wonder you look so thin and tired. By the way, the beard doesn’t suit you.”

“I knew you’d say that, Mom. I’d like to go to my room now. I’ve had a long day.”

“Suit yourself. I’ll watch TV until Shilpa ...”

Prema stops short and her eyes widen. A young black male has just emerged from the staircase that leads to the basement. Dressed in a T shirt and shorts, he smiles at them.

“Did I startle you?” the man says.

“Mom, this is Joe, our tenant.”

Prema somehow manages to find her tongue.

“Pleased to meet you,” she says.

“Same, here. Sorry to intrude, but I won’t take more than a minute.”

“Take your time,” Shyam says. “No hurry.”

When Joe goes into the kitchen, Shyam and Prema step into the living room. Prema collapses into the nearest sofa, looking shell-shocked.

“Joe was renting the basement room when we bought the place. He came with the territory, so to speak.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Mom, we need every penny we can lay our hands on. You’ve no idea of the mortgage payments ...”

“Shyam, I’m unable to understand how you could give a perfect stranger such ... free run of your home!”

“Joe’s a very nice guy. He only comes up once or twice a day to do his cooking or use the toilet.”

Prema shoots up like a rocket from the sofa.

“Please stop! I think I’ll go to my room.”

* * *

The next morning when Prema wakes, a pallid sun pretends to shine outside. The silence in the house is almost sepulchral: no birdsongs, no traffic sounds, nothing. Still groggy with jetlag, Prema forces herself to get up and go downstairs. She finds nobody about: it’s as if the house is standing stock-still, holding its breath.

Prema makes herself a cup of coffee. Unable to find a newspaper, she goes through a stack of flyers. Later she tries to switch on the TV, but the universal remote proves too much of a challenge. She returns to the kitchen and cooks a south Indian breakfast, enjoying the explorer-like

“That can wait. I want to go back home now. If you don’t want to get my return journey confirmed, let me know. I can do it on my own.”

Unannounced, it starts to snow. It falls like salt and bounces off the windscreen. The flurries grow thicker and the road looks paved with stardust. When Shyam brings the car to a halt on their driveway, Prema steps out. The fresh snow crackles underfoot.

“Mom, you’ve got to see a white Christmas after all.”

“You bet,” says Prema, with an emphasis that surprises Shyam.

* * *

A few days after his mother’s return to India, Shyam’s father calls him.

“Dad, please hang up the phone,” Shyam says. “I’ll call you back.”

“Don’t bother, Shyam. I’ve heard of your notorious phone cards. Nowadays international calls have become quite cheap in India too.”

“Dad, how is Mom? She became very upset when she was here. I don’t know why. I asked her what was wrong many times, but as usual she didn’t bother to explain.”

“She’s fine, believe me. Your mother has gone to the club for a game of rummy. About her becoming upset—that’s the reason why I’m calling you. Shyam, don’t take this to heart—she has got it into her head that the child is not yours.”

“That’s sheer nonsense!”

“You’re right. But your mother bases her suspicion on the colour of the baby’s eyes,” his father says.

“I can’t believe it! Dad, you’ve met Shilpa’s relatives—they’re from the west coast, and quite a few of them have light-coloured eyes.”

“I know, Shyam. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell your mother. Shyam, you shouldn’t feel bad—you know about your mother, don’t you? She can be difficult at times.”

There’s the wisdom of a long-suffering life in Shyam’s father’s voice. Shyam is silent for a few moments. Though he ought to have been inured to his mother’s opinionated views, he wishes things were different.

“Shyam, are you there?”

“Yes, Dad, very much. Is Mom still annoyed with us?”

“No. She seems to have gotten over it apparently. She’s planning a trip to Austria.”

“That’s good to hear. I’m sure Apu will be able to keep her happy.”

His father chuckles. “I won’t bet on it, Shyam. Your mother wants to see the blue Danube. For Apu’s sake, I hope the river lives up to its reputation.”

The Toy Flamingo



Sitting squished on a single leather chair, my two young daughters looked like Siamese twins as they leafed through a big picture book they had on their laps. Dressed alike in a pink and white outfit with matching coordinates—my wife Anita was finicky in such matters, they looked so young and innocent.

“Hi sweethearts,” I said, dropping my car keys and cell phone into a walnut-wood tray we had bought in India while on holiday. It was a Sunday afternoon, and I had just returned from a meeting organized by a nature conservation society in Mississauga.

“Da-ddy!” both of them exclaimed. Extricating themselves from the chair, Veena, aged 6, placed the book on a side table, while Neena, all of 5, shuffled towards me, weighed down by the gift-wrapped parcel in her hands. They shouted: “Look, what we’ve got for you!”

“Children, wish your Daddy a Happy Father’s Day!” said Mummy-ji, my wife Anita’s mother, emerging from the kitchen where she must have been having a cup of chai while her daughter cooked dinner. Since Anita called her

mother 'Mummy', I would add the honorific 'ji' while addressing her. After my father-in-law's death about a year ago, Mummy-ji, who lived all by herself in Brampton, began to drop by more often than I cared. While I was passionate about nature, and wanted to lead a life which was in harmony with our environment, Mummy-ji, it appeared to me, admired success, and the power it gave you to acquire status symbols. I would hate it if Anita and the children came under her influence.

"I think it is such an important day," she added pointedly. It was my mother-in-law's perennial plaint that I never observed the red-letter days in one's life—Father's Day, Valentine's Day etc.—with the fervour they deserved. Knowing full well that nothing special would be done on this notable occasion (for Anita, understandably, would be keen only on Mother's day), she had purposefully driven down and taken the girls to a nearby mall to buy their Daddy a present.

"I agree, Mummy-ji," I said, giving my daughters a hug and a kiss each.

"Sunita's husband Ajay would always give his children return gifts on Father's day," said Mummy-ji.

I ignored her comment. Sunita was Mummy-ji's elder daughter, who along with her family had relocated to Australia a couple of years ago, citing Canada's extreme weather as a pretext. In that insular continent they were happily impervious to Mummy-ji's weekly visits.

The gift I received, going by its size and heft, seemed to be a book. Though it was more than a decade since I came to Canada, I hadn't quite overcome the Indian custom of *not* opening gifts the moment one received them.

Anita entered the room and headed straight for the TV remote. My wife bore a strong resemblance to her mother and had the same nervous energy in her movements.

“What did the children give you, Venky?” she asked, pointing the remote like a dagger at the TV.

“A book, I’m guessing,” I said, starting to tear open the package.

The TV screen—the size of a small billboard, no less—crackled and came to life. The children stopped reading, and turned their heads to watch an ecstatic woman talking about the increased whitening power of an age-old brand of toothpaste.

The book I unwrapped was called *Winged Visitors*. The gift brought a smile to my lips: even my young children were aware of my keen interest in nature. Left to her, Mummy-ji would have bought me a book on how to become a millionaire in seven days. Maybe I was being unduly harsh, but when Mummy-ji was around I felt like a wild bird which has been thrust into a cage.

On the front cover of the book my girls gave me, a host of flamingos stood rooted in knee-deep water. But my mind was not on the book, it was drawn elsewhere:

I see the rose-pink bird through a mist of tears. It is made from a stiff sheet of paper, and is mounted on a stick. The bird has an S-shaped neck and a big beak. Crude, black strokes outline its body.

I wipe my eyes and raise my hand to grab the bird. He pulls the toy out of my reach. His unshaven cheeks look as if has rubbed soot on them.

He shows me how the toy works. When he pushes

up a slider on the stick, the bird lifts its wings. And when he brings the slider down, the bird lowers its wings.

Taking the toy from him, I move the slider up and down, again and again: the bird flaps its wings as if it's flying through the air.

"A penny for your thoughts," Anita said.

"It's nothing," I said. I had been plagued by such unbidden thoughts as far back as I could remember. When I was very young, they would occur often, popping up at unexpected moments, but as I grew older they had become less frequent. The funny thing was that the people who appeared in them were certainly not my parents; I would always be very young and speak in a tongue which was gibberish to me. The events bore no obvious relationship to my life as I knew it. Yet the memories must have had some connection with my childhood which I couldn't figure out. Whatever the reason, when I did experience them, they caused an indescribable sadness within me ...

* * *

The next week, on a Friday night, we stood holding the free drinks we had exchanged for the tickets handed to us at the door. Except for the lighted stage where a group of dancers were gyrating to Bollywood songs, the place was in semi-darkness. Waves of guests surged and swirled around us, talking, laughing, drinking, eating.

I cannot remember now whether it was a party to launch a South Asian Magazine, or an East Indian fashion show; Anita worked in an ad agency, so she was always

being called out. To please Anita, I would accompany her and stand by her elbow, ready to fetch up a smile whenever someone approached us. Sometimes, I was too quick on the draw and ended up shaking hands with perfect strangers, much to Anita's annoyance.

A buffet was arranged at the far end of the room. We joined a line up which made a halting progress towards the spread, the cynosure of the party. In the only light that came from the chafing dishes, the food looked like nothing recognizable. But I need not have worried; they were mostly South Asian stuff like nans, tandoori chicken and potato tikkis masquerading as western fare.

In the semidarkness, while biting into the tidbits, uninvited a memory entered my consciousness:

*He is in the kitchen—I can hear the banging of vessels.
I'm hungry; I've been sitting at the table for ages.*

*"Hasve agataday!" I cry out. The room is small
and dingy, illuminated with a bulb of low wattage
hanging from a wire.*

*Something falls to the ground with a crash. I hear
him mutter in a strange language. I'm certain now
that dinner will take even longer to come.*

We left the party at eleven, and drove to Mummy-ji's place. Whenever we go out, we leave our children in her care, like a couple of bags in a left-luggage office.

"I don't like it Anita ..." I said.

"I know the party was a bore. I'm sorry."

"No, it's not the party. We leave the children to themselves much too often."

myself, I had also learned how enduring the legacy of parents' love and values could be. As I drove away, I turned my head and looked back. My mom and dad were standing there with their hands raised, staring after my car.

I look out of the window. I see people on the street. Now and then a rickshaw trundles by. Sometimes a car races past, its horn blaring.

Then I see him. He is walking down the lane, not so fast this time. When he draws level with the gate, he stops. He stands there with his hand on the latch, undecided. I wave out, but he does not see me.

He stares at the front door for a few moments and then raises his palm to his mouth, and in a gesture of affection, kisses his fingers. Abruptly he turns and walks away, without a backward glance.

I never see him again.

Birthday Blues



I woke up on the morning of my 12th birthday and immediately wished I hadn't. It was almost ten and the house had that deathly Sunday stillness. I went to the washroom, peed, wiped the seat clean of the yellow drops and flushed the toilet—all as mum had trained me to do.

I went back to my room and picked up *The Dark Knight Returns*. Lying down on my bed, I began to read. Reading kept my mind off things like how dorky *all* my birthdays had been. OK not all, at least the ones I could remember. I needed no crystal ball to tell me that the present one would be no different.

I heard a sudden *vroom* downstairs—mum must have started on her favourite weekend pastime, vacuuming the whole damn universe. It was only a matter of time before she came upstairs, dragging the machine like pit bull on a leash. I got up and played Back Street Boys (which mum had bought for me for no other reason than it had a red sticker) real loud to drown the racket she was making.

Soon enough, without so much as a knock, mum pushed my bedroom door open. Mum believed in surprising people.

“There’s no *need* to put on the music that loud,” she said.

I got up and tweaked the controls—pretending to reduce the volume. It had been an entirely different ball game when Joe was around.

Mum shut the door and I went back to my book. A couple of seconds later, she opened the door again.

“Happy Birthday, son. What would you like to do today?”

What I’d like to do? Go bowling with my buddies, Tony and Mustapha, that’s what. But I kept the thought to myself. With mum within earshot, it was not very wise to air your thoughts.

“Shall we go to the temple?” she asked brightly. I wanted to groan. She continued: “First, I’ll make some food for your dad.”

Dad had died two years ago, exactly on the same date as my birthday. Mum would cook for him and place the food on a small table below his framed photograph on a wall in the living room. Later, we’d eat the leftovers—some birthday treat.

Don’t get me wrong. Dad had been a good dude. I wouldn’t say the same thing of Joe. Though dad could be cantankerous at times, he had been a chummy kind of person. If I did something stupid, he’d roll his eyes and say, *Je-sus!* He used to say that all the time even though he was a full-blown Hindu, born and bred in India.

Mum too was born in India. But you wouldn’t have guessed, looking at her. She always wore stuff like tops and pants, and her hair was cut very short. Even her accent didn’t sound Indian (neither did it sound very Canadian, though she would have dearly wanted it to).

Dad's parents had seen mum in a photograph a relative had sent them from India. In the picture, mum was wearing a sari, and she had flowers in her long hair and a big red dot on her forehead. According to mum, my grand-parents took such a shine to her that they boarded the next plane to India and arranged for dad's marriage.

After mum finally left my room, I got back to my book. I liked reading—I devoured graphic novels by the ton. When I grow up I'd like to be a writer. I like words—nice long words, words with a majestic ring to them. Unfortunately, my spelling sucked. Miss Bowman, my class teacher, said that you must know how to spell if you wanted to be a writer.

"No sweat," Tony said, "you can always use the spell check."

But Mustapha said: "Only ninnies use spell check."

* * *

On the evening of my tenth birthday, dad tried to string a bowtie around my neck. Unlike mum, dad was tall and heavily-built with large clumsy hands. He appeared a little out of breath and droplets of sweat formed on his brow as he struggled with the tie. It was August and the weather was hot and stuffy. Mum never switched the AC on until the temperature touched 100 degrees—Celsius, mind you, not Fahrenheit.

Mum had bought me a black pinstripe suit to wear to my birthday party at Chuckee Cheese. When dad said that nobody wore a suit to Chuckee Cheese, mum simply steam-rolled over his objections—like always.

Mum had invited all her friends, her relatives and *their*

children to the party. But Tony and Mustapha were nowhere in the guest list—you'd think it was Mum's birthday party.

"Can't you tie a bowtie properly?" mum said to dad.

She roughly spun me in her direction and started to manipulate the bowtie. I was half-afraid I'd get strangled to death.

"It's loose. You'll have to tighten it," dad said.

That darn tie was choking me as it was.

"So you think you know everything, eh?" mum said.

That's how it started. Before I could even get into my pinstripe coat, they were screaming at each other. Then came the usual Act Two where things got physical. Dad gave mum a slap on her shoulder. And mum replied in kind—with a sort of a punch in his stomach. I watched the bout mutely like a referee who had misplaced his whistle.

They stopped fighting just as suddenly and got on with the job of getting ready as if nothing had happened—like they always did. But as dad was about to pick up his car keys, he gave out a loud moan—as though somebody was tying a bowtie very tightly around his throat. He fell down with a crash, breaking a leg of an end table. Mum screamed and dialled 911.

We accompanied dad in the ambulance because mum didn't know how to drive. I sat in my pinstripe trousers and bowtie next to him. Mum was continually on the mobile, calling her friends and relatives to cancel the party. The paramedic heard her and wished me a "Happy Birthday." Dad looked at me, rolled his eyes and mouthed: "*Je-sus!*"

When we got out of the ambulance we found that some of my parents' friends and relatives had decided to follow us to the hospital. Perhaps, they wanted to give mum and dad

moral support. Or did they think that the venue of the party had moved? Seeing the long line-up of cars—like a preview of his funeral procession—must have unnerved dad.

He never got out of the hospital alive. I miss dad. I think he had loved me in his own peculiar way, whatever mum said to the contrary.

* * *

It was a foregone conclusion that my 11th birthday would be a no go. After all it was dad's anniversary too. It kind of sucked he died on my birthday. But when such thoughts occurred to me I felt bad because it was like being disloyal to dad. I missed not having him around a helluva lot. Mum, who had been weepy for days, kept saying that she missed dad.

As a sparring partner, I thought. One way or another I couldn't see the two of us trying to restart the abandoned party in Chuckee Cheese.

Mum made chicken tikka and fried rice and offered them to dad. They were his favourite Indian dishes. At lunch time she removed the stone-cold food from below dad's picture and placed it on the dining table.

"The food tastes funny," I said. "I think it needs some salt."

"That's right," mum said. "Dr. Moore had told me to use less salt in the cooking because your dad was—what's the word?"

"Hypersensitive," I suggested.

"Whatever," mum said. "But I never got around to doing it when your dad was alive."

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About The Author



Pratap Reddy moved to Canada from India in 2002. An underwriter by day and a writer by night, he writes about the angst and the agonies (on occasion the ecstasies) of newly arrived immigrants. His stories have been published in Canada, India, and the USA. He is working on a second volume of short fiction, and a novel. He lives in Mississauga with his wife and son.