

# New Fiction from J. Malcolm Garcia: “Viraj”

Viraj sat in a room behind the motel reception counter, eating a bowl of bhaat with his fingers when the desk bell chimed. He set the bowl down and opened the door. A man in a heavy green coat stood at the counter. His pale blue jeans hung off his waist and he tugged them up. He had a wide, bearded face and smiled easily, but Viraj thought his eyes looked tired. A small, leashed brown dog stood beside him and sniffed the floor. The man whistled a high, sharp note, and the dog looked at him, ears perked, and sat.

“May I help you?” Viraj asked.

“Do you have a room for the night?”

“Yes,” Viraj said.

“Do you allow pets?”

“Yes.”

“OK.”

“I’ll need to see your ID and credit card,” Viraj said.

The man reached into a pocket and withdrew a worn leather wallet held together by duct tape. Opening the wallet, he slid his driver’s license and a Visa card under a plexiglass sneeze guard that Viraj installed at the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

“Is your dog a pet, or do you have him for emotional support?”

“What do you mean?”

“If it’s for emotional support, I won’t charge you a deposit.”

"I was in Afghanistan," the man said.

"I see," Viraj said after a moment. "Army?"

"No, I was a contractor. But sometimes there wasn't a difference."

Something in the tone of the man's voice made Viraj uneasy, or perhaps he just felt bad for him. He didn't know.

"I'm sorry," he said.

He examined the driver's license. *Billington, John Donald. Colorado*. He entered the credit card number into a computer.

"Where are you from?" the man asked.

Viraj glanced at him but didn't answer. Was he one of those America First people? Around town he had begun seeing "American Owned" signs in the windows of other motels. Some guests had come into his motel only to leave when they saw him behind the counter. He didn't feel anger as much as contempt. How ignorant some of these Americans are! he thought. He was just an infant when his father, frustrated with the low salary he earned as a history teacher in Hyderabad, India, brought Viraj and his mother here to McAllen, Texas, near the Mexican border. They moved in with his father's older brother, Madhav, who operated a Motel 6. With his contacts, he helped Viraj's father become a manager at the Grand Star, a motel just two blocks away. The family made a home of two rooms on the first floor where they still lived. Viraj's father always wore a dhoti and his mother wrapped herself in a sari, and they continued to speak Hindi to each other and to Viraj but he would answer them in English. After school, Viraj helped his mother clean rooms. He collected bedding and damp towels, and carried them to a laundry room, sometimes tripping on blankets trailing on the ground. His father worked the front desk. In those days, Viraj thought of the Grand Star as a warren of mysterious rooms within which anything was possible.

"Are you from India?" the man asked.

"Yes, I am," Viraj said.

He pushed the driver's license and credit card under the sneeze guard. The man put them in his wallet.

"How long have you lived here?"

"Since I was very small."

When he was a senior in high school, Viraj's father suffered a stroke. Viraj began filling in for him and managing the motel with his mother. As the months passed, the hopes for his father's full recovery faded. Now the family patriarch spent his days in a wheelchair staring out at the parking lot behind the motel, and Viraj's mother had to help him eat. He could speak only a few words. Viraj thought his parents would move back in with Uncle Madhav so he could continue with school. However, Madhav told him this was not possible. It is your job as a son to care for them, not mine, he said. Viraj considered attending college at night but too many guests arrived in the evenings for him to take time off. He considered other options but the routine of managing the day-to-day operations of the motel soon became as much a part of his life as breathing. The plans he had made for school assumed the vagueness of dreams he had difficulty remembering. His mother told him that when he had a family he could fulfill his ambitions through his children, as she and his father had hoped to do with him.

After Viraj turned eighteen, Uncle Madhav introduced him to the daughter of an Indian friend. They married and Viraj brought his new wife whose name was Meera to the motel where they lived in a room next to his parents. She helped his mother clean after guests had checked out. Viraj and Meera tried to have children but she was unable to conceive. He told her it was God's will and she agreed but he knew she felt ashamed. She told him he was wasting his time with her. He took her to a doctor who prescribed antidepressants. She began

spending more time away from the motel—where she didn't say, and Viral didn't ask. Her unhappiness was another trial. He didn't know what to say without burdening himself further so he said nothing. When she didn't come back one night, he wondered if she was at peace and if so, how she had found it.

"I stopped in India on a layover and spent about twenty-four hours in New Delhi," the man said. "Not enough time at all to see it."

"In New Delhi, no, it would not be," Viraj said.

"Do you go back and visit?"

"No," Viraj said. "I am the manager here now and work all the time."

He printed a receipt for the room and asked the man to review and sign it and to write the make, model, and license plate number of his car in a box next to his signature. He looked out the glass front doors at the heavy, gray sky and saw his mother pulling weeds from a pot that had once held geraniums. Uncle Madhay had scolded him for not replacing the dead flowers. Remove the pots, he told him, or plant something. What would your father think? Viraj agreed but did nothing. He doubted his father would care at this point so what did it matter? Viraj checked-in guests. Let his mother worry about the pots.

Across the street, cars pulled into the Waffle House. Next door, people streamed in and out of the Shell convenience store. A woman and a boy walked from sunlight into shade. On slow days like today, Viraj read books about ancient India that belonged to his father. His mother would check on him and he would feel her beside him peering over his shoulder as he read. He heard his father's labored breathing in the other room. I am fine, mother, he would tell her. After she left, he continued to read until his eyes grew tired. Putting the book down, he stared into space. Sometimes, he would go through his

father's closet, change into a dhoti and then return to his chair. He imagined being a physician in the time of the Gupta dynasty, when advances in medicine helped create India's golden age. In another life, Viraj thought, he might have worked with the celebrated fifth-century physician and surgeon Sushruta. In another life he might have been him. Instead, he had this life.



"You're in room 201, around to the back," Viraj told the man.

The man nodded, leaned down and patted the dog's head. Then he straightened up and waited while Viraj put a plastic card key in an envelope.

"Thank you," he said.

He tugged on the leash and the dog stood.

"Did you know that from the Middle Ages to around 1750 some of

eastern Afghanistan was recognized as being a part of India?" Viraj asked.

"No, I didn't."

"It was," Viraj said. "There was an Afghan who died in 1576 on behalf of an Indian king fighting the Mughal Empire. His name was Hakim Khan Sur."

"I didn't know that either," the man said.

He turned to leave. The dog walked beside him, its nails clicking on the white tile floor. Viraj watched them get into a dented Toyota hatchback checkered with mud, and drive toward the rear of the motel. He looked out the door for a long moment. Then he took a pen and wrote "Hakim Khan Sur" on a Post-it. He put the pen down and walked around to the man's room. The dog barked when he knocked, and the man opened the door without removing the chain lock. Viraj noticed a green duffle bag on the floor and a bottle of water and a vial of pills on the night table. The dog sat bolt upright beside the man and growled. Viraj stepped back. He offered the man the Post-it.

"I wrote down the name of the Afghan who died fighting the Mughals," he said. "Hakim Khan Sur."

The man looked at it and Viraj had the impression he didn't remember their conversation.

"Hakim Khan Sur," he repeated. "In case you want to Google him. You can tell me when you check out what you have learned."

"Thank you."

"I live here with my mother and father," Viraj said, "I like to read history books about India."

"I appreciate your trouble," the man said.

He folded the Post-it.

"Google him. You will see I come from a great country."

The man stared at Viraj.

"He was a very important person."

The man nodded. Viraj walked away. He had not gone far when the man shouted, "I can't help you." Viraj paused but didn't reply or look back. He felt the man staring at him. He had been to Afghanistan. Viraj knew about Hakim Khan Sur. He thought that was interesting. He had assumed the guest would think so too, and would see they had something in common. Now, he felt foolish. He knew he would not see him in the morning.

Viraj returned to his station behind the counter. He wondered if he should read or just go to bed. He knew all there was to know about the golden age of ancient India. He often had dreams of that time as if he had lived in the fifth century, and he would remember them the next morning. He didn't know if that was a good thing. Maybe he read too much. Maybe this evening he would just sit with his mother and father and clear his mind, accept the silence as his own, captive to the slow pace of a quiet night.