

# IJSSIS NON-ACADEMIC FICTION

## DRIVING SOMEWHERE ELSE

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### Abstract

In this work of original short fiction, the characters Chiku and Madam Beth each represent a type of real-life expatriate existing in Doha, Qatar, a city in which foreign workers have outnumbered natives since before the country achieved independence. Though expatriates arrive from diverse locations with varying socio-economic backgrounds and individual needs, they display at least one characteristic and experience in common: hope propelled by imagination has compelled them to risk leaving their own cultures and often their own families to obtain something better, no matter how nebulous this “something better” is.

Even though Chiku has lived in Doha only six years—far fewer than Madam Beth—he would still be considered, by more than a few, a long-term expatriate due to the transient nature of the lives and employment of many of the foreign nationals around him. For those who are in Doha for the long haul, time and circumstances modify, and can even undermine, the possibilities inherent in experiencing a new place, language, and culture. This process of de-evolution requires the foreign worker to reassess: to consider whether there is little more to be gained or to contribute and thus to repatriate to the homeland, or to re-forge his or her purpose and goals in order to remain. Considering the cultural traditions, as well as the legal restrictions on upward mobility in Doha for the foreign worker, if those goals are to align with reality, the individual often needs the quiet help of both the native Qataris and their government and other members of the expatriate community.

### Is There a Place Called “Better”?

The man known as Chiku stood for the second time that morning in front of Madam Beth’s full-length mirror and stretched his long arms up and out so they formed a “V” over his head, while saying in a loud voice, “I am Alagarasu Karim Pandala. He left off the phrase “at your service.” He could do this frivolous thing because Madam Beth had dashed off to school leaving him alone in her house as she usually did when he came to clean. He turned to the side and watched himself as he ran his hand down the smooth cloth of his new jacket. He took a deep breath of satisfaction. It was perfect. The shoulders lay flat, and the length of the sleeves allowed just a peek at the long-sleeved shirt underneath. It was a white shirt and looked fine and bright next to the classic navy. And though the trousers needed loosening in the waistband, the suit still looked sharp on his slender frame.

Before she left, he had sat down in Madam’s teak chair with the pinkish pillow and crossed his legs to test the suit’s elasticity. “Little bit tight,” he said, patting his stomach. “Maybe.”

Madam said, “Yes, I’m not surprised. They do good work, but they have a tendency to make their clothes fit on the snug side, especially for the women. I always have to remind them we’re not all young Filipinas.”

“I take care of it, Madam,” Chiku had said. “They can fix.” He assured her it wasn’t too warm. When buying the cloth, they had both expressed concern when they heard it was wool, but the tailor from Tehran explained there was no need to worry because it was fresco wool, a summer blend.

Chiku made a living cleaning all types of residences in Doha. He was successful at it. His customers were happy with his reliability and thoroughness, and they spread the word. Indeed, sometimes he had too much work. But over the past year he had found himself yearning for a more dignified job. Last year the British embassy advertised for a chauffeur. It triggered his interest because if there was one thing he knew how to do besides fix broken things was to drive in Doha—no small feat considering the out-of-proportion traffic fatalities in a city that was one big

construction site. And one could potentially make more money. He imagined bringing the British ambassador to meet with members of the royal family—maybe the Emir himself. Madam was willing to serve as a referral, though she said she had mixed feelings about it since if he got the job she would be minus a house manager. He had liked the sound of that—house manager. He had rushed an application in, but no one ever called from the embassy. He suspected it was because he didn't know anyone there. The Qataris would say he needed someone with *wasta*.

He'd surely have the job in hand, if the embassy bosses could just observe him drive; if they had just seen for instance how he handled Doha traffic when he took Madam to the tailors.

Saturdays were impossibly congested so he and Madam had made sure to go to the tailors in the morning on a Tuesday. As they left the compound in Chiku's rental, he nodded to the security guard, while Madam waved—she was a friendly sort and waved while going out and coming in. He turned right and started down a dirt road that here and there broke out in large boils of gravel and dirt.

"I can't believe they've torn up this road again, she said.

"They forgot sewage pipes."

"No, you're kidding."

Chiku nodded towards a stack of large black pipes near the edge of a large pit, ready to be dropped in. "There." They both laughed.

"This is so Doha," Madam said. What was it last time?

Chiku shrugged. "Don't know. But too much time they—." He made circular motions with his hand.

"Yes," Madam said, "they turn the street inside out."

There was no direct path to move from the compound to Al Bustan, the outer road, so he had to make a U-turn and go down the opposite way, bump by bump. A dinged up, white car lay stranded over a small mound of rubble like a bad omen.

"Aren't you afraid these bumps will hit the bottom of your car?" Madam tried to ask—but this all came out in jerks.

At Decoration Roundabout he made a left into the middle lane. The street remained clear for a half mile, inviting drivers to roar down this stretch as if racing on the Indian Grand Prix. A white, Nissan truck in the lane next to him and just a few paces ahead nudged closer and closer to the dividing line, even crossing over into Chiku's lane, without the driver seeming to make a definite choice.

"Look at that," said Madam. "No lane discipline."

Chiku deftly went around him.

Without warning, someone in a black Trailblazer pulled up behind him within an inch of his tail—it looked that way—and flicked his lights on and off. Chiku shifted to the right lane. He was choosy about his battles on the road. The trailblazer streaked by. Most likely a young Qatari male.

"I hate when they do that," Madam Beth said. Her right hand gripped the door handle.

Suddenly everything came to a halt. The traffic was logjammed. There was no telling why. After waiting several minutes the SUV drivers in front of Chiku turned their cars so they could drive over the median and make a U-turn. The Renault Logon's small size compelled Chiku to take a more civilized route by finding a road where he could turn right. He twisted and turned down dusty half-built roads and took a chance moving in the opposite direction on a one-way alley he knew well.

Chiku reflected on this last maneuver he had pulled that day and figured it was best used on his own personal time...if he ever got the chauffeur job, that is. He took one last satisfied look at his suit in the mirror and then went about quickly changing into his work clothes. He had already cleaned one villa, but the chartreuse-colored shirt and long pants were still spotless. He took another deep breath before pattering down the stairs in his stocking feet towards the storage room where the cleaning supplies were kept. He thought if no one hired him as a driver, then he might save to buy a car and add a limo service to the things he offered his customers. Perhaps a Sunny or a Camry. He could always find Toyota parts in Doha.

Chiku pursued a global method of cleaning. He chose not to dust, vacuum, and mop one room before pathetically moving onto the next like those few times his father did when his mother was sick. He attacked the whole of the residence at once—so he dusted the entire house before vacuuming all the floors and then ending with mopping the same. He was surprised at how well he tolerated it.

His brother, or *Anna*, as little brothers called their elder brothers, was the one who first broached the idea of Chiku taking over his domestic service work.

"But I've just received my certificate in electronics," Chiku said. "Why would I want to clean houses?"

"So. I have my certificate, too," said *Anna*. "But the job market is tight right now in Kerala. And all the bosses want workers with university degrees. In Doha, you can save enough money to make something of yourself. Buy a car, or after awhile maybe come back to Kannur and go to engineering college like I'm about to do." Anna laid a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Listen, Chiku, do you really want to get married without having experienced anything of the world outside of Kannur? Everyone is going to the Gulf."

That was six years ago. He now was a married man with a wife and baby girl back in Kerala. They talked daily on the phone. Sometimes he called just to hear the baby gurgle.

Chiku padded upstairs again to change the sheets. He felt a surge of energy flow through him as he popped

them off. He often felt this way when there was change in the air. Of course, there was always change in Doha, a city still in process. Transition was the nature of the place, but this change he believed would affect his life for the good.

He brought the sheets downstairs and checked the washer to make sure it wasn't scooting across the floor today. With no building codes to bother with, the construction company had built the compound in six weeks, and things were always coming apart or breaking down. His customers here put up with it because they appreciated the spaciousness of the villas—most others were smaller.

When *Anna* left, Chiku took his place under the British family who sponsored him. Since they needed him only part time, they allowed him to take on *Anna's* customers as well, something not quite legal, but Qataris looked the other way with workers like this. What soon became apparent was Chiku's business savvy. He would buy phone cards for his customers who were willing to pay extra so they didn't have to make the trip, and in no time he found himself repairing old CD players and light fixtures and computers.

Chiku expanded his customer base by asking for referrals and visiting them in person. It's harder to refuse someone face to face, especially if you need the service. That's how he met Madam Beth. She was a bit loopy, as his British madam would have said, but she had a good heart. She didn't tip much, but when she sent Chiku to buy water or a cleaning supply, she gave double or triple the money and didn't ask for change. And when he helped her to compose his task list for the summer before she took a flight home, he could tell they dreamed up chores together mostly to keep him employed. Doha could empty out when Al Shamal blew in, and he didn't have as much work, except for pet care. He could hear the blessed tap, tap, tap of Madam's pen against the counter until one of them would come up with the next item.

Any extra tip that came his way Chiku saved. In fact, he had a knack for saving money all the way around. He had been able to pay a Qatari man 10,000 Riyals twice to sponsor two of his cousins. Madam was shocked to hear it cost that much. They formed a network of housecleaners and took over for each other during illness or vacation. All three shared a small apartment and were saving to bring other cousins over. Chiku expected the living arrangements to get crowded, but he could put up with a lot since he was planning on buying land back in Kerala to build a house.

If Beth had stayed home just thirty minutes longer and then peeked into the guest bathroom, she would have seen Chiku squatted, leaning over the tub, his right arm moving back and forth, scrubbing the porcelain with vigor. Chiku, however, was seeing something else entirely.

As a special attaché to the Ambassador, he'd been given a cache of top-secret papers detailing British defenses at their Doha base in case of an attack on Qatar, and was assigned to keep them safe until the Ambassador met with His Highness the Emir. He stashed them in his posh villa in the West Bay in a safe with a combination lock, cut into the floor, under the Persian carpet, under his king-size bed. Fortunately, he was a light sleeper. That night he heard a slight whoosh, and immediately crawled out of bed and moved silently to the wall. He always wore charcoal-gray pajamas with a hood so as to blend in more effectively. He molded himself to a corner, so that in the dark no one could possibly discern his presence. A moment later, a masked figure draped in black entered his bedroom. Chiku waited until the figure crept closer to the bed before using the wall to propel himself towards the intruder and give a powerful kick to his head. It took only one. Chiku lifted the mask from the unconscious man. He took a quick breath. It was the supervisor at the embassy who had trained him to be a chauffeur! His British mentor, Scott Hansom! A traitor! Chiku ran for rubber ties and his mobile. There would be no betrayal tonight.

The bathtub was done and so was Scott Hansom. Chiku saw himself with the papers forcing his red convertible down an alley, with the car tilted on its side, only two wheels touching the ground, just as he had seen in a dubbed James Bond movie back in Kerala. Of course Chiku fully realized such a feat was impossible for the average person, but facts played only a minor part in his daydreams. In his short life he had already been a train conductor, an orchestral composer, a symphony conductor, a classical pianist, a musician of traditional Indian music, an undercover agent, a detective, a university professor like Madam, a seafaring captain, a pirate, an inventor, a famous actor in Bollywood, an astronomer, a prime minister, a professional dancer, and even a drummer out in L.A.

Madam caught him one time at his daydreaming. It was when she was going down the litany of tasks they had to do in preparation for his interview. She would work with him twice a week on his English—this was her biggest worry; he would write his application, and she would edit it; he needed to ask his British sir if he would write a recommendation this time—there's no reason to be skittish about that! If she could give him up, his British family could give him up. It was about his future!

It was about then that Chiku's mind started wandering off into the clouds of adventure for he was a WWII pilot this time, and soon he heard Madam say, "Chiku. Chiku, are you all right?"

"Oh, yes, Madam. I'm sorry. Just daydreaming. I'm sorry, sorry." He felt mortified.

Surprisingly, Madam threw back her head and laughed with gusto. She told him she had spent most of her childhood in a fantasy land. Chiku felt relief. Others would have chided him, perhaps gently, but still have chided.

He checked off the last item on the list: the patio was now swept and watered down. Tweed, the feral cat Madam fed, gave him a sour look before crawling on her belly under the gate to return to the front. He took a last look around and finally locked up. The best thing about Madam was that she left him alone in the house. He liked being his own man.

Three weeks later, the embassy called Chiku to ask him to come in to take a test in basic English skills and then

to be interviewed. When Madam heard, she actually yelled and clapped.

"I knew that reference of your sponsor would make a difference!" she said.

He was pleased as well and had gathered his cousins and some friends that night to celebrate. Some lounged on the couch in the cousins' apartment, while others sat cross-legged on the floor and passed around Chikki, Aloo Chaat, and Kela Ke Puri. One of Chiku's closest cousins, Bijou, brought out a bottle of red wine a customer had given him. It was ordinary table wine, but everyone praised it as the best they'd ever had.

But now that the actual day had arrived, he was bored out of his skull. Thirty minutes earlier he had picked Madam up in his rental and had gotten stuck in traffic almost immediately.

They had planned for this, but Chiku felt disappointed all the same. It was the reminder he needed that driving in Doha these days usually did not require the deftness he displayed when taking Madam to the tailors. The city had always been in need of infrastructure, but things were more tightly wound now because of its exploding population. Chiku had to admit he missed the challenges posed by the crazy drivers in earlier times. Anything was better than sitting in one place, blocked in on both sides by cones and construction pits or cars. It was so bad today that when the traffic light hit green, no one moved. It wasn't until the next light cycle that traffic could budge.

Madam was jittery today and eating his brain with her chatter. He wondered if she was nervous on his behalf. He wasn't nervous, but he was full of doubts about the wisdom of this pursuit. He recently had met an Indian from Goa whose brother was a chauffeur for the same embassy. When asked if his brother liked it, he said, yes, as far as he knew he felt very fortunate to have such a job, and the bosses were fair and didn't yell in anger. All sounded promising to Chiku until he learned that the man's relative had stayed in the same position for over a decade.

"No opportunity for promotion?" Chiku asked in Hindi.

"Oh, he gets pay raises, but no, I don't think his job has changed. So no promotion. It's a good, stable job, though. Very stable. We are all proud of him. Very proud."

Chiku felt deflated after hearing this. Perhaps his own domestic work that he did now wouldn't change for a decade, but at least he made his own schedule and could take vacation when it was cool in Kerala without getting stuck in its rainy season. He also negotiated pay with his customers, gave himself a raise now and then, and if he found someone too insulting, he had been known to politely tell them he could no longer be of service. He believed the man from Goa about the reasonableness of the supervisors at the embassy, but that didn't mean all the visitors were of the same kind. Just the other day while exiting Madam's front door, he observed a large man who lived across the street yell at a limo driver, both of his hands making exclamation points in the air. Chiku wasn't up for that.

After seventy-five minutes of driving and thirty minutes of parking in a dusty lot and several different security checkpoints, he sat in his classic navy suit in a plush swivel chair in a room of sleek glass fixtures and pictures of British equestrians with their horses. Madam was outside the office in one of the lobbies. Probably praying, Chiku thought, and would have laughed a little if there had not been an interviewer of graying face and hair sitting in front of him. Chiku had trouble at times distinguishing between the British, Scottish, and Irish accents—they all tended to sound alike—but the man's name, Ian McCubbin, labelled on a metal desk tag, told him he was most likely Scottish. Everyone used first names in Doha, thus Chiku would call him Mr. Ian.

Chiku listened carefully as Mr. Ian first explained the job expectations and benefits. The chauffeurs were on rotating shifts: four days, three nights. Like most people in the country, they officially worked six days a week, but the chauffeurs were actually given a full day off, even a day and a half off, in between the four days and three nights. This was to allow them to recover from those after-midnight excursions they often had to make to the airport and downtown hotels. Their staff received health insurance benefits and 25 days off annually, along with certain holidays during which the embassy was closed. It sounded generous, if fairly typical of high end companies. When Chiku heard about the salary, he silently noted it was very average. Seemingly aware of potential complaints, Mr. Ian was quick to say this was for an entry-level position and pay raises were given regularly.

"Excuse me, Mr. Ian," Chiku said. "Sir, I have question. Um, Sir, opportunities for step up here? I mean for excellent service, of course?"

Mr. Ian tilted his head sideways. "Well, we have entry-level, and then permanent-staff level. Once one attains permanent-staff level, it's a very solid job. Very solid."

Chiku nodded politely, his head bobbing to the front in the western way he had learned many years ago. He smiled with a closed mouth.

Mr. Ian leaned back in his chair and asked, "You contract your domestic services out, I take it. How is that going?"

Chiku was prepared for this question and started to give his answer as he had rehearsed with Madam Beth. But he forgot part of what he meant to say, and thus plunged into spontaneous explanation. It was the latter he felt most comfortable with, most persuasive about. It was how he watched out for the needs of his customers so that he became more to them than just a housecleaner. They depended on him for errands, his electronic know-how, his awareness of Doha trends, his ability to obtain event tickets, his knowledge of the reputations of various primary schools. He even threw in his gardening abilities, as he called them, despite the fact Madam had told him forthrightly that gardening was not his forté. True, he lost a lot of plants over the summer, but so did everyone in the deadly heat. That didn't stop customers from still asking him to take care of their green things.

"Impressive," Mr. Ian exclaimed. His demeanor changed, becoming more alert. "I'm obviously speaking with an

entrepreneur.” He drummed his fingers on his leather desk blotter, and said. “Tell me, Mr. Alagarasu, why do you wish to work here?”

Chiku hesitated. He and Madam Beth had formulated a polished answer to this question, as well. But at this moment, Chiku threw everything to the wind—he didn’t know why—and said as he had heard several of his American male customers and actors in American movies say, “To tell you the truth, I’m weighing my options...Sir.” He regretted it as soon as he said it. But there it was.

Mr. Ian’s eyebrows went up in surprise. He then promptly burst into laughter. Chiku couldn’t help but laugh, too, though he felt sheepish.

“Well done, sir, well done,” Mr. Ian said. “Listen, I think I’m going to recommend you. But there is one thing you must agree to if you’re going to take this job. Your English test scores came out a little lower than we like to see. Since this is an entry job, that’s no problem. We can offer you daily lessons for a few months, let’s say three. You’d work for us at a lower pay, and then upon improving your score, we’d raise your rate up to the usual. Of course, Human Resources has to approve this, but that will be my recommendation to them.”

Chiku said, “Very kind, sir.” And nodded his head in the western way, politely.

Chiku rose to leave, saying thank you, again, when he noticed Mr. Ian, once more, drumming his fingers against the blotter.

“Uh, listen, Mr. Alagarasu, before you leave...am I right in thinking you have a lot of customers?”

Chiku assured him he did, even more than he could handle right now.

“Well, here.” Mr. Ian pulled out his wallet and removed a card to hand to Chiku. “This is our domestic helper, my family’s that is, and she is looking for more work. She’s excellent and thoroughly reliable.”

Chiku reached for the card, as Mr. Ian said, “If we hire you, perhaps you could throw some work her way, eh?”

Chiku agreed. He looked at the name on the card. Then looked up. “Filipina?” he asked.

“Yes,” Mr. Ian said.

“Good workers,” Chiku observed. Mr. Ian agreed vigorously.

If anything, Chiku was quick on his feet. It took only the few seconds from the chair to Mr. Ian’s desk to shake his hand, to the door for him to dream up a battle plan. He would call this Filipina—young, she probably was, and offer her work. Of course, she could stay with Mr. Ian’s family—he didn’t want to create bad feelings—but she could also work for him. If he was right, she had a brother or sister or two who wanted to come to Doha for work. He could save to pay for their sponsorship, and there you go! There was his crew, the beginnings of a domestic service company. It would take some time and a Qatari sponsor to agree, but Chiku saw future nannies and workers in cleaning, hospitality, and pesticide under his leadership. And his family here in Doha or back in Kerala.

He walked into the lobby and up to where Madam was seated. She looked up with expectancy.

He was excited and said quickly, “Madam, they going to offer me job...Sir said good chance. I not take, I don’t think. But I need suit. I pay you.”

It satisfied Chiku to see he could leave Madam speechless.

