
The Inheritance of Loss

Kiran Desai

Kiran Desai was born in India in 1971, she moved to the USA when she was fifteen. She attended Bennington College, Hollins University, and Columbia University, where she studied creative writing. She published in the *The New Yorker* and is the author of *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) and *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), which won the Booker Prize. The following excerpt is about the experience of an Indian immigrant who lives illegally in New York.

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Biju had started his second year in America at Pinocchio's Italian Restaurant, stringing vats of spluttering Bolognese, as over a speaker an opera singer sang of love and murder, revenge and heartbreak.

"He smells," said the owner's wife. "I think I'm allergic to his hair oil."

She had hoped for men from the poorer parts of Europe—Bulgarians perhaps, or Czechoslovakians. At least they might have something in common with them like religion and skin color, grandfathers who ate cured sausages and looked like them too, but they weren't coming in numbers great enough or they weren't coming desperate enough, she wasn't sure....

The owner bought soap and toothpaste, toothbrush, shampoo plus conditioner, Q-tips, nail clippers, and most important of all, deodorant, and told Biju he'd picked up some things he might need.

They stood there embarrassed by the intimacy of the products that lay between them.

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He tried another tactic: "What do they think of the pope in India?"
By showing his respect for Biju's mind he would raise Biju's self-respect, for the boy was clearly lacking in that department.

"You've tried," his wife said, comforting him a few days later when they couldn't detect any difference in Biju. "You even bought the soap," she said.

Biju approached Tom & Tomoko's—"No jobs."

McSweeney's Pub—"Not hiring."

Freddy's Wok—"Can you ride a bicycle?"

Yes, he could.

Szechuan wings and French fries, just \$3.00. Fried rice \$1.35 and \$1.00 for pan-tried dumplings fat and tight as babies—slice them open and flood your plate with a run of luscious oil. In this country poor people eat like kings! General Tso's chicken, emperor's pork, and Biju on a bicycle with the delivery bag on his handlebars, a tremulous figure between heaving buses, regurgitating taxis—what growls, what sounds of flatulence came from this traffic. Biju pounded at the pedals, heckled by taxi drivers direct from Punjab—a man is not a caged thing, a man is wild *wild* and he must drive as such, in a bucking yodeling taxi. They harassed Biju with such blows from their horns as could split the world into whey and solids: paaaaaWWW!

One evening, Biju was sent to deliver hot-and-sour soups and egg foo yong to three Indian girls, students, new additions to the neighborhood in an apartment just opened under reviewed city laws to raised rents. Banners reading "Antigentrification Day" had been hauled up over the street by the longtime residents for a festival earlier in the afternoon when they had played music, grilled hot dogs in the street, and sold all their gritty junk. One day the Indian girls hoped to be gentry, but right now, despite being unwelcome in the neighborhood, they were in the student stage of vehemently siding with the poor people who wished them gone.

The girl who answered the buzzer smiled, shiny teeth, shiny eyes through shiny glasses. She took the bag and went to collect the money. It was suffused with Indian femininity in there, abundant amounts of sweet newly washed hair, gold strung Kohlapuri slippers lying about. Heavy-weight accounting books sat on the table along with a chunky Ganesha brought all the way from home despite its weight, for interior decoration plus luck in money and exams.

"Well," one of them continued with the conversation Biju had interrupted, discussing a fourth Indian girl not present, "why doesn't she just go for an Indian boy then, who'll understand all that temper tantrum stuff?"

"She won't look at an Indian boy, she doesn't want a nice Indian boy who's grown up chatting with his auntsies in the kitchen."

"What does she want then?"

"She wants the Marlboro man with a Ph.D."

They had a self-righteousness common to many Indian women of the English-speaking upper-educated, went out to mimosa brunches, ate their Dadi's roti with adept fingers, donned a sari or smacked on elastic shorts for aerobics, could say "Namaste, Kusum Auntie, *aayie*, *baethiye*, *khayiyel*" as easily as "Shit!" They took to short hair quickly, were eager for Western-style romance, and happy for a traditional ceremony with lots of jewelry: green set (meaning emerald), red set (meaning ruby), white set (meaning diamond). They considered themselves uniquely positioned to

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lecture everyone on a variety of topics: accounting professors on accounting, Vermonters on the fall foliage, Indians on America, Americans on India, Indians on India, Americans on America. They were poised; they were impressive; in the United States, where luckily it was still assumed that Indian women were downtrodden, they were lauded as extraordinary—which had the unfortunate result of making them even more of what they already were.

Fortune cookies, they checked, chili sauce, soy sauce, duck sauce, chopsticks, napkins, plastic spoons knives forks.

"*Dhanyawad. Shukria.* Thank you. Extra tip. You should buy topi-muffler-gloves to be ready for the winter."

The shiny-eyed girl said it many ways so that the meaning might be conveyed from every angle—that he might comprehend their friendliness completely in this meeting between Indians abroad of different classes and languages, rich and poor, north and south, top caste bottom caste.

Standing at that threshold, Biju felt a mixture of emotions: hunger, respect, loathing. He mounted the bicycle he had rested against the railings and was about to go on, but something made him stop and draw back. It was a ground-floor apartment with black security bars, and he put two fingers to his lips and whistled into the window at the girls dunking their spoons into the plastic containers where the brown liquid and foggy bits of egg looked horrible against the plastic, *twe tuzeeeee tuhoo*, and before he saw their response, he pedaled as fast as he could into the scowling howling traffic down Broadway, and as he pedaled, he sang loudly, "*O, yeh lakki zara si deewani lagti ho!*..."

Old songs, best songs.

But then, in a week, five people called up Freddy's Wok to complain that the food was cold. It had turned to winter.

The shadows drew in close, the night chomped more than its share of hours. Biju smelled the first of the snow and found it had the same pricking, difficult smell that existed inside the freezer; he felt the Thermocol scrunch of it underfoot. On the Hudson, the ice cracked loudly into pieces, and within the contours of this gray, broken river it seemed as if the city's inhabitants were being provided with a glimpse of something far and forlorn that they might use to consider their own loneliness.

Biju put a padding of newspapers down his shirt—leftover copies from kind Mr. Lype the newsagent—and sometimes he took the scallion pancakes and inserted them below the paper, inspired by the memory of an uncle who used to go out to the fields in winter with his lunchtime *parathas* down his vest. But even this did not seem to help and once, on his bicycle, he began to weep from the cold, and the weeping unpicked a deeper vein of grief—such a terrible groan issued from between the whippers that he was shocked his sadness had such depth.

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When he returned home to the basement of a building at the bottom of Harlem, he fell straight into sleep.

The building belonged to an invisible management company that listed its address as One and a Quarter Street and owned tenements all over the neighborhood, the superintendent supplementing his income by illegally renting out basement quarters by the week, by the month, and even by the day, to fellow illegals. He spoke about as much English as Biju did, so between Spanish, Hindi, and wild mime, Jacinto's gold tooth flashing in the late evening sun, they had settled the terms of rental. Biju joined a shifting population of men camping out near the fuse box, behind the boiler, in the cubby holes, and in odd-shaped corners that once were pantries, maids' rooms, laundry rooms, and storage rooms at the bottom of what had been a single-family home, the entrance still adorned with a scrap of colored mosaic in the shape of a star. The men shared a yellow toilet; the sink was a tin laundry trough. There was one fuse box for the whole building, and if anyone turned on too many appliances or lights, *PHUT*, the entire electricity went, and the residents screamed to nobody, since there was nobody, of course, to hear them.

Biju had been nervous there from his very first day. "Howdy," a man on the steps of his new abode had said, holding out his hand and nodding, "my name's Joey, and I just had me some *WHIEES-KAY!*" Power and hiss. This was the local homeless man at the edge of his hunting and gathering territory, which he sometimes marked by peeing a bright arc right across the road. He wintered here on a subway grate in a giant plastic-bag igloo that sagged, then blew taut with stale air each time a train passed. Biju had taken the sticky hand offered, the man had held tight, and Biju had broken free and run, a cackle of laughter following him.

"The food is cold," the customers complained. "Soup arrived cold! Again! The rice is cold each and every time."

"I'm also cold," Biju said losing his temper.

"Pedal faster," said the owner.

"I cannot."

It was a little after 1 A.M. when he left Freddy's Wok for the last time, the street lamps were haloes of light filled with starry scraps of frozen vapor, and he trudged between snow mountains adorned with empty take-out containers and solidified dog pee in surprised yellow. The streets were empty but for the homeless man who stood looking at an invisible watch on his wrist while talking into a dead pay phone. "Five! Four! Three! Two! One—*TAKEOFF!*" he shouted, and then he hung up the phone and ran holding onto his hat as if it might get blown off by the rocket he had just launched into space.

Biju turned in mechanically at the sixth somber house with its tombstone facade, past the metal cans against which he could hear the

unmistakable sound of rat claws, and went down the flight of steps to the basement.

"I am very tired," he said out loud.

A man near him was frying in bed, turning this way, that way. Someone else was grinding his teeth.

By the time he had found employment again, at a bakery on Broadway and La Salle, he had used up all the money in the savings envelope in his sock. 35

It was spring, the ice was melting, the freed piss was flowing. All over, in city cafés and bistros, they took advantage of this delicate nutty sliver between the winter, cold as hell, and summer, hot as hell, and dined al fresco on the narrow pavement under the cherry blossoms. Women in baby-doll dresses, ribbons, and bows that didn't coincide with their personalities indulged themselves with the first fiddleheads of the season, and the fragrance of expensive cooking mingled with the eructation of taxis and the lascivious subway breath that went up the skirts of the spring-clad girls making them wonder if *this* was how Marilyn Monroe felt—somehow not, somehow not....

The mayor found a rat in Gracie Mansion.

And Biju, at the Queen of Tarts bakery, met Saeed Saeed, who would become the man he admired most in the United States of America.

"I am from Zanzibar, *not* Tanzania," he said, introducing himself.

Biju knew neither one nor the other. "Where is that?"

"Don't you know?? Zanzibar full of Indians, man! My grandmother—she is Indian!"

In Stone Town they ate samosas and *chapatis*, *jalebis*, pilau rice.... Saeed Saeed could sing like Amritabh Bachhan and Hema Malini. He sang, "*Mera joota hai jipani*... ." and "*Bombay se aaya mera dost—Oi!*" He could gesture with his arms out and wiggle his hips, as could Kavalya from Kazakhstan and Omar from Malaysia, and together they assailed Biju with thrilling dance numbers. Biju felt so proud of his country's movies he almost fainted.

Twenty-two

Brigitte's, in *New York's financial district*, was a restaurant hall of mirrors so the diners might observe exactly how enviable they were as they ate. It was named for the owners' dog, the tallest, flattest creature you ever saw, like paper, you could see her properly only from the side.

In the morning, Biju and the rest of the staff began bustling about, the owners, Odessa and Baz, drank Tailors of Harrowgate darteeling at a corner table. Colonial India, free India—the tea was the same, but the romance was gone, and it was best sold on the word of the past. They drank tea

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and diligently they read the *New York Times* together, including the international news. It was overwhelming.

Former slaves and natives. Eskimos and Hiroshima people, Amazonian Indians and Chiapas Indians and Chilean Indians and American Indians and Brazilian Indians and Argentinians, Nigerians, Burmese, Angolans, Peruvians, Ecuadorians, Bolivians, Afghans, Cambodians, Rwandans, Filipinos, Indonesians, Liberians, Borneans, Papua New Guineans, South Africans, Iraqis, Iranians, Turks, Armenians, Palestinians, French Guyanese, Dutch Guyanese, Surinamese, Sierra Leone, Malaysias, Senegalese, Maldivians, Sri Lankans, Malaysians, Kenyans, Panamanians, Mexicans, Haitians, Dominicans, Costa Ricans, Congoans, Mauritians, Marshall Islanders, Tahitians, Gabonese, Beninese, Malians, Jamaicans, Botswanans, Burundians, Sudanese, Eritreans, Uruguayan, Nicaraguans, Ugandans, Ivory Coastians, Zambians, Guinea-Bissauans, Cameroonians, Laotians, Zaireans coming at you screaming colonialism, screaming slavery, screaming mining companies screaming banana companies oil companies screaming CIA spy among the missionaries screaming it was Kissinger who killed their father and why don't you forgive third-world debt; Lumumba, they shouted, and Allende; on the other side, Pinochet, they said, Mobutu; contaminated milk from Nestlé, they said; Agent Orange; dirty dealings by Xerox. World Bank, UN, IMF, everything run by white people. Every day in the papers another thing!

Nestlé and Xerox were fine upstanding companies, the backbone of the economy, and Kissinger was at least a patriot. The United States was a young country built on the finest principles, and how could it possibly owe so many bills?

Enough was enough.

Business was business. Your bread might as well be left unbuttered were the butter to be spread so thin. The fittest one wins and gets the butter.

"Rule of nature," said Odessa to Baz. "Imagine if we were sitting around saying, 'So-and-so-score years ago, Neanderthals came out of the woods, attacked my family with a big dinosaur bone, and now you give back.' Two of the very first iron pots, my friend, and one toothsome toothy daughter from the first days of agriculture, when humans had larger molars, and four samples of an early version of the potato claimed, incidentally, by both Chile and Peru."

She was very witty, Odessa. Baz was proud of her cosmopolitan style, 50 loved the sight of her in her little wire-rimmed glasses. Once he had been shocked to overhear some of their friends say she was black-hearted, but he had put it out of his mind.

"These white people!" said Achootan, a fellow dishwasher, to Biju in the kitchen. "Shit! But at least this country is better than England," he said. "At

least they have some hypocrisy here. They believe they are good people and you get some relief. There they shout at you openly on the street, 'Go back to where you came from.'" He had spent eight years in Canterbury, and he had responded by shouting a line Biju was to hear many times over, for he repeated it several times a week: "Your father came to *my* country and took *my* bread and now I have come to *your* country to get *my* bread back."

Achootan didn't want a green card in the same way as Saeed did. He wanted it in the way of revenge.

"Why do you want it if you hate it here?" Odessa had said angrily to Achootan when he asked for sponsorship.

Well, he wanted it. Everyone wanted it whether you liked it or you hated it. The more you hated it sometimes, the more you wanted it.

This they didn't understand.

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The restaurant served only one menu: steak, salad, fries. It assumed a certain pride in simplicity among the wealthy classes.

Holy cow. Unholy cow. Biju knew the reasoning he should keep by his side. At lunch and dinner the space filled with young uniformed business-people in their twenties and thirties.

"How would you like that, ma'am?"

"Rare."

"And you, sir?"

"Still mooin'."

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Only the fools said, "Well done, please." Odessa could barely conceal her scorn. "Sure about that? Well, all right, but it's going to be tough."

She sat at the corner table where she had her morning tea and aroused the men by tearing into her steak.

"You know, Biju," she said, laughing, "isn't it ironic, nobody eats beef in India and just look at it—it's the shape of a big T-Bone."

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But here there were Indians eating beef. Indian bankers. Chomp chomp. He fixed them with a concentrated look of meaning as he cleared the plates. They saw it. They knew. He knew. They knew he knew. They pretended they didn't know he knew. They looked away. He took on a sneering look. But they could afford not to notice.

"I'll have the steak," they said with practiced nonchalance, with an ease like a signature that's a thoughtless scribble that you *know* has been practiced page after page.

Holy cow unholy cow.

Job no job.

One should not give up one's religion, the principles of one's parents and their parents before them. No, no matter what.

You had to live according to something. You had to find your dignity. 70
The meat charred on the grill, the blood beaded on the surface, and then
the blood also began to bubble and boil.

Those who could see a difference between a holy cow and an unholy
cow would win.

Those who couldn't see it would lose.

So Biju was learning to sear steaks.

Blood, meat, salt, and the cannon directed at the plates: "Would you

like freshly ground pepper on that, sir?"

"You know we may be poor in India, but there only a dog would eat
meat cooked like this," said Achootan.

"We need to get aggressive about Asia," the businessmen said to each
other. "It's opening up, new frontier, millions of potential consumers, big
buying power in the middle classes, China, India, potential for cigarettes,
diapers, Kentucky Fried, life insurance, water management, cell phones—
big family people, always on the phone, all those men calling their moth-
ers, all those mothers calling all their many, many children; this country is
done, Europe done, Latin America done, Africa is a basket case except for
oil. Asia is the next frontier. Is there oil anywhere there? They don't have
oil, do they? They must...."

The talk was basic. If anyone dared to call them *Fool!* they could just
point at their bank accounts and let the numbers refute the accusation.

Biju thought of Saeed Saeed who still refused to eat a pig, "They dirty,
man, they messy. *First* I am Muslim, then I am Zarzibari, then I will BE Ameri-
can." Once he'd shown Biju his new purchase of a model of a mosque with
a quartz clock set into the bottom that was programmed, at the five correct
hours, to start agitating: "*Allah hu Akbar, La ilhaha illallah, wal lah hu akbar....*"

Through the crackle of the tape from the top of the minaret came ancient sand-
weathered words, that keening cry from the desert offering sustenance to cre-
ate a man's strength, his faith in an empty-bellied morning and all through the
day, that he might not fall through the filthy differences between nations. The
lights came on encouragingly, flashing in the mosque in disco green and white.

"Why do you want to leave?" Odessa was shocked. A chance like they
had given him! He surely didn't know how lucky he was.

"He'll never make it in America with that kind of attitude," said Baz 80
hopefully.

Biju left a new person, a man full to the brim with a wish to live within
a narrow purity.

"Do you cook with beef?" he asked a prospective employer.

"We have a Philly steak sandwich."

"Sorry. I can't work here."

"They worship the cow," he heard the owner of the establishment tell someone in the kitchen, and he felt tribal and astonishing.

Smoky Joe's.

"Beef?"

"Honey," said the lady, "Ah don't mean to offend you, but Ah'm a steak eater and Ah AAHM beef."

Marilyn. Blown-up photographs of Marilyn Monroe on the wall, Indian owner at the desk!

The owner was on the speaker phone.

"Rajibhai, *Kem cho?*"

"What?"

"*Rajibhai?*"

"Who aez thee?" Very Indian-trying-to-be-American accent.

"*Kem cho? Saaru cho? Tem samjo cho?*"

"WHAAT?"

"Don't speak Gujarati, sir?"

"No."

"You are Gujarati, no?"

"No."

"But your name is Gujarati??"

"Who are you?!"

"You are *not* Gujarati?"

"Who are you?!"

"AT&T, sir, offering special rates to India."

"Don't know anyone in India."

"Don't know anyone???" You must have some relative?"

"Yeah," American accent growing more pronounced, "but I don't talk to my relateev..."

Shocked silence.

"Don't talk to your relative?"

Then, "We are offering forty-seven cents per minute."

"Yhaat deference does that make? I haave aalready taald you," he spoke slow as if to an idiot, "no talephone calls to Eeendya."

"But you are from Gujarati?" Anxious voice.

"Veea Kampala, Uganda, Teepton, England, and Roanoke state of Vaer-geenial One time I went to Eeendya and, laet me tell you, you canaat pay me to go to that caantrey agaen!

Slipping out and back on the street. It was horrible what happened to Indians abroad and nobody knew but other Indians abroad. It was a dirty little rodent secret. But, no, Biju wasn't done. His country called him again. He smelled his fate. Drawn, despite himself, by his nose, around a corner, he saw the first letter of the sign, G, then an AN. His soul anticipated the

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rest: *DHI*. As he approached the Gandhi Café, the air gradually grew solid. It was always unbudgeable here, with the smell of a thousand and one meals accumulated, no matter the winter storms that howled around the corner, the rain, the melting heat. Though the restaurant was dark, when Biju tested the door, it swung open.

There in the dim space, at the back, amid lentils splattered about and spreading grease transparencies on the cloths of abandoned tables yet unclear, sat Harish-Harry, who, with his brothers Gaurish-Gary and Dhan-sukh-Danny, ran a triplet of Gandhi Cafés in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. He did not look up as Biju entered. He had his pen hovering over a request for a donation sent by a cow shelter outside Edison, New Jersey.

If you gave a hundred dollars, in addition to such bonus miles as would be totted up to your balance sheet for lives to come, "We will send you a free gift; please check the box to indicate your preference":

1. A preframed decorative painting of Krishna-Lila: "She longs for her lord and laments."
2. A copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* accompanied by commentary by Pandit so-and-so (B A, MPhil., Ph.D., President of the Hindu Heritage Center), who has just completed a lecture tour in sixty-six countries.
3. A CD of devotional music beloved by Mahatma Gandhi.
4. A gift-coupon to the Inddiagiftmart: "Surprise the special lady in your life with our special *chohli* in the colors of onion and tender pink, coupled with a butter *tehinga*. For the woman who makes your house a home, a set of twenty-five spice jars with vacuum lids. Stock up on Haldiram's Premium Nagpur Chana Nuts that you must have been missing...."

His pen hovered. Pounced.

To Biju he said: "Beef? Are you crazy? We are an all-Hindu establishment. No Pakistanis, no Bangladeshis, those people don't know how to cook, have you been to those restaurants on Sixth Street? *Bilkul bekaar*...."

One week later, Biju was in the kitchen and Gandhi's favorite tunes were being sung over the sound system.

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