

Cyril Dabydeen

## THE OTHER HALF

Harro felt a stirring in his veins looking at Shami—who was one of our young teachers with jet-black hair, a pointy nose, and a wisp of a body. See, Harro had lived for a while in America, and might have come back just to meet her. Now friends we were becoming, Harro and I. “What for?” I asked him, meaning about his looking at Shami like that. He made a whirring noise. His head was a crumpled mass of hair, Afro-style. He was one of our more seasoned teachers. “What for?” he feigned being amused. Indeed I continued thinking about his interest in our East Indian Shami: she having been one of the new teachers recruited from the village. But Harro was from the town, and different.

I smiled. Harro made a face, an American face.

Shami whirled her body around as Harro pretended being suave, though he looked ungainly standing near her. And when he laughed Shami also laughed. Indeed she knew of his interest in her, older as he was. The senior school kids snickered, as I simply thought of the difference between town and country—in our new time, new era. It also had to do with the government trying to change people’s ways. Anti-colonialism do you call it?

Harro kept being charming; and Shami was a Muslim, but not a diehard like her father Abdul Gafoor. Did Gafoor know about Harro’s interest in Shami? Laughter from the other young teachers aware of the bigotry and diehard religious feelings in our community.

“Why are you watching me like that?” Shami raised her voice to Harro.

“I can watch you if I want,” he shot back.

“You think you still in America, eh?” Shami meant this in a funny way.

“Maybe.” he grinned.

“It’s because you’re not like us ... village people, eh?” Shami

meant to put Harro on the defensive. He passed a hand over his head, smoothing his hair.

She stroked her hair reaching down to her shoulders. The other teachers listened, one or two laughing. I figured our village was unique. But many of us also set our sights on America. *Yes, going there.* But Harro having returned here was making us begin to have second thoughts. *Why did he really come back?*

Odd, I figured he would go back to America and never return. Shami cast a sideways glance at me and smiled. I imagined Harro in America wearing zoot and strutting about in Motown wearing platform shoes with a smirk on his face. In Harlem he was funky-looking. “Hey, Mr American Man,” I called out. Harro waved, waving to Shami. Yes, I saw her leaning against Harro’s arm. *Really in America?* My head spun.

“Why are you grinning like that?” asked Harro. We watched the older boys playing cricket, a favourite school game. Shami walked by looking beautiful as she flaunted herself. But her diehard father, Abdul Gafoor, I again thought about who regularly prayed at the mosque. Now maybe Shami was beginning to have liberal ideas with our country’s schools no longer being run by Christians. Yet “denominational” was the government word we repeated to ourselves. Harro made a strange sound, like an “American” sound?

Abdul Gafoor was now talking to the village imam, who recommended that Shami wear a hijab to hide her beauty from the likes of Harro. Shami would look beautiful in a hijab, I thought. She scoffed at me. Now some started calling Harro “coloured”—an American term—and he’d said something about having joined the NAACP while in America. When I tried to ask Harro about this, he simply clammed up. See, I wanted him to only talk about America’s “coloured” people and their struggle. Shami did too, I figured. She looked at me warily.

But Harro remained cool, American cool. Why did he come back after five long years there? And was Shami really interested in him?

“Is it true you’re thinking about Harro, and maybe going to America?” I teased her.

“No!”

“You can’t deny it.”

“Deny what?”

“Harro ... and America.”

“He’s not like us.” She made a face. Did it have to do with him being “coloured”? I wanted her to be cool, if American-cool. Everyone laughed when I said that. Harro simply made a face.

I simply dithered.

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Harro had become disillusioned by America it seemed, which was the talk going around. Once more Shami came by swaying her smallish body, which she did even when she rode her bicycle going home after school. Harro also rode his bicycle to and from the town. Strange, our village appeared bigger because Harro was teaching at our school. “America-America,” I sang to myself. New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Atlanta, New Orleans, and Miami came closer. I walked around in my own zoot. Everyone else being in zoot, including the older students. Sure, strutting we were.

Now our village and country was no longer a dull place. I stood before my class of students, with a new confidence. But again others scoffed.

“He go marry she?” one older student sniffed.

“Marry ... who?”

“You know who!”

Everything in a whirl, I sensed.

“It’s because he’s ... like a white man.”

“Who?” I snapped.

“Harro ... you know.”

I balked. “Not colored ...?”

Abdul Gafoor, Shami’s father, met with the imam once more, I

knew. Maybe he didn't want Shami to be a school teacher any longer. But Shami was determined, she would never stop being a teacher.

I braced myself for more. Harro, well, only smiled.

"He's really not like us," I heard.

"Because he's ...?"

"A Negro," someone hurled at me.

"Who are we ... anyway?" I lit up with an argument.

"Wha ...?"

"Harro's mixed-race ... or white," rasped another.

The wrangle over race continued. I tormented myself thinking about this.

"See, racial problems are everywhere in America, yet everyone wants to go there," Harro smirked, as though having a second thought.

"Why?" I argued, in a vain manner.

Harro's thoughts were only on Shami, he couldn't fool me. When he played cricket with us in the school-yard, he began to be a show-off with his large body as he ambled forward. Shami again watched him run up to bowl as he pretended being a West Indian fast bowler, like famous Wesley Hall. *Pace like fire, see.*

Shami focussed her eyes as Harro took the long run-up a second time, then he sprang into action, bowling really fast.

I thought of our famous cricketers who travelled the world to England ... India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Australia. But not to America? Harro took another long run-up, the cricket ball gripped in his hand. How he swung his shoulders as he bowled at the batsman. Shami watched him with fascination. One older student called out "the American cricketer!" Then, "Come on, let's see how really American you are!"

"Yeah-yeah!"

Shami applauded. I wasn't sure if she was applauding the village star batsman Deonand ... or Harro. I again saw Harro in zoot strutting in Harlem or Motown, then in New York ... and next in Chicago, Los Angeles. I was sitting high up in a large football stadium in New York watching him there in the middle playing cricket. Not baseball? Harro once more got ready to bowl fast; but just then looked up, and saw me.

Sauntering down Fifth Avenue in Manhattan next he was, and I was with him. Shami too was there ... her face on the cover of fashion magazines, pointy nose and all. Yes, she was really on the cover of *Cosmopolitan*, on newsstands in the Big Apple. *Our Shami!* Harro looked at these pictures and smiled.

When I actually told Shami this she blushed. She was a Muslim, I mustn't forget. Then she smiled, and I smiled back.

But Abdul Gafoor would have none of it. *None of what?*

Shami parted her lips, teeth glistening. Harro was taking Shami's hand.

I told her what I imagined, and how she laughed.

"You must marry me," Harro said to her that afternoon.

"To take me with you to America?" she grinned; it was just banter.

Abdul Gafoor and the imam grew wide-eyed, as the gossiping grew.

"We could elope," Harro said, being daring, and debonair.

"What's elope?" Shami shot back.

*Does he mean it?*

Gafoor was aghast. The imam kept up a solemn face. The muezzin's cry rose at the mosque—calling everyone to prayers.

"Really elope?" Shami repeated.

Harro once more did the long run-up with the cricket-ball. I looked closely at him. "It will never be, Harro, not with Shami's father

being who he is,” I said to him. And Shami’s face was still on the cover of *Cosmopolitan*. Then she was on *Reality TV*... and Donald Trump was captivated by her!

The imam frowned.

Abdul Gafoor’s ire grew.

I said to Harro, “You have to use a different tactic, man.”

“What different tactic?”

Odd now, I didn’t want to see him in America; I wanted him to be right here with us. As a young teacher I’d made a commitment to our village and country. Other young teachers were similarly committed, even as we talked about the NAACP, Black Liberation and the Civil Rights Movement in America. Later it would be about saving the environment, the Amazon basin close to us. America, Canada, Asia, Africa ... Saudi Arabia—all came closer.

Harro held the cricket ball firmly; and Shami applauded when the ball flew past the batsman. Deonand ducked at the crease! Maybe the village batsman had other ideas. Did he want to become a prime minister one day?

“See, Harro, you’re not the best,” I heckled him.

“I am,” he hollered back.

“Harro! Harro!” came a chant.

Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, all chanting.

*So cool.*

Harro talked about the Muslims in America, and about Malcolm X, then Louis Farrakhan. Could Shami’s father, Abdul Gafoor, be such a Muslim? The imam ... well, gathered Muslims around him at the mosque. A minaret sky, the muezzin calling everyone to prayers, if the men only.

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Shami was nervous when her father came home late that evening. See,

Abdul Gafoor was thinking of sending Shami to another village to be far from Harro. Shami looked nervous, she simmered. Gafoor next talked about going on the hajj ... to Saudi Arabia, devout as he was. Maybe he genuinely feared the “American” Harro, who read magazines like *Playboy* and wanted to elope with his daughter.

“Tell us about girls in America, Harro?” another teacher baited him.

“You have to go there to see for yourself,” he replied.

“To meet Marilyn Monroe, d’you mean?” I tried.

Did Harro actually meet her and Elizabeth Taylor?

“Is Shami not like her?” I meant Marilyn Monroe, who else?

“Harro’s now thinking of becoming a Muslim,” another teacher solemnly said.

“No,” I replied.

“Abdul Gafoor would accept him if he really became one, eh?” another mused.

“But Harro’s, well ...” sniffed another.

“Well what?” I cried. “A Christian?”

My thoughts went haywire. Shami’s too, no doubt. Commitment to local politics and tradition is what I thought. Did I still want political change?

*What kind of change really?*

I faced the students in my class in the new school term. But my thoughts were only on America; and sometimes about Shami eloping with Harro. But he was no longer his usual self; he wouldn’t talk about America at all, but shook his head when I tried prompting him. Shami was on his mind, see, there was no doubt. Then I saw him and Shami talking animatedly.

I rubbed my eyes. Harro was indeed asking her to elope with him.

But she was devoted to her father; she wouldn't go with one like Harro.

"You were born here like us, Harro," she cajoled, now with her mixed feelings.

"Was I?"

"You only lived a short while in America."

Her words were mine. *What was I thinking?*

"This is not *our* place," Harro shot back.

What did he mean?

I conjured Shami walking tall—a real fashion model in America. How she flaunted herself with high heels and walking along Fifth Avenue, then sauntering along Times Square and being on Broadway next. Next she was in Los Angeles ... San Francisco ... with admirers everywhere. Donald Trump was really becoming interested in her! Ah, she would now wear a hijab, looking elegant—if only to defy expectations. Imagine, eh?

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Weeks passed into months. Harro, well, he didn't come to our school anymore; he was teaching elsewhere, it was rumoured. But not returned to America? Maybe he would teach in a town school only, but still interested in our Shami. He would ask no other to *elope* with him. Yes, I persisted with Shami and Harro being together in America. But other village school teachers scoffed at me. Now too, Abdul Gafoor was like a ghost walking around with his own thoughts.

My own mind grew haywire. Again I saw Harro taking the long run-up to bowl the cricket ball. Instinctively I applauded, when no one else did.

Yes, Harro and Shami walking hand-in-hand in New Orleans' French Quarter. How the other teachers laughed. Deonand said I was the only one who would miss Shami because I was secretly in love with her. And Harro would only fall in love with an American beauty, if a genuinely coloured girl like Aretha Franklin. Shami's family members said almost the same, trying to save face.



Abdul Gafoor was grim-looking.

Strange, I began seeing Harro as a diehard Muslim ... going on the hajj with the likes of Louis Farrakhan. Abdul Gafoor would go there too, and I imagined him meeting Harro dressed in a long flowing white robe and looking like a sheik from Oman, Qatar, or Saudi Arabia.

Now Shami came to our school with her head covered, a devout Muslim as she was. Because of Harro's doing? I forced myself to see him again taking the long run-up with the cricket ball. Deonand, the cricket batsman, said I was becoming strange or different because of my obsessive thinking about Shami.

And indeed Shami's father, Abdul Gafoor, now wore a long white robe ... going on the hajj, and being in Saudi Arabia—so devout he was, bending down, buttocks arched in the air in the *sijdah* and pointing in the direction of the Kaaba. Then instinctively he turned sideways, and he saw Harro next to him—or, one looking like him as they made eye-contact, praying hard.