

A House in the Country

After Reading

A Summary of the Story

The following is a brief summary of the story of 'A House in the Country'. However, the paragraphs are not in the correct order (apart from the first and last ones). Work in pairs to put the paragraphs into the correct order.

1. Ray, who had been working for some years in London, returns to his native Sri Lanka to occupy the house that his uncle left him.

2. All of this is set against the background of the civil war in Sri Lanka. As they go about their work and lives, however, the only disturbances are the curfews, a regular event which they have got used to, but which only help to emphasise their frequent silences.

3. One morning, when Ray goes out for his regular walk, he comes across the burning remains of Mr Ibrahim's shop. It appears that Mr Ibrahim had been the victim of the disturbances that were tearing the country apart, and had been burnt alive in his shop.

4. Ray decides that what Siri needs is to have some land of his own. He offers to lend Siri the money to buy some land, but Siri refuses to become a debtor.

5. At first he wants to try and do the work on the house, which he finds very ugly, by himself. However, he soon accepts the advice of a friend and employs Siri as his assistant.

6. The solution, Ray decides, is to buy some land for both of them, and to build a house in the country where they can both live, and he imagines a time when Siri marries and settles down with a family in the new house.

7. Apart from providing the majority of the manual labour required for the rebuilding, Siri also acts as houseboy, or personal servant

for Ray, providing meals and drinks, and generally running the house efficiently.

8. Returning home, Ray learns from Siri that the shopkeeper had refused to listen to warnings to stop stocking a particular newspaper which took a particular political stand. Siri claims that if the shopkeeper had listened to the warnings he would still be alive.

9. Siri proves to be a very trustworthy employee who produces work of the finest quality. Ray discusses his plans for the building extension, and Siri sets about putting them into practice the very next day.

10. This event causes an even greater silence to fall between the two occupants of the house. Then Siri comes to Ray and tells him he must leave, but wants to know where he can go, appealing to Ray's knowledge of the wider world to indicate a safe place.

11. However, Ray finds it difficult to talk to Siri. He doesn't really appreciate the 'old ways' that Siri follows, where a distance is maintained between master and servant. Ray finds this lack of communication frustrating.

12. After enquiring as to the cause of Siri's disquiet, Ray discovers that Siri's brother, who lives in the country, has been brutally murdered by a gang. Siri feels that this marks the end for him. He must move away.

13. Siri is surprised at Ray's generosity as it exceeds anything he has ever known. Ray sets about the negotiations to buy the land.

14. Ray is left, wondering what will happen next.

The House in the Country

After Reading

Further Reading

In 'The House in the Country' we read that Ray worked in London for some time, where he earned enough money to return home to start rebuilding his house in Colombo.

He'd had a secure job with a building society, a flat in London, a car, and a happy circle of acquaintances.

We don't know when arrived in London as an immigrant, but he always seemed to have the intention of returning home to Sri Lanka

Ray had not planned on having any help or company when he first returned to Colombo from England..... they never had much to talk about and quite often he simply thought about going back to Sri Lanka.

The following story is also about an immigrant to London, except here the time working in London is concentrated on: what it is like being an immigrant to the UK.

The River Underground

His name was Husman. He came from The Gambia, or Gambia as most people call it. The Gambia is really just a river, the country is just the scrub that stretches out a hundred miles or so on either side of the great river's banks. Husman had come to England to make money. He'd come just for a few months. He planned to return to his home and build his own compound and be a big player in Baku.

He was here illegally - it was simpler that way. He couldn't afford to get here *and* be turned away. This was to be his once-in-a-lifetime-experience.

He'd been very lucky. He'd made it to London without too many problems. His English was good and he was well prepared. He had talked to many tubabs on the beach in Baku, plus a few from the aid agencies while he was working upcountry teaching English to the kids there. .

They'd told him that though he might think that all white people were rich in fact they weren't. Some of the young tourists told him they had no proper job at all.

The tubabs told him people in London got paid more than £100 a week for doing nothing more than looking for work. One told him that he'd taken his £100 a week, plus a little they had in the bank and a bit from doing some work on the side, and had come to Gambia for a one week holiday.

The young tubab said when he returned the free money would still be there. For him it was back to security, back to that city of millions .where every tubab seemed to come from.

But where was that free money coming from that these tubabs kept pulling from their pockets? It was like there was a money spring welling up in that cold country. Like a river underground washing up all the money from the world out onto the flood plains of the old River Thames.

The river Gambia never worked like that; it washed people out to other lands and sometimes it brought villagers from upcountry to Baku looking for a new life in the tubab hotels. But not money. No, never money.

Despite the shock of their careless wealth, it did not put him off the tubabs. Most of them, despite their money never acted impolitely in Gambia. In fact,

sometimes, though he could not exactly explain why, they seemed to be nicer than they were to each other.

He was fascinated by the prices of things and how much you could earn as a tubab. The best one he ever heard £3.50 an hour for washing dishes! Were these people insane? Were these people so rampant with their money that they could pay people £3.50 an hour just to run some water over some plates? That was enough money in Gambia to feed the family.

The only tubab Husman didn't like was the aid worker who lived in his compound. He was a tall blonde man and said he was a Christian. He had an African wife, a very pretty one, from Angola.

He'd been in Africa for five years. Been all over the place. He said he loved Africa. Said that he worked for free. "Must be a rich man to work for free," Husman's best Captain had said.

Captain was from Liberia. He'd been in the army there and had fled to Gambia. That's why they called him Captain. He'd never talk about what happened in the army so Husman never asked him. But he was a good friend. A real friend. One day Hus was sitting in the yard mashing up some tea when he heard a conversation in a room nearby.

"One in ten is any good, you know," said the aid worker

"Yes?" said another English voice, a new one.

"These people, they'll steal anything. You put a gallon of petrol outside in a drum. You come back it's been siphoned half away. You leave your motor scooter out on the street too long and someone unscrews the pedals and walks off with them."

Husman had no answer to the man's complaints, he just didn't understand. Hus was not surprised that the tubab didn't understand.

After Husmah arrived in England he started work as a cleaner in the London Underground. He worked for another company that worked for the Underground and spent all his time cleaning in the tubes.

When he worked the people would pass all around him like he was not there. After the first three or four days he stopped trying to talk to people. They

moved too quickly. They had nothing to say to him anyway.

And the people in London - who were these people? People from all over the world. People from every country in Africa, North, South, East, West. And African people who had lived here even before he was born and were as soft and as strange as the regular tubabs.

Captain had said that some of these had come from Gambia long ago, then gone to America as slaves, then the Caribbean as free people and then to London for jobs. It sounded incredible but Captain swore it was true.

Anything seemed possible now he was here in London.

He laughed at the things they used to tell him about tubabs when he was a child. They said that tubabs were so physically weak that you could crush their hands if you held them too hard. And there was some truth in that - their hands were so soft, soft as a little baby's hand, soft as a girl's breasts.

And they had laughed when tubabs talked about men having gone to the moon. Some of the young people in his compound believed it, but the leaders who'd only just come from the family village upcountry, they almost died laughing when you said that to them.

When he got here he saw that it was all true. He read English very well and he read everything he could get his hands on. The newspapers here were so full of things. Especially on a Sunday when they had lots of pictures of beautiful houses, each one as good as the President of Gambia's house.

And most people didn't even appear to work especially hard here to get that kind of thing. He worked hard though.

He'd work either early mornings or late nights. Both were terrible. And now he did believe some of the things the Christian had said about the way things were in England. The Christian had said that England was not all good and happy, that this image was a myth, that it had its own problems with poverty. He had not believed a word of it.

But he had seen children, English children, sleeping in the tubes, taking drugs, selling themselves for sex – worse than anything he had seen in the worst part

of Baku.

Craziness was rampant here too. At night there many crazy people. It was like the Ju-Ju bird had got into all the people down in the tube. People jumped onto the tube tracks and killed themselves. People were vomiting and fighting and urinating everywhere, every night, like animals in a mad heat - people in suits too with lots of money. And then there were the blind people with just a fat funny dog walking through the tubes on their own and not worrying about a thing. It was a crazy place.

But the money was good. Every week he would take his cheque to the bank and cash it directly. All he needed to show was Some ID and they gave him his money. And it was good money.

He lived with three other guys from Gambia in a place called Hackney Downs. He had got there in the summer and that was not too bad. But now, when it was getting cold, it was too harsh.

He was not sure which was worse: at work or being back at the room. In the room all they talked about was home - about the women back at home, about the food back at home, and about the sound of the sea and the fishing boats and the taste of real milk and real sugar and real couscous.

Milk at home was so thick, and the cream floated in it and melted on your tongue. Here the milk was like water and the sugar like dust.

TV was also mixed. The animal programmes were the funniest. There was a cat - it had a broken leg - the family and two doctors spent a month looking after it. X-rays and drugs and all the full treatment.

Hus remembered when his cousin broke his leg and it wasn't done right at the clinic and he found it hard to marry because his leg was never right. And then he thought about this little cat.

And the tubabs begged here too - even the ones who already had the free money. They asked him for money when he was coming home from work. He had been taught that Allah wanted him to be gracious to the poor, but this was too much.

Sometimes on Friday nights they would go and buy some ganja. Not very good stuff, not like they grew back at home, but they would smoke it and sing together a bit and talk about who was the better Wailer.

Although some of his brothers liked the Nigerian-style guitar music, he and his friends loved the old reggae best and no one could change their minds.

The hardest thing was finding somewhere to keep the money they had saved. Hus would save his up until he had three or four weeks' money then get it wired to the bank in Gambia. It was an excellent system. He wired it to his own name. He'd pick it up from there when he got home. They charged him a lot - but it was safe.

One man, from Senegal, in another room on the floor above, went crazy one Saturday morning. His savings had been taken. He'd put them under a floorboard. He threatened everyone near him with a knife. He had been planning to go home in two or three weeks. Now he would have to stay. The police came and it was a bad scene for everyone. After they arrested the man from Senegal they wanted to know who everyone else was. They wanted to see papers. Hus was lucky that morning. He was just coming back from the nightshift and when he saw the police outside the flats he just kept walking and sat in a McDonalds for an hour with a cup of tea and read the morning papers. It was like that sometimes - feeling like he was doing a slow bank robbery, and at any time, as if responding to a call from months ago, the police were going to arrive and take him away.

It was not so bad now, though. He'd been able to send back enough money to pay for the blocks and cement for a half compound with two rows of rooms. He couldn't wait to see Captain's face when he got back. Captain would be given the second biggest room. The biggest, of course, would be for him and his wife - whoever she would be.

The threat of return was not too unbearable. He had back sometime someday anyway.

Unlike some of the people he met in London he had no intention of staying. He could have made this place home if he had wanted to, but he'd rather be a rich man at home than a poor man here for the rest of his life.

In Baku he was a teacher, respected, well-paid. No, when the time was right he would go back to his friends. The might even give him a free flight home if he was arrested for working illegally. He'd heard of such things. It was kind of them really. He couldn't imagine the Gambian police giving a tubab a free flight.

Though the work was dull the money was coming in steadily and nicely. The cleaning manager was friendly and he never stole their money and never cheated. He just had to endure this for another three months, he reckoned.

For another month life carried on as usual. But then, just two months from the trip home, he came across something that he had never expected. He fell in love. With a tubab.

Printed by kind permission of the author

© Richard Tromans 2002

The River Underground first appeared in 'Diaspora City'

Published by Arcadia Books Ltd 2003

Glossary

Note: The definitions given here are accurate for the context of the story 'The River Underground' but may vary in other contexts.

Baku	capital of the Gambia
crush	press so hard it breaks what is being pressed
ganja	marijuana
harsh	hard and cruel
mashing	making (tea)
rampant	extravagant
scrub	ground with bushes, low trees; not very fertile
tubab	Mandinka name for white people
welling	rising up from
wired	sent electronically
work on the side	extra, illegal (undeclared) work