



Indian Gothic

SPRING EDITION 2026

VOL 1 ISSUE 1

Interview:

INTO THE DARK

with

Neil D'Silva

THE WELL

Nisha Hegde

TEJIMOLA'S DAUGHTER

Nilanjana Dey

RIVERS RUN DEEP

Sarah Gadhavi

NAZAR

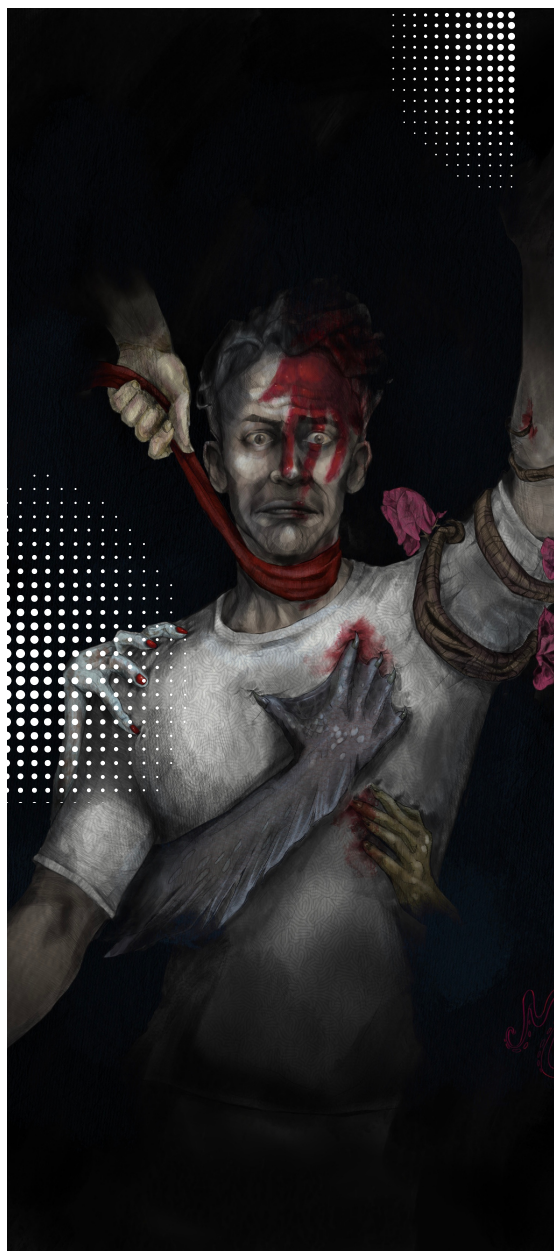
Seline

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**“I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED TO USE FEAR,
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SHIRLEY JACKSON



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OPEN CALL FOR MONSOON EDITION!

Our next submission window for Issue 2 of Indian Gothic opens
on May 7 and closes on June 30, 2026.

We are accepting short stories,
craft-related articles, one-act
plays, and flash fiction (NEW)!

Send us your best writing in the
following sub-genres of Gothic fiction:

- Traditional Gothic
- Contemporary Gothic
- Horror
- Speculative Fiction
- Supernatural
- Paranormal
- Sci-fi
- Magical Realism

For submission guidelines, please visit
our website:

<https://www.indiangothic.com/submit>

If you have a question, email us:
submission@indiangothic.com

Want to read and acquaint yourself
with classic Gothic horror stories we
love? Here is your list!

1. Frankenstein by Mary Shelley (1818)
2. Dracula by Bram Stoker (1897)
3. The Turn of the Screw by Henry James (1898)
4. Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë (1847)
5. Rebecca by Daphne du Maurier (1938)
6. The Monk by Matthew Gregory Lewis (1796)
7. Carmilla by Sheridan Le Fanu (1872)
8. Melmoth the Wanderer by Charles Maturin (1820)
9. The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket by Edgar Allan Poe (1838)
10. The Case of Charles Dexter Ward by H.P. Lovecraft (1941, posthumous)



**From the monsoon edition
onwards, we will also publish
flash fiction between 1000
and 1200 words!**





THE AGE OF UNSETTLE

BY ARPITA BHAWAL

“Horror writing is no longer a genre defined solely by tropes; it is an inquiry into the self and its relationship with everything else in existence, including that which lies within our bodies.”

Evidently, we’re quagmired in Kalyug (or Kali Yuga), the fourth and final era in Hindu cosmology, and horror has slipped indiscriminately from the pages of fiction into our lives.

Described as the *age of darkness* or the *age of vice*, where Kali represents the demon of strife, quarrel, or discord, we’re already acquainted with Kalyug – a complex, intolerant, and unsettling time that continues to shape scary narratives. Perhaps, then, there is no better time to write and read stories that not only evoke fear, unease, or bewilderment but also question who we are, what we carry within, why our reality transforms, and how things linger even after they are gone, like unfamiliar ghosts awaiting justice.

Last year, when I decided to create a space dedicated to horror fiction in India, I remembered a famous quote by Mariana Enriquez: *“Fear is a way of understanding the world, not of escaping it”*. Isn’t that what you and I are doing right now?

Indian Gothic was born from this very impulse.

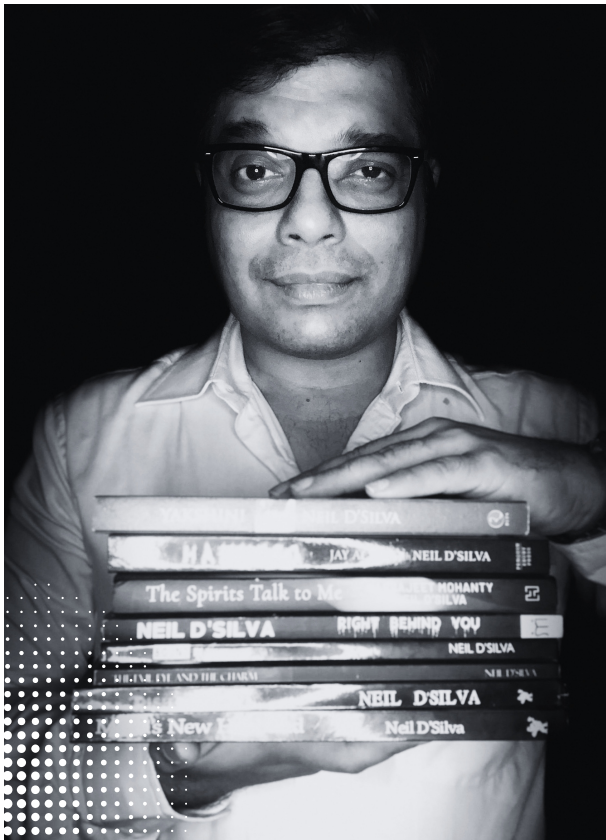
Horror writing is no longer a genre defined solely by tropes; it is an inquiry into the self and its relationship with everything else in existence, including that which lies within our bodies. In India, Gothic horror is not merely an imported Western aesthetic confined to castles and moors, nor is it cashing in only on old havelis and bhoot bunglas. Indian horror explores folklore and myths, extending beyond atmosphere and space to examine our interactions with alter egos and ghosts.

In this regard, for this inaugural issue, I’m thrilled to present Neil D’Silva, the OG horror writer and pioneer of folklore horror in India, who has helped reshape the genre of horror writing in India since 2015. In an exclusive interview with *Indian Gothic*, Neil sheds light on his writing journey and interesting insights about horror and paranormal writing.

We’re also absolutely delighted to publish the brave writers—emerging voices, and offbeat storytellers—who took a chance on *Indian Gothic*. Perhaps, in reading these stories, we will come a little closer to understanding ourselves and the times we live in.

Happy reading!





INTO THE DARK

WITH NEIL D'SILVA

In an exclusive interview for the inaugural issue of Indian Gothic, India's pioneer and leading horror writer reveals his writing journey in a niche genre, what makes the horror writing craft actually scary, and what are the top three things new entrants to this genre (readers and writers) need to know, or can take away from it.

Qs 1. The Indian Texture of Fear

Horror often wears different skins across cultures. What, in your view, makes Indian horror distinct—psychologically, culturally, or even spiritually—from Western horror traditions?

Ans.

From my observations gathered from my reading, I have come across the following distinctions between Indian and Western horror.

We have more complex themes and plots.

While all Western horror is essentially the tussle between the good and evil forces, Indian horror stories are more richly layered. The stories might often dabble with themes of redemption and retribution, past-life karma, traumatic and tragic deaths, curses that run through generations in families, crusades against social evils, and so on. This requires us to build a larger universe and have stories with stronger undercurrents. Our horror cannot and does not just rely on jump scares and thrills.

Our horror villains are nuanced. In many Western horror stories, it is enough to depict the antagonist as purely evil. However, in Indian stories, the antagonist is usually fleshed out more, often with a backstory that delves into the cause of their evil deeds at present.

Local lore. We have an abundance of folklore entities that lend to engrossing horror stories. Whether it is Rantas from Kashmir, Alvantin from Goa, Shakchunni from Bengal, or Odiyan from Kerala, they all have powerful origin stories. In their local areas, these entities are dreaded. It is almost inevitable then, the way they find themselves in our horror stories.

Happier endings. While Western horror often gets away with interpretative endings or keeping the villain alive (or with an ambiguous fate),

Indian horror audiences like stories that have stronger conclusions. Even though franchises of horror movies are the norm these days in India, it is noteworthy that every individual movie within a franchise still counts as a standalone story with a conclusion of its own, where the villain often “dies”.

Messaging. Indian horror audiences also appreciate some kind of messaging or social commentary within the broader universe of the story. This need not be on the nose, but it makes a better story to incorporate a social message in some manner.

Qs 2. Writing Fear in a Familiar Landscape

India is steeped in mythology, superstition, and lived folklore. How do you navigate the balance between inherited myths and original storytelling without falling into the familiar?

Ans.

With my books such as *Maya's New Husband*, *Yakshini*, *Pishacha*, and *Devputra*, I have developed a distinct style that blends contemporary settings and characters with entities from our folklore. Hence, while the stories sound modern, the cause behind all the trouble usually turns out to be some unpaid debt to the past, which is where the folklore element comes in.

My method of writing these stories involves strong research into the entity or folklore element I am writing about. Then, within the grammar of that folklore, I blend my modern story. This is an interesting process that juxtaposes the past and the present, making for something fun to read. But, of course, it is necessary to keep this pattern as pure as possible. I make the effort to stay faithful to the folklore.

Understanding the rules of the folklore world I am dealing with becomes vital. No entity is invincible. Listening to locals' stories, it becomes clear that every entity has its own unique evil powers, but also its own weaknesses. I don't change that aspect. The fiction part of the story, of course, stays fiction.

Qs. 3. The Writer's Journey in an Unforgiving Genre

Horror is still somewhat of a niche in Indian publishing. What did your early journey look like, and what were the biggest challenges you faced in being taken seriously as a horror writer?

Ans.

You are right when you say that horror is a niche, and I believe that it should always remain so. The moment horror goes mainstream, it will lose the very essence of what it stands for. Horror needs to remain in the dark shadows, lurking just beyond the visible, always looming on the periphery, ready to throw an unexpected scare.

However, that also becomes the biggest challenge for us horror authors. We know there's an audience, but reaching them is daunting. When my debut novel, *Maya's New Husband*, was released in January 2015, there were hardly any Indian English horror writers on the scene. The Amazon India horror lists were populated only by Western authors.



But now I had written a book, and it hit me with the force of a sledgehammer that I need to promote it too! My biggest ally at that time was social media, especially Facebook, as well as platforms like Wattpad and Figment. I shared free horror stories on my website to give people a flavour of how I can write. Once this was established, people became curious, and my books gained traction.

The one thing I did very well was not to stop at one book. I wrote two short story collections in 2015, and in 2016 I published *Pishacha*. On its heels came *Right Behind You*, and then came the novel that gave me a lot of visibility—*Yakshini*, which was also my first traditional publication (Rupa Publications). *Haunted* (Penguin Random House) was released in the same month as *Yakshini*, and the two books together helped me gain both acclaim and credibility as a horror author. Then something happened that hadn't happened earlier—I was invited to lit fests around the country. When Instagram became a thing, podcasters reached out and had me on their platforms. My episode with Beer Biceps on his show, *The Ranveer Show*, has around 3 million views!

Having said all of this, a horror author's challenge is always reaching the audience. The audience is surely out there, but they need to have faith. Horror audiences are like possessive spirits; once they like you and latch on to you, it's very difficult to get rid of them. They'll keep reading all your future books without you needing to promote them too much. For me, the one thing that worked majorly was to keep on writing good stories (two or three a year) and assure my audience that I won't suddenly melt away into nothingness after giving them a taste of my blood.

Qs 4. The Craft: What Actually Makes Something Scary?

Beyond atmosphere and plot, what do you think truly creates fear on the page? Is it language, pacing, psychology, or something more intangible?

Ans.

Good that we have atmosphere and plot out of the way. Of course they are needed, but everyone knows that, and so I won't dwell upon them. Here are the other things we need to make horror memorable.

Characters. Horror is a character-driven genre and not a plot-driven genre. We can create great horror even with the flimsiest of plots. See how characters like *Frankenstein*, *Freddy Kreuger*, *Jigsaw*, and so many others are popular out in the West. For us here in India, the characters in horror have to be real, work with emotions we can relate to, be put in believably scary situations, exist in settings we understand, and react to them in ways we might do. This is very important for horror to work.

Beliefs. Indian horror is largely mythology and folklore based. Even our paranormal world is different from the Western paranormal world because we believe in a different set of rituals and practices that are a part of our daily lives. Indian horror authors don't and shouldn't tamper with those. We can invent, innovate, and take our readers beyond their wildest imaginations, but that shred of believability should always be there.

Senses. In horror, it is extremely important to make the readers think that the circumstances are playing out with them and the best way we can do that is by working with their five senses. Making horror as visual as we can, making them

smell and hear the environment we are putting them in, even giving them the taste of blood and the touch of gooseflesh is crucial to make horror work. This is where language becomes an essential companion. The right word and the right syntax at the right time can elevate an ordinary sentence to something that packs a strong punch right in the gut, that is, make the reader really 'feel' the scene.

Sensibility. Horror is the most intellectual genre there is. I do not say it lightly. It has been stigmatized because it requires a lot of imagination and intelligence on the part of the reader. We horror authors write smartly—never spelling out everything but giving enough details for the horror to build—and then it has to build in the reader's mind. A reader who just glances through cannot appreciate horror. It has to get under your skin and it will only do that when you can pick out the many nuances and layers we authors create. That is why badly written horror becomes so laughably vapid. Horror readers can easily identify bad horror; that's where their intelligence lies. A good author knows how to work with it.

Qs. 5. For the New Entrant to the Dark

If someone is just beginning to write horror today, what are the 3 non-negotiable things they must know, do, or avoid to make their writing come alive?

Ans.

Be Honest with Your Story. Write the story the way it demands to be written. Don't dilute it to appease a wider audience, don't sensationalise it either, don't chase trends. Do justice to your characters and your story. Writing a book is a big responsibility and horror is no exception.

Don't Plot Too Much. Horror stories mostly evolve as you write. They can't be fit into a perfect plot at the start. Once you start writing and your characters take on a life, they are going to dictate terms to you. They will be unruly and wayward and take the story in a direction you didn't plan earlier. Let them. Writing horror without a rigid plot is also fun because then, as an author, even you are unravelling the story as you write, and when the scares come, they come without a warning and become genuinely scary.

Write Them Quick. Horror stories stagnate the longer they stay in your mind. Write them when they are still fresh, when you can still taste the fear they first generated in you. Delaying them makes writing them a chore. Allot yourself a few weeks when you can write the first draft of the story at a stretch.

6. The Role of Literary Magazines in India

As someone who has seen the ecosystem evolve, what role do you think literary magazines play today in shaping genres like horror? Do you engage with or follow any of the Indian or international horror lit mags?

Ans.

To be honest, literary magazines haven't really taken off in India, especially for a niche category such as horror. To work, a literary magazine must capture their audience's attention. That said, a good literary magazine would certainly be well-received by readers. When I say good, I mean that it should be a good showcase of the horror genre. This goes beyond books; it must tap into other areas within horror such as comic books, artworks, horror-themed events, and even horror

memorabilia. Horror fans like to be within an ecosystem. If a magazine can tell them how to do that, it will certainly be well received.

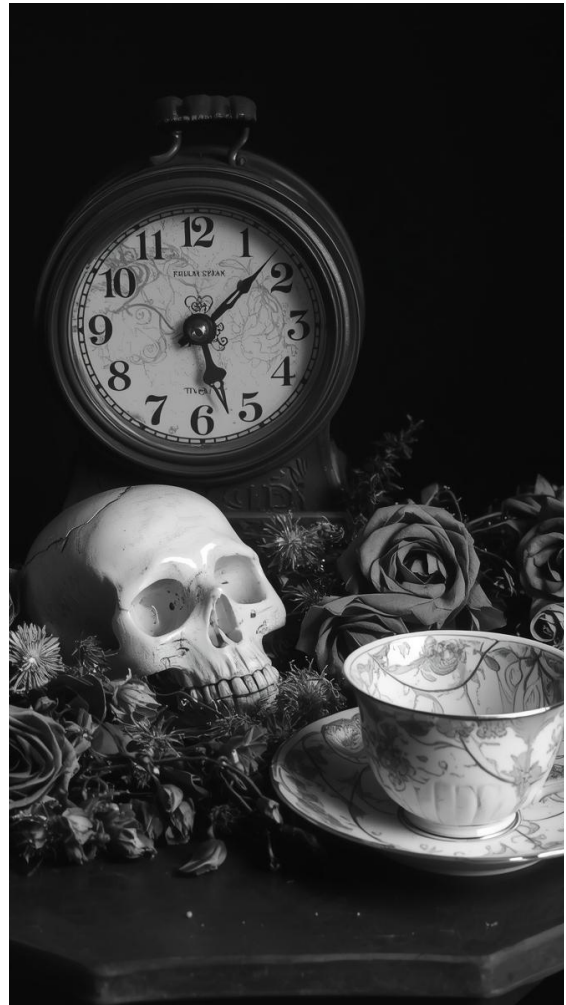
Qs. 7. About Fear

If you could leave readers of Indian Gothic with one lingering thought about fear—or even why people seek horror—what would it be?

Ans.

The simple answer would be “to be scared”, but it goes beyond that. Indian horror fans are looking to connect and associate with like-minded people, which is why both ScareCon and HorrorCon see such a huge audience. It's about being part of an ecosystem which has others who can understand their love for horror. For most, horror is their way to unwind and relax (which is quite true, even though it does not sound like it). It is these “fans” who love to attend any horror event they can and keep the genre going.

*



About the author:

Neil D'Silva is one of India's leading voices in horror fiction, with 17 published books spanning adult, young adult, and non-fiction horror. Known for cult titles like *Maya's New Husband*, *Yakshini*, *Pishacha*, and *Playthings*, his works have consistently topped Amazon charts and been published by houses such as Penguin, Rupa, Hachette, and HarperCollins. As a pioneer of Indian folklore horror in English, Neil has helped reshape the genre in India since 2015. He has served as President of the India Chapter of the Horror Writers Association and was the Jury Chair for the Short Stories category at the Bram Stoker® Awards, 2022-23. His talks and workshops at institutions like IITs and noted colleges and universities have inspired countless young writers. He has spoken at prominent litfests across the country and given TEDx Talks. Neil is also a passionate mentor and educator, having co-founded the Litventure inter-school festival and mentors emerging authors through Scholastic Writers Academy. His insights on horror and writing have reached millions via popular podcasts like *The Ranveer Show*, *Khooni Monday's Ankhon Dekhi*, *Astro Arun Pandit Show*, *Hindi Rush*, and others. Beyond writing, Neil is an advocate of holistic wellness. A former teacher and now also a marathon runner, he speaks often about the synergy between body, mind, and creativity.



THE WELL

BY NISHA HEGDE

On a hot summer day in my village, nearly twenty years ago, after painting nonstop for hours, I took one look at the finished canvas, and such immense disgust welled up inside me at what I'd created that I ripped the painting apart and knocked over my easel. It fell with such a loud clatter and crash that the whole village should have rushed to check out the noise. But by then, they were used to my artists' tantrums. I shouted and scolded the fallen easel, then stomped viciously on my paint tubes and brushes like an angry toddler.

Guruji, who usually gave me my space during these childish episodes, decided to watch my meltdown till its conclusion. And when I was finally calm enough to notice him, he beckoned me into his chambers.

"You're naive and short-sighted, Anirudh..." he began, "...and maybe a bit arrogant too. I see a lot of myself in you. But you're a good student and an excellent artist."

He paused and, in a softer voice, beckoned me still closer, "Beta, I have something important to tell you."

The rest of the students under his tutelage diligently painted and sculpted in the adjacent room. Their paper-scratching and occasional sighs drifted through the space. It was true that I was Guruji's star pupil, but it was dawning on me that anyone who worked just as hard as I did could easily surpass me. For that reason, I paid rapt attention to Guruji's advice, even though I found it trite and predictable.

As if he'd read my mind, he said, "Anirudh, today I don't have any gyaan for you. Only something I felt was important, for your peace of mind, maybe."

My curiosity got the better of me. I impatiently nodded for him to continue. "In the deep forests of Sirsi, deeper than we usually venture, and further from the city, hidden away and nestled within the heart of nature itself, there rests a village. In fact, it's the very village I was born in," he said. "That village used to be so full of life. Before everyone moved out to live in towns and big cities, it was a homely, wonderful paradise. One of the things that made it so perfect was the village's 'well'. A divine well, said to be possessed by an entity or a power that could grant wishes. In exchange, the entity asked for an offering - and if it was pleased, it would grant a boon."

"And how would that help me?" I cut in.

"Spirits and demons are always twisting wishes and adding clauses. I don't want my pursuit of mastery and fame to be foiled by my hand turning into a paintbrush, while my torso morphs into a colour palette."

I remember when Guruji laughed at this comment; it filled me with white-hot rage. What did the old superstitious oaf know that I did not? His laughter subsided, and he replied, "It wasn't an evil spirit. Was it merely bored? Friendly? Benevolent, perhaps? The village is now abandoned and desolate, overtaken by nature." He took a deep breath and said, "Back then, villagers would converse with the spirit in the well while drawing water from it. The spirit kept the water cool and clean all year round for us, and in exchange, it asked for little except brief company. It acted like a chatty shopkeeper. We had many..."

"You grew up here?"

"For some time, yes. But mainly my Dada and Dadi lived there. And after I also left the village, I often visited them in my youth. Before the big move that left the village entirely abandoned."

"Couldn't they take the spirit along with them?"

"Humans and spirits probably don't function the same way," he mused on the query.

"So all I have to do is go there and talk to it? Offer it something? Like how we offer fruits and flowers to the gods?" I couldn't hide my impatience even if I tried. And I'd tried everything to get out of this village with my talent, but nothing had worked. Perhaps this was the final step towards securing some sort of escape.

"Yeah, perhaps that is all it still desires...an offering," he mused in my direction. I could see his mind wandering like the hippie artist he was.

"The spirit kept the water cool and clean all year round for us, and in exchange, it asked for little except brief company. It acted like a chatty shopkeeper."

Eyes veering off into the corner of the ceiling, his one hand cradling his chin in thought, while the other tapped on the table. My foot joined in the tapping.

"It's been abandoned for years, though, beta. There might be dacoits, wild animals, druggies, or...God knows what else! I told you because there is a part of me that still believes in the power of the well. Watching your plight has left me helpless. How many easels will you break? How much paper will you destroy? Maybe God, or the spirit, will appease your soul."

His concerns meant very little to me. "I can handle the dangers of the forest perfectly well! I have a friend who knows how to traverse those paths. He will take me."

Promptly that afternoon, I went to Samarth's house to ask him to join me on the journey. He was busy chopping wood in the hot sun, but immediately noticed me when I approached, lowering his axe to the ground and running up to me.

As expected, before I could even finish telling him the details, he readily accepted the offer. My childhood friend. The one who always followed me around like a lost puppy.

He would follow me to the well, too.

"I haven't been to Sirsi-side in ages!" he exclaimed over a plate of bajji that Sana aunty had brought out for us, as we sat beneath the shade of their mango tree. With a chug of his tea that nearly emptied the glass, he continued, "We will have to leave very early, and return by nightfall. If we are stuck there too late, there may be dacoits and wild animals."



"I only need an hour at the village. We aren't wasting time there. I have a mission."

He paused, contemplated, then continued his inquiry, "What else did your guruji say? Ask him if there are any lakes or waterfalls nearby. Will he provide a map? Why are we visiting his village? Can't we go somewhere closer?"

I took my time to chew the bajji as he rattled with more questions.

I had chosen to omit some finer details of the quest - specifically, the magic of the well. A superstitious fellow like Samarth might hesitate to join me if he knew about it.

"Chalo, but," Samarth asked, "When do we leave?"

"Let's leave tomorrow night. I need to prepare my art supplies and clothes. You will handle the rest, right?" I said, standing up to leave as he elbow-nudged me goodbye. My chai remained half-full and cold; the strong ginger did not agree with my delicate stomach. But the bajjis were excellent, and I had unknowingly finished my entire plate. With a quick thanks to Aunty, I left for home.

We were scheduled to leave the very next day, at dawn during the Ganesha festival, but Samarth begged me to stay for the festivities before we set off for the journey. I obliged.

The festival was loud from the moment I entered the temple. There was an energy about! A vibration I felt throughout my whole body as the temple cymbals rang out sonorously in time with the mridangam. I was entranced, and even more in awe when I saw the elephant, the representative of God himself.

Gold jewellery adorned its massive head like ancient armour; the kind that wound further around its wrinkly trunk. With every heavy step

it took, made heavier by the ankle bells, there was sonorous jingling-jangling. The lachrymose eyes of the beast drooped. When I gazed into them, it was as if they looked back at me (or so I thought).

The elephant-herder I hadn't noticed before, lurking behind the hind legs of the elephant, nudged its back with a sharp stick, causing the elephant to move forward with a slight lurch. It ambled to the centre of the grounds; eager devotees made way for it, encircling it in a silent prayer-circle. I couldn't stop looking into its eyes; it looked hurt, miserable, and awkward. But the crowd around me slowly began to sway, and I swayed with them in prayer. I felt trapped, just like the elephant.

Trapped in this godforsaken village where my ambitions rotted and my talents went unnoticed. And I was scared to die in this village, like the elephant eventually would. Even the sparkle of all its jewellery did very little to help us both forget about its dull fate. I let tears stream down my face and promised myself this was the last time I would let myself succumb to such pathetic self-pity.

With the temple-sounds still ringing in my ears, Samarth and I began our journey at dawn. Through the morning mist, we pushed and hacked through dense foliage; mostly Samarth thwacked, and I followed, dodging overhanging branches and slapping large, hungry mosquitoes away from my sweaty face and swatting buzzing flies away from my eyes. The heavy scent of greenery and earth filled my nostrils with every breath, and my breathing grew heavier and heavier.

Samarth kept glancing backwards to make sure I was ok. He often yelled reassurances, but the forest was so loud that I barely heard him clearly.

The screeching of birds and insects, and the sound of my own breathing, clashed with the hacking through the shrubbery. I stumbled over large roots, clutching my satchel tightly, the one that held my painting supplies. I would offer the well a painting—my magnum opus—and receive a divine boon in return. Until then, we battled the elements.

Eventually, after several hurried stops to rest, paint, and navigate, what seemed like an endless journey was interrupted by the distant sounds of rushing water. A lazy river peeked through the branches. We broke into a run as the foliage cleared ahead of us. The sweet sounds of fresh water!

Samarth dropped his duffel bag of supplies and his shrub-hacking katti onto the grass. He almost immediately disrobed and waded into the river until only the top of his head bobbed above the surface. I sat down to paint. I was painting my journey so far, and had filled three-fifths of the painting with imagery of the forest, trees, and annoying but beautiful insects and birds. It felt poetic to depict my journey to the well through a series of paintings.

As I painted, as usual, Samarth loudly urged me to join him in the water. He said it flirtatiously, I think, from his tone. But I was busy preparing my paints. I heard the splashing of Samarth's approach as he emerged from the water, dripping, and tried flicking droplets onto my painting. But by now, I knew his impish ways and covered the painting in his presence. In the strong mid-morning sun, he sat down next to me.

"It's just the two of us here at this beautiful river, Anirudh." He leaned in and whispered, his lips brushing against my ear.

Despite my annoyance, my face flushed. I knew what he meant by that.

Samarth and I were childhood friends. We knew everything about one another. I loved him, and he loved me.

"We can't waste time doing all that. It will get dark," I said. I did not want to waste time. But more importantly, I was reserving Love for when I was famous and rich in the big city. Something I thought was too out of reach at the time, but with my talent and the well's boon, it was possible.

Samarth withdrew, turning to his duffel bag, and pulling out the food he had packed for the trip – extra soggy bondas, some chai, puliogare – lovely picnic foods. I felt restless and started to paint as Samarth rolled the rice into balls and dropped them into my outstretched hand. I popped the balled-up rice into my mouth and continued to paint.

At some point, Samarth returned to the water. I heard his splashing and hooting in childish abandon turn into a terrified scream. My eyes shifted from my painting to him, but what I saw instead was something floating towards us from a distance.

A large tree trunk? Garbage? As it floated even closer, my heart sank into the depths of my stomach. The paintbrush was forgotten in my hand. Paint dripped onto my pants, but I was frozen. The curved headpiece I'd seen on the magnificent beast from the dawn's rituals was still attached to its large, disembodied head. It floated down the river, a dull red streak trailing behind in the water. White pus oozed from its rheumy eyes, washing away into the water. I stood in shock and watched it float by wordlessly.

At some point, Samarth returned to the water. I heard his splashing and hooting in childish abandon turn into a terrified scream.

Samarth had scrambled out of the water in a panic. "Did you see that?! It's the same elephant," he said and began muttering fervent prayers of protection while grabbing his clothes and hurriedly putting them on. We immediately packed our belongings in scared silence, as the bloated, bloody elephant head floated away with the tide. I watched the carcass drift into the distance, attracting the attention of crows, who boldly snacked on the flesh of their elephant-boat. If I didn't leave this damn village soon, that would be me one day.

We were close. According to Samarth, the village was only a few hundred metres away. We ambled roughly north-east, following the thin, winding path through the trees and shrubs, hoping for a clearing to emerge soon, but it didn't.

A left at the broken tree.

A right at the mosquito-infested pond.

Go straight along the tapering path.

These were Samarth's instructions as we made our way.

The plants closed in around me, and their thorns dug into the fabric of my clothes. I tore through them recklessly - I was already in a world of discomfort. My hair stuck slick to my sweating forehead, and my pants wedged uncomfortably in my crotch.

Finally, we reached a clearing.

The first thing I noticed was the well.

Overgrown with vines and flowering weeds, tiny grasshoppers darted through the dense foliage, and who knows what else slithered underneath the surface!

We eagerly approached the lip of the well. Peering into the depths, I was struck by disappointment. There was hardly any water at the very bottom.

I swatted a fly away as I leaned in further. Indeed, I could still see - clearer than I had expected - a shape that resembled me. My floppy hair, my shoulders, and a rippled reflection of my face. Familiar, but not quite. The waters looked murky. I withdrew from the well's mouth to set up.

In my sling, I carried my essential materials - a hand-bound book of canvas sheets, the paint kit, and brushes. There was a nearby flat-topped rock. I imagined Guruji sitting by the well as a child, while his mother fetched water from it. I took a seat, set the paints and brushes next to me, used my own water to fill the cup that I used to dip my brushes in, and opened my notebook. I began.

I deftly marked the lines on the canvas, then dipped my paintbrush in some inky black paint. The perspective of looking straight down into the well inspired vertigo. I felt I'd lost control as soon as the canvas met my dipped-ink brush. I'd intended to draw the base of the well, but I was starting at its top. I hastily re-inked my brush, splattering the canvas with flecks of paint when I painted the first brick.

I heard a dropping sound coming from inside the well. Peering inside, I saw the water's surface disturbed. My reflection phased out and wobbled. I glanced up briefly, wondering if I should call Samarth to take a look, but when I peered back down again, the water had stilled. Something was different.

My watery reflection somehow appeared smaller, perhaps even more distant than before. When I looked back up at what I had sketched so far, it didn't seem right. Something was different on the canvas, too. Reaching into my sling, I pulled out the palette once again. A fresh batch of paints were mixed. I had dared to peer into the well. I coaxed the

inky blacks of my paint into the corners of the canvas to provide the vignette of the dark walls of the well. I swathed the paint around the periphery of the figure first, and as I got to it, I craved another peek into the depths. Ripples on the surface, like water droplets from rain, and yet there was no rain. I imagined a frog or fish had made its residence at the well's depths when the rippling started again. Bending forward at the edge of the well, to get a closer look, I observed the ripples first. Before I understood what it was, my own reflection, the watery figure I stared at, no longer resembled me. The frame was far too thin, the hair too long and limp, a rippled blob for a head that seemed to turn up to gaze at me. The faint shape of its shadowy mouth made a sound like a bubble pop! I came back to my canvas, picked up a thin-line brush, dipped it straight into the black, and resumed painting.

"Why are we here? You came to paint the well?" Samarth asked, possibly having figured out the reason for our journey. He had surveyed the village and returned to my painting spot.

I said, "It's a favour for Guruji, a birthday gift, a memory of his childhood.

Samarth scoffs, "You? Making a birthday gift for someone you hate?"

I convinced him I'd changed my ways. Gurudakshina, an offering of gratitude to the teacher, I called it.

Finally, the painting was finished. I was sweating and my eyes burned. My hand was stiff with the brush wedged between my thumb and index finger. I was done now, so I put the brush down, stretched out my fingers, and admired my masterpiece. It was beautiful. It depicted the village, my journey, and the well. The colours on the canvas danced before my eyes.

Confused, I ran to it, picked it up again, and repeated my action, heard the thunk of the painting landing at the bottom with a soft splash. Yet again, right after that, when I looked back at my easel, the painting was right back on it.

The way I had painted the wind into the trees, the moisture into the Earth right after the rain, and filled the well with a beautiful coat of water was mesmerising. I took the painting off the easel, and I held it at the mouth of the well. I dropped it into the depths and watched it land flatly with a thunk onto the shallow water below. It seemed to get absorbed, and within seconds, disappeared into the water!

It was gone, and my wish would come true.

I turned back to my easel, stunned. The painting I just dropped was still there, sitting on it like it hadn't been lifted. Confused, I ran to it, picked it up again, and repeated my action, heard the thunk of the painting landing at the bottom with a soft splash. Yet again, right after that, when I looked back at my easel, the painting was right back on it.

My chest grew tight. What had started as a dull throb in my head was now a full-blown migraine that pulsed painfully at my right temple, and the sharp pain shot into my eyes.

Rejection.

The well was magical all right, and it was rejecting my offering. My sacrifices. I steadied my breathing as Samarth approached me again from another one of his tireless adventures. He had flowers in one hand, a knife in the other, and a sickening smile on his face. He was saying something about the flowers and how beautiful they were, but my mind had grown fuzzy. I felt rage constricting my throat, and that crushing, awful, self-pity somersaulting in my guts, making me queasy and nauseous.

I looked into the depths of the well. Samarth stared down into the depths with me. I felt the sting of an angry tear at the corner of my eye that I blinked away, and when I looked at Samarth, he was looking back at me with an expression I recognised as reassurance. That things would be alright. Kind, gentle Samarth. He was perfect in every way, and he was perfect in ways that ambition hadn't corrupted. Pure. Angelic, almost. Magical. Miraculous. The answer to my prayers. Who else would leave the comfort of the village to journey with me to some abandoned well?

I left the abandoned village an hour later. My satchel only carried my now-full water flask, having left my painting supplies at the well. The inspiration had struck almost instantly, and as soon as I had finished, I couldn't bear to stay in the place any longer.

The sun was starting to set. A strange energy coursed through me. I sensed the well's magic was answering my wishes—now that I had given it a worthy offering—and as if in response to my thoughts, the water in my bottle splashed loudly with my movements while I stumbled and tore through the foliage, retracing the same path we had taken to arrive.

By the time I reached home, it was nighttime, and the shrieking of crickets masked the sounds of my noisy arrival. I began unpacking my belongings. More painting supplies, some leftover food...what else did I need? A final glance at my old clothes, letters and sentimental knick-knacks. I left them undisturbed and safe in their place, where my old self rested with them. I wouldn't need them in my new life. My new life in the city. The life I finally had the courage to pursue.

My boon had been granted. I could feel it in my body. And with the boon, I would create beautiful paintings for rich landlords and even richer folks who worked with computers and technologies in the big city.

I felt like my life had just begun.

I briefly thought about how Sana aunty would wake up the next day and wonder about us. About how the village folk would react to our disappearance. And I knew they wouldn't care about me, but they would notice Samarth's absence.

Because Samarth was still in that abandoned village. And even if they sent a search party out to look for him, they'd never find him, because only I knew where he was now.

My heart twinged, but I ignored it entirely in favour of lugging my rucksack onto my back. Thanks to Samarth, I managed to return safely. I would never forget his sacrifice. I would honour his sacrifice and everything he'd done for me. I loved him; he was my closest friend. But when I grabbed his knife and stabbed him, I was delirious—with rage—and a cacophony of other unexplainable emotions. And when I pushed his limp body into the well, I hadn't thought about the consequences. These thoughts were surfacing now.

My stomach rumbled. I thought of Sana Aunty's bajji.

I thought of the wet, resounding crack of his neck that echoed from the bottom of the well, loud enough to startle the birds in the trees as they fluttered out of their nests. Loud enough to set off the insects' buzzing harshly in my ear. The flowers he was so excited to show me were lying wilted and trampled beneath my feet. Suddenly, the forest had gone silent. I heard the sound of saliva swallowed in my parched throat.

I heard my heart pounding as I looked over the lip of the well. Samarth had vanished. When I turned away and looked around, he hadn't returned to me like the painting.

In the silence that followed, I heard the trickle of water.

I hurriedly walked away with my belongings. At the edge of the clearing, I paused and looked back. The well was full, brimming with water!

Water that would quench my thirst.

I went back, took the cool water into my cupped palm and sipped.

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Nisha is a gamer, avid tarot reading witch, and connoisseur of horror. Having grown up with Edgar Allen Poe, she has a soft spot for Gothic and Body Horror, which has followed her well into her adulthood nightmares. When not contemplating the terrifying, Nisha can be found applying copious amounts of glitter on her eyelids, or attending obscure workshops over the weekend.



TEJIMOLA'S DAUGHTER

BY NILANJANA DEY

The day after I moved into Mr Barua's outhouse, I saw a girl of about six or seven talking to a bougainvillea. The child and the fledgling plant stood along the low boundary wall, a little distance away from my window. Moving her hands around, touching the leaves, nodding – the child seemed to be having an earnest conversation. A slender branch of the bougainvillea, weighed down by a rioting bunch of red flowers, bobbed in benediction atop the girl's head.

An impatient voice, probably Mr Barua's, called out from somewhere near the gate. The child, Mainu, flinched momentarily at her father's strident call. Waving a hasty goodbye to the plant, she ran through the overgrown grass that brushed against her shins before disappearing around the main house.

How did I end up at Mr Barua's?

I was starting my BSc in Zoology at the Handique Girls College. Noma was very proud that I made it to her alma mater. She even gave me her old red bandhni dupatta, because the

college uniform – white salwar kameez with a red dupatta – hadn't changed in ages.

During admissions, we came across Mr Barua, a clerk in the admin department, who informed us that he had a one-room set to rent. It turned out to be a small outhouse with a separate bathroom and some basic furniture. Noma helped me clean and set up the space before taking the Sunday morning Kamrup Express back to Dhubri.

In case you are wondering, Noma is my notun ma, new mother, her call shortened by my childish tongue all those years ago. My mother passed away when I was five. Father married Noma and then he passed away too, electrocuted during the flood. I was in the ninth standard then.

There's a flood in Dhubri every year, but that one was big. Muddy red water, carrying the soil from fields and broken embankments, filled the town till you couldn't tell inside from outside. Weeks later, we returned from the relief camp to a structure of rotting wood and peeling paint. Everything else had been washed away.

My classes began next week. There was an orientation; I sat next to a girl who was from Sadiya. Together, we went to Panbazar to buy second-hand textbooks. We discovered Revathi, a faded red truck outside the college back gate,

One evening, we strolled into Dighalipukhuri, where we spotted our Genetics teacher on a bench across the lake, holding hands with a man.

Noma called once that week. Told me she'd been to the bank to transfer some money from the fixed deposit into my account. She mock warned me not to lose my head. "It has to at least get you through the first semester," she cautioned.

Mr Barua also called on me that week. "Do let me know if you need help with anything," he said. Standing under the fluorescent bulb that hung outside, his fat eyes threw half-moon shadows on his face. "And don't worry about the rent, a few days up and down is fineeee," he stretched the last bit, as if to emphasise how fine it was. "I am here to help, okay," he smiled through a hiccup and turned around.

The bulb overhead buzzed, flickered, and breathed its last. When he was several steps away, I noticed the faint scent of alcohol lingering in the darkness.

The first week was almost over. Back early from college on Friday, I came upon Mainu on my way to the outhouse. Now, in a sleeveless frock instead of her two sizes too large school shirt, I asked what she and the plant were talking about. She held up the lone flower and told me her mother had given it to her for doing well in her maths test.

"Where's your ma? I haven't seen her around."

"This is ma," Mainu said, running her finger along the thorny main stem of the bougainvillea.

"No...this is a plant. Did your ma grow this?" I asked again, hoping to help her make sense. Pulling her hand away from the plant, Mainu watched her finger for a beat.

A red drop appeared. Worried that she was pricked, I was about to reach for her hand, but she wiped her finger on a nearby leaf. Then repeated that the bougainvillea was her ma.

Frustrated and a little unnerved, I snatched her hand. The finger seemed fine, no longer bleeding. Taking her hand back, Mainu edged past me and towards the main house.

She's our Cinderella story, but bloodier. Instead of being transformed by a fairy godmother, Tejimola is killed by her stepmother and buried in the backyard, where she reincarnates as a bottle-gourd vine.

Rolling my eyes behind the girl's back, I smiled. Her refusal to cater to questions from grown-ups reminded me of myself in that first year after Noma came home. My relatives would ask if she scolded me, made me do housework, and gave me enough food. My insistence that Noma cooked the best fish curry and bought me new clothes did not sit well with their expectations. Later, when Noma put the flood relief money in a fixed deposit, they smirked. Almost hopeful that Noma was finally showing her true colours now that my father was no more. They warned me that I wouldn't see that money again, that my stepmother would be no different than Tejimola's.

You don't know Tejimola?

She's our Cinderella story, but bloodier. Instead of being transformed by a fairy godmother, Tejimola is killed by her stepmother and buried in the backyard, where she reincarnates as a bottle-gourd vine.

Mr Barua had lent me their old fridge, and for that, I was grateful. A chilled can of Coke was just what I needed after a humid morning spent weeding the tall grass around the outhouse. Between carbonated burps, I decided to get a

bougainvillaea to brighten up my room.

Ring the doorbell at the main house, I reminded myself not to stare at Mr Barua's weirdly big eyes. So, of course, that was the first thing I noticed when he opened the door. Not wanting to linger, I skipped the niceties and asked if I could pluck a bunch of bougainvillaea.

"What bougainvillaea?"

"The one I think Mainu's mother, uh...your wife, planted?" The man still looked confused, so I continued. "The plant that Mainu keeps talking to. Near the left side wall."

Mr Barua suddenly looked pale. He glanced over his shoulder. I peeked sideways to see Mainu engrossed in a colouring book, bent over the centre table. Right next to a glass and a bottle of liquor.

"Sure," he grunted and closed the door on my face before I could thank him.

That night, I couldn't sleep.

The shadow of the bougainvillaea danced wildly. The wall beside my bed was filled with thick dark lines that rose and fell, leafy shapes that shivered and swayed side to side. Licked at my ceiling. A violent gust of wind made the shadow leap off the wall and onto my bed. Yanking my arm away, I turned on my side, away from the wall.

My neck was sticky with sweat. My ears picked up every scratch and scrape of the thorny branches against the outhouse. I imagined them etching admonishments on my wall for plucking the flowers.

On the stool beside my bed, the afternoon's rust-red bougainvillaea sat perfectly still in their empty Coke can, unperturbed by the seeming displeasure of their mother plant.

At some point, exhausted by the constant vigilance, I fell asleep.

Next morning, I opened my window half expecting it to be blocked by the massive bougainvillaea-of-the-dancing-shadow. But there was only the sunlit grass and mossy boundary wall. Outside, Mainu was standing at her usual spot in front of the bougainvillaea, pulling down the tallest branch, whispering and giggling.

The plant was only a little taller than her. Its slender main stem, topped with a fresh bunch of red flowers, gently swung with the breeze. Brushing the top of Mainu's head. Devoid of any malevolent intent.

Back in bed, I closed my eyes and tried to piece together fragments of a dream from last night.

A woman with a face like Mainu's is lying on the ground near the boundary wall. Green shoots sprouting out of the body. Climbing up the sides of a house and onto a tin roof. Big leaves, red flowers, and bottle gourds are weighing down the roof. New tendrils are crawling forward, swallowing the house.

The ditty that my grandmother sang whenever she narrated Tejimola's tale, the dead girl begging passersby not to pluck the vegetables and flowers from her plant form, rose and fell around me as I drifted back to sleep.

A persistent knock on the door woke me up. There was a smell that made my stomach growl. Mr Barua handed me a steel tiffin box, warm and fragrant.

"Mainu's grandmother has sent some rice and pork curry for you," he said.

I thanked him, ready to close the door and open the box. But that would appear impolite. Before I could think, I heard myself asking, "I haven't seen Mainu's mother around."

The man flinched.

"She... She passed away."

"Oh!"

I started thinking of words of condolence, but then began to wonder if that is why he drinks. Maybe that is why his face lost all colour yesterday when I mentioned his wife.

"She slipped on the stairs and hit her head. A few months ago."

I hadn't asked and was scrambling again for the right words to close this conversation.

"I will get going then, you must be hungry."

I smiled gratefully and had almost closed the door when he spoke again.

"Has Mainu said anything to you about her mother?"

All Mainu had said was that the bougainvillea was her mother. But for some reason, I didn't want to bring that up now. Not with last night's dream and the woman actually being dead.

"Not really," I replied.

"Ah, ok," the man smiled and turned to walk towards the far wall.

That is when I saw the uprooted bougainvillea in his hand. Lifeless branches askew. The main stem, with its clump of red flowers at the crown, trailing across the ground. I was about to call out, ask him why, but my lips didn't part. I had this image of him turning around and saying, "It's fineee," pulling at the last syllable as his eyes bulged outwards till I could see thin red veins spreading root-like across the whites. I had to shake my head to get rid of it.

In the evening, I heard crying and raised voices from the main house. Outside my window, Mainu stood at her spot looking intently at the ground, willing the plant to sprout back.

In the months after my mother died and before Noma arrived, I would try to think of impossible things to do. Holding my breath for a really long time or eating 10 green chillies at once. Because if I could do one impossible thing, it would mean I could do another, like bringing back the dead. But Mainu had taken a different route, simply transcended the species barrier and found her mother in a plant.

After she was called inside by her grandmother, in the dark blue evening light, I walked out to the corner of the far wall to find the uprooted plant, thrown at the base of a cluster of tall tamul trees, its leaves wilting but flowers still defiantly red.

Tejimola's tale, the dead girl begging passersby not to pluck the vegetables and flowers from her plant form, rose and fell around me as I drifted back to sleep.

I avoided Mainu for weeks after that. What if she sensed that I snitched to her father, blamed me for the renewed loss of her mother? The incessant rains helped.

I need not have worried. Even after the rains stopped, I didn't see Mainu for quite some time. Then one evening, I found her sitting on her haunches beside the cluster of tamul trees, merrily chatting away.

She spotted me and smiled. "Ma has come here!" she shouted across the yard.

I was relieved to see her around, but also worried that she'd turned another tree into her mother.

As I reached her, she stood up excitedly.

"See, father killed her again na, put her here."

I looked at the base of the tamul trees. The rain had turned the corpse of the uprooted bougainvillea into mulch. Nothing remained except for a bit of the decaying main stem.

"Ma went into the ground, and then came here, just like before," Mainu continued, now patting the smooth trunk of the tallest tamul tree.

I wanted to ask her what she meant by 'again'. Was there another plant before the bougainvillea? But I was pretty sure there would be no coherent answer.

Tamping down a flash of irritation, I smiled vaguely and walked back. I was mad at myself for feeling a little scared of Mainu's ramblings. Suddenly, I didn't want to become close with her or care if she was happy or sad. It felt cruel to think like that, but I just wanted to be done with it all.

Thankfully, thoughts of Mainu-faced tamul trees or Tejimola and her next rebirths as a lemon tree and a lotus did not come to haunt me. Neither did the straight trunk and short fronds of the tamul tree dance on my walls. I was back in Dhubri after my first semester. Noma was busy cooking my favourite dishes and catching me up on the family gossip.

Amidst all this, the story broke. You remember it, don't you?

In the din of loudly horrified anchors, I caught the sounds of 'Bhadreshwar Barua', 'Handique College'. Channel after channel broadcast the same footage. The camera panned across the main house, the backyard, and my outhouse, before coming to rest on the clump of tamul trees. The tallest of them was snapped at mid-height; the top half had crashed through the first-floor window of the main house.

They were calling it a freak accident. The slender tamul trunk had shattered the windowpane, showering glass over the man sleeping on the bed placed next to it. He'd been taken to the hospital, declared 'brought dead'.

Blood loss from a glass shard that cut into his jugular, the news channel graphics explained.

By evening, the channels had a close-up shot of Mainu, several mics thrust at her face. She was wearing the sleeveless dress I knew. There was a cut on her lower lip and a bruise on her upper arm.

A disembodied voice asked how she felt now that both her parents were dead, or something to that effect.

"Nothing will happen. My ma is there," she said with a small smile.

In my dreams that night, tamul fronds caressed purple bruises, and big hibiscus flowers with waxy red petals bloomed rapidly out of the broken trunk.

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RIVERS RUN DEEP

BY SARAH GADHAVI

Serena tiptoed barefoot down the hallway, her secret safe for now.

The threat of exposure was weighing on her mind as she clutched her trainers. What a night it had been. The lingering memory of her new experience left her hoping for more. She told herself to remain focused.

To avoid detection, Serena tried to maintain her composure; deception didn't come naturally to her. Another step brought the trepidation and the uncertainty of what might await her: chaos, confusion or calm.

From inside flat number 6, a dog barked. Once, twice. And then a growl, a whimper and a few choice words from Mrs Evans, the disgruntled owner, before the comforting sound of a kettle boiling. Barnaby, the Alsatian, wasn't used to his neighbour roaming around in the early hours. Even he was aware that Serena was a creature of habit, holed up from sunset to sunrise, and that this behaviour was uncharacteristic. She expected that soon the stench of fried fish would emanate through the

gap under Mrs Evans' doorway. An image of a small kipper in a frying pan popped into Serena's head, and she batted it away, scrunching up her nose. How she loathed the smell of fish cooking – all aquatic creatures deserved to swim the open waters rather than be served up on someone's plate.

As Serena padded through the communal corridors, her concentration was broken by the lift humming as it ascended to the top floor. When she turned the corner, she drew a deep breath. The first hurdle. It was a good sign. Her front door, painted in a bold shade of turquoise, was closed.

With anticipation, Serena pressed her ear to the door. The familiar household noises, a dripping tap and the gurgle of the pipes as the radiators creaked into action like ageing joints, were reassuring. She turned her key in the lock, slipped inside the place she had called home for the past five years, and closed the door behind her with a soft click. After Serena had squeezed her trainers onto the shoe rack and hung up her coat, heat rose to her cheeks – layers of mud were smeared across the camel-coloured fabric of her coat. She spun it around, but the evidence ignited a thought that clamoured for attention. Serena tried to shrug it aside, but it was as persistent as a relentless

tide.

With four decades of life experience behind her, she couldn't claim to know the answers to all of life's mysteries. However, up until the day before, on one matter, she had been certain: a man or woman at the remarkable age of 106 must be revered and obeyed.

Especially in the case of Great-Aunt Yatika, and particularly after her death.

Serena swallowed down her guilt, longing for that same rush of exhilaration that had washed over her earlier. For so long, she had intended to carry out every one of Yatika's wishes and, in her role as an obedient great-niece, she had already fulfilled some. As agreed, she had organised the cremation under a serene Indian sky and had travelled back to London with her great-aunt's ashes and ring. Within the next few days, she planned to scatter them in the Thames, where Yatika could be reunited with her beloved Varun. As for remaining indoors while awaiting further signs ...

Had it been an aberration? No, I mustn't think like that. What was done was done, Serena told herself. And it wasn't as if I had committed a crime.

A glance around the kitchen reassured her that everything looked just as she had left it; dishes were piled up on the draining board, a packet of ginger biscuits, its top torn off, was lying on the worktop (she could never master those perforated openings), and the rim of a half-drunk glass of water bore traces of her dusky pink lipstick.

Next, Serena summoned the courage to look at the table. A lumpy shape rested upon it, concealed beneath the soft folds of a blanket that she had draped over it hours earlier. As she approached, memories of the night before flashed into her mind.

All at once, Serena was struck by the magnitude of her actions and the fact that, despite Great-aunt Yatika's warnings, there had been no unsavoury consequences following her escapade.

A burst of impatience had led to an impulsive decision, and now her clammy hands were reaching out and pulling the blanket away. Serena's brow furrowed as she scrutinised the marble urn and the silver ring nestled beside it. She lifted the urn carefully, the stone cold against her palms. Leaning in, she inspected it, ensuring that the lid was secure under its tight seal. Then she craned her neck to check its underside, which displayed the engraving of Yatika's favourite phrase, Rivers run deep. Serena gave a nod of satisfaction and placed it back on the table. The urn's contents were safe, and its form remained untouched and motionless.

Amused by the absurdity of her reasoning, Serena chuckled. The concerns that had plagued her on the way home were unfounded. What had she been thinking? She had always had an overactive imagination, which was both a blessing and a curse. Great-aunt Yatika had died over a month ago, and surely the urn would never move of its own accord.

Serena sank into the chair, her gaze sweeping to the window. In the soft light of dawn, the river shimmered, reflecting the palette of pinks and oranges that painted the morning sky. Mist hovered above the water's surface like a delicate veil. For a few moments, she lost herself in its beauty.

All at once, Serena was struck by the magnitude of her actions and the fact that, despite Great-aunt Yatika's warnings, there had been no unsavoury consequences following her escapade. She was safe, and she was starting to



wonder whether her expedition offered a glimmer of the future that awaited her.

As Serena watched the ripples dance, an unsettling notion crept into her mind. Great-aunt Yatika had assured her that patience was a virtue, but was that just a cruel trick to leave her waiting forever, leading a futile existence?

Perhaps Yatika had deceived her all along.

Perhaps Yatika's promise would never come true.

Perhaps there were no rules for survival.

Turning her attention to the urn and the ring, Serena wrestled with conflicting emotions, her mind stirring like a tempest. For as long as she could remember, her great-aunt had been bossy and cantankerous, yet, as the two surviving family members, they were connected by traits that they hid from others.

As Serena tapped her fingers on the table, she considered the advantages and disadvantages of her actions. She weighed out the risks and certainties and basked in the warm novelty of possibilities as if they were rays of sunshine. Her skin tingled, recalling the events of the previous night. By venturing to the riverbank, leaning against a weeping willow and allowing the river's fluid movements to pull her into a hypnotic state, she had tasted freedom like never before.

Now she yearned for more.

Absentmindedly, Serena clenched and unclenched her fists. She took a deep breath, sliding her hand back and forth across the table. Then, no longer able to resist the urge, she snatched the ring. When she brought it closer to her face to study it, her eyes widened; each groove, dent, and curve whispered stories from the past. Its surface was etched with a floral pattern that caught the morning light.

Transfixed, Serena toyed with the delicate silver treasure. Set with a pearl gemstone, the ring had sat snugly on Yatika's gnarled index finger for over a century. She envisioned placing it on her own finger, and a thrill of excitement surged through her. Serena wondered what would happen if she were bold, if she ignored her great-aunt's wishes and kept the ring for herself. There was a possibility that her life might be transformed in ways she had only dared to envisage.

All at once, Serena jumped at a tapping from the window. The ring slipped from her grasp, spun on the table, and with a soft clink came to rest by the fruit bowl. Her heart raced as she turned her head. Two ravens with dainty bells around their necks were rapping their beaks against the glass. Then they flew to a nearby apple tree, perched on a branch, and stared at her with an intensity that seemed to bore into her.

To an outsider, they might appear to be ordinary, but during fortnightly phone conversations, Yatika had warned her to view ravens as anything but. Serena was starting to suspect that this was another of her great-aunt's fabrications. When the birds flapped their glossy feathers and screeched at her three times, she pushed back her chair, leapt to her feet and grabbed the ring. In an uncharacteristic act of defiance, she slipped it onto the index finger of her left hand and brandished it at the ravens as if it were a weapon.

Instantly, Serena felt the warmth of the metal against her skin. She laughed at the birds, now taking flight and retreating. They usually glided in perfect harmony, but today their wings flapped erratically. Cawing and careening, they soared off in different directions, propelled by the sudden howl of a buffeting wind.

However, Serena's laughter trailed off as she noticed the urn's fragile form rocking from side to side. Her fingers gripped the edge of the table, and she reassured herself that the same breeze that had propelled the ravens was also responsible for the draught that shook the urn. Hadn't her landlord promised to fix the window seals months ago? Serena scratched the back of her neck.

Why, if there were such a breeze and such a draught, did everything else, including the leaves and the curtains, remain motionless?

Suddenly, a throbbing radiated beneath Serena's skin, and she flinched as the ring tightened. She guessed the warmth in the kitchen must have caused her fingers to swell, yet she was prepared to bear the discomfort if it brought her the ultimate prize. Above all, Serena was determined to prove that her great-aunt's beliefs, which had dictated most aspects of her life, were indeed just that – unfounded fears and delusions. For Serena, the urn's contents served as a timely reminder that happiness should be seized, and life was too short for regrets. Today was the day to dispel Yatika's superstitions.

Serena glanced at the clock. Its hands were edging towards six o'clock. She grabbed a carton of milk from the fridge and drank it in one go with reckless abandon. When she had finished, she flung the empty carton into the bin and squealed.

She couldn't deny it. Making decisions and rebelling against Yatika's archaic rules feels liberating. If I had any friends, I would call them to boast.

But within seconds, Serena was hit by a wave of nausea as if the milk had curdled into a heavy mass in her belly. Rather than entertaining another of Yatika's falsehoods, she suspected

that the milk must have exceeded its expiration date. When sharp cramps knotted her abdomen, she retched into the sink and gasped for breath. Clutching her stomach, Serena struggled to make her way to the bedroom. Each laboured movement seemed to intensify the gnawing ache.

When she lay down on her bed, she lacked the strength to close the curtains. Instead, she hugged her knees and closed her eyes, welcoming the distraction of resurfacing memories.

Vivid images of her eight-year-old self, meeting her great-aunt for the first time, came to her. Small and hunched with short, snowy-white hair, framing her wrinkled face and accentuating her toothless grin, Yatika had fascinated her with stories of her unconventional existence. What had followed was the revelation that, although Serena was different from most, she was not entirely alone.

Yatika's unique residence, close to the Aravalli Hills, had once been a resplendent eighteenth-century lakeside palace. Yet through neglect, vines crept up its crumbling walls, many of its roofs and *chhatris* sagged, and its tall *jali* windows bore jagged edges that glinted in the sunlight. Despite its enormity, Yatika occupied only a small section, leaving most of the halls and chambers in disrepair, with peeling paint, faded tapestries and threadbare rugs. Paintings of Yatika's beloved, Varun, adorned her bedroom walls. Serena found the place unsettling: she took care not to cut her feet on the shattered floor tiles, sneezed at the dust lingering in the air, and hated the smell of

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mildew clinging to the surfaces. Yet the allure of the lake by the palace repeatedly pulled her there. Although her great-aunt forbade her from swimming in it, insisting that there might be dangers lurking below, Serena cherished the peace by the lakeside. Peering at the calm waters, she would let her imagination wander. She pictured herself discovering hidden wonders and communicating with mystical lake creatures inhabiting subterranean caves. If only she had been allowed to explore the waters. But it had been typical of her great-aunt to quash her sense of adventure. As her eyelids grew heavy, she clung to this notion, carrying the visions with her as she drifted into a deep sleep.

A rumble of thunder stirred her. Serena opened her eyes as a flash of lightning illuminated the sky. When she looked at the clock on her bedside table, she blinked in confusion.

How could it be half-past five? Had I really slept that long? I had only meant to rest.

The room echoed with the sound of rain lashing against the windowpane, each droplet cascading down the glass with relentless intensity. Serena's hand slid to her belly, and she breathed a sigh of relief. The discomfort in her stomach had finally subsided. As for her finger, it was still swollen, but it felt less uncomfortable. She stretched out her arm to admire the ring. It looked exquisite in the fading late-afternoon light.

Springing out of bed, Serena dashed to the kitchen. She broke into a smile when she saw that the urn was exactly where she had left it. She turned to the window and watched pedestrians dodging puddles under their colourful umbrellas. Buses and cars crawled

over the bridge, their headlights flickering like fireflies against the dull haze. Everything looked normal, but something wasn't right.

Rain hadn't been forecast for today. I would have remembered the exciting prospect of the river swelling.

Serena banished the thought from her mind. Yatika was dead and couldn't possibly have manipulated the weather.

With her face pressed to the window, she looked past the traffic to the river beyond. Her eyesight, like Yatika's, was as sharp as a bird of prey's. Activity in its mysterious depths caught her interest. It was not the familiar flicker of fish darting through the murky waters, nor the gentle sway of aquatic plants.

It was a streamlined silhouette.

In parts, he resembled a man's form.

Yet something otherworldly set him apart from humans.

As he glided through the river beneath the bobbing swans, geese and ducks, he seemed to defy the need to come up for air. His movements were mesmerising – a blend of virility and grace. Muscular arms, strong and defined, sliced through the water with effortless precision. At times, they rested by his side, while at other moments, he extended them wide, cutting through the reeds like sleek arrows. His shoulder-length black hair glistened, while his bare chest displayed a perfect physique. Yet there was something more that captivated her, a quality that set him apart from others and made her breathless: His magnificent fishtail.

As it swished from side to side, glimmering in hues that reminded her of emeralds and sapphires, it exuded an unmistakable power. Serena gasped as the merman stopped and

flashed her a smile. When he waved at her from under the water, her stomach fluttered. He was handsome in a classical way, with a chiselled jaw and high cheekbones. His deep-set eyes were as dark as coal, with a warmth that she found beguiling. He resembled a valiant hero lauded in fairy tales or folklore. She imagined him slaying pirates, sharks, and sea-dragons to reach her.

There could be only one answer for his appearing to her now. Serena was sure that it was no coincidence – by putting on the ring, she had summoned him. Her heart always fluttered when she tried to understand the concept of love. Just as Varun had captivated Yatika all those years ago, so this merman would capture her heart. One day, she would hang paintings of him on her bedroom walls, too.

Serena ran a hand through her tangled hair, intending to change from her scruffy clothes before she presented herself to him. Tonight, with the power of the ring, she would reclaim her life as one of the merfolk. At last, after a lifetime of trying to understand the reason for her differences, she would delight in the gift that nature had bestowed upon her. Growing up hadn't been easy. At school, she had been ostracised and teased. At work, she had been misunderstood.

"Miss, I don't want to sit next to Serena. She's weird."

"Mr Turner, Serena has come back from her lunch break with wet feet. Very odd."

Serena winced at the memories and twitched with impatience. Seconds seemed like hours. If only she could speed up time so she could fulfil her dreams of swimming with the merman. But he had never forgotten a letter from Varun to

Yatika that she had stumbled upon. The message was very clear - in the ritual of love, there were to be no spectators.

At that moment, a rattling sound jolted Serena from her thoughts. Tearing her gaze from the window, she whirled around. The urn was teetering on the edge of the table. She clenched her jaw, throwing her hands up in a flurry of questions.

Why was Yatika trying to ruin my happiness? Don't I deserve a partner after all these years as a spinster? Don't I deserve to experience love, just as she had?

"Please stop!" Serena yelled.

She glared at the urn, but it continued to shake. She pounded her fist on the tabletop, but it persisted. With a snort, Serena grabbed the urn and shoved it underneath the table. She hurried to her bedroom, where she slipped into a flowing purple dress that hugged her slender figure. Having loosened and styled her thick hair so that it cascaded down her back in elegant chestnut-brown waves, she applied a coat of lipstick and swept blusher across her cheeks.

Minutes later, Serena darted back to the kitchen window. Her cheeks flushed the moment she spotted the merman's shadowy figure. A thrill coursed through her veins as she locked eyes with him. She placed her palm against the windowpane and twisted the ring on her finger in the hope that he would see it. Serena had never expressed a desire to find love, trying to shrug off the idea of romance whenever it surfaced. But now she wanted what her great-aunt had enjoyed in her twenties. The need for this merman was insatiable, clawing at her like a ferocious bear.

Serena burst into song, but instead of struggling

to stay in tune as she normally did, her voice resonated with a richness she had never known, creating a heavenly melody. The merman seemed entranced by her voice, his eyes glowing with admiration. He stretched his arms out to her, a silent plea for her to join him.

"Not long now, my sweet," she whispered. "Our patience will be rewarded, I promise you."

The hours dragged by, and it was past midnight when the last diners had departed from the local bars and restaurants. Finally, the rain had stopped, and the streets lay silent and deserted. Serena chuckled to herself as she glanced at the full moon casting a silver glow over the damp surroundings. She could almost hear her great-aunt scolding her, warning her that it wasn't safe for the river to see her at night.

That was in the past, which was exactly where she intended to confine Yatika. Tonight, after scattering the ashes, Serena would never have to deal with her again. Cheered by that thought, she reached under the table, intending to pick up the urn that she had left there. But her fingers found nothing. A chill trickled down her spine. She threw back the chairs, fell to her knees, and scanned the area for any sign of it.

Serena's gaze darted around the kitchen. Under her breath, she cursed her great-aunt as she combed cupboards and rifled through drawers. However, her efforts were in vain. When she searched the other rooms, there was still no sign or sound of the urn. A weighty silence wrapped around her like a dense fog. It occurred to her that perhaps Yatika didn't want to be found and had given up on her. Serena swallowed the sense of abandonment like a bitter pill. If it were true, she realised, she felt

just as disappointed in her great-aunt as Yatika ever had in her.

Abandoned? After all that I had sacrificed? Two could play at that game.

Seething with frustration, Serena flung open the front door, stormed out, slammed it behind her, and raced down the communal stairs. She ignored Barnaby's barking and the heat that was radiating from the ring. It was typical of her great-aunt to complicate matters and overshadow her happiness. Even after death.

The moment Serena sprinted across the road and reached the riverbank, she forgot about Yatika and focused on her future. The chill from the night air entered her lungs, and goosebumps pricked her skin like needles. She took off her trainers, tossing them under the tree where she had rested the night before. She stood beneath its sprawling branches, a few traces of the earlier rain dropping from its leaves onto her head. Serena drew a deep breath, inhaling the musty soil and the weeping willow's aniseed fragrance. For a few moments, she hesitated, listening to the water lapping against the bank and the occasional call of an owl above the drumming of her heartbeat. It was time.

Serena started walking towards the river, giggling every so often as the wet grass tickled her bare feet. One step. Then another. As she got closer to the Thames, the earth became sodden. She slowed down, relishing the sensation of her toes squelching in the mud.

Above, the pair of ravens returned and shattered the tranquillity. They circled, their deafening caws ringing in her ears.

"Just leave me alone!" she cried.

Serena screeched and gesticulated at them until they disappeared over the horizon. She had always held a deep affection for animals,

but these were like no others. For years, they had intruded on her daily routine. Yatika had tried to convince her that they served a greater purpose, but now more than ever, Serena refused to believe her. How could a pair of birds be something so precious?

Her gaze flitted to the river's surface. It twinkled in the moonlight. She pressed her lips into a grimace. There was no sign of the merman.

Suddenly, to Serena's horror, the river gurgled as if it were choking. She staggered back and reeled as the Thames split into two tributaries, twisting and turning, writhing and churning. The water level rose and fell as if it were inhaling and exhaling, its soul alive... agitated. Despite an overwhelming urge to run away, Serena tried to make sense of the alarming scene.

Activity in the water drew her attention. She narrowed her eyes.

Was it?

She gasped. A merman. Her merman. He was battling the violent currents. His body was buffeted by the frenzied river. Fierce, formidable, it was overpowering him. Back and forth. Plunging and soaring. Lurching, tussling, and thrashing. His hair whipped across his face, and his fishtail lashed out as a high-pitched scream escaped Serena's lips.

The merman hurtled upwards, muscles tensed, fists balled, as if the sound of her voice had empowered him. His fishtail beat through the water like a rudder, his powerful arms propelling him forward until he crashed through the surface and bellowed something incomprehensible.

Serena fought back tears as the river appeared to obey his command. Within seconds, whatever feud had arisen was settled, and harmony was restored.

The river shrugged off its irascibility, raging waters transformed into gentle ripples, and the two distributaries reverted to one calm body.

Marvelling at the magnitude of the merman's powers, Serena's gaze alighted on him. Up close, he was even more striking. His face was as sculpted as a statue; his teeth shone like pearls, and silky lashes framed his eyes. They were as dark as an abyss, drawing her in with a magnetic pull. She yearned to lose herself in their depths.

On the water's edge, Serena was spellbound as the merman began performing backflips in the water, his fishtail swaying back and forth with the elegance of a horse's mane. Then he floated on his back, flipped over and plummeted to the riverbed, where he curled into a ball. Serena clapped as he burst back up, breaking the surface with a splash. He rotated his body and undulated his hips; his movements were so rhythmic that she wondered if he might be dancing to an inaudible tune. If his objective were to seduce her, he had succeeded. Serena's stomach somersaulted. She was unable to look away.

"We belong together," he said, his voice low and rich. "Prepare to venture from the rivers and embark on a journey to the enchanting depths of the oceans. I will unveil to you the wonders that lie beneath the waves. Picture coral reefs teeming with fish, dolphins gliding through clear waters, and hidden underground caves waiting for us to explore. In this realm, we will discover a love for each other that will deepen over time to become as boundless as the ocean itself. Come in and join me."

With his words, Serena succumbed to the lightness in her chest. In a graceful motion, she unbuttoned her dress, slipped it off her

shoulders, and let it fall to the ground. She trembled, not from the chilly night air, but from the sense of freedom and anticipation. The merman's eyes shone but never left hers, and she blushed at the intensity of his stare.

Serena dipped her toes into the water and gasped. The texture of her skin was changing; her feet tingled and were shedding their human form, hinting at the mermaid she would soon become. With a sweep of his hand, the merman theatrically gestured to her. She grinned and, buoyed by his invitation, eased herself into the river.

The water was icy cold, and Serena took several deep breaths to acclimatise. However, when she was fully immersed, it became as warm as tropical waters. Every nerve ending from her waist down became infused with an electrifying energy. Soon her toes and legs were bound together, morphing into a beautiful fishtail, shimmering with iridescent scales. For her whole life, Serena had possessed a mermaid's soul. Now her body was working in harmony with her emotions. This was the role that she had waited a lifetime to play.

Laughing at her weightlessness, Serena familiarised herself with her new streamlined body. Her first attempts at a sidestroke were uncoordinated and clumsy. But once she had mastered the basics, she emulated the merman as he taught her more complex moves. Soon her movements were as agile as his, and she relaxed in his company. She even managed to brush her fishtail against his. When the merman grabbed her by the waist, spun her around and took her in his arms, never before had she experienced such joy. Never before had she beheld such beauty.

A glint from the riverbank broke her immersion and Serena reluctantly tore her gaze from the

merman. The urn. She rubbed her eyes, but it remained, sitting on the bank as if it had always been there. She searched for answers.

How did it get there?

The thought was replaced by a shriek as the lid burst off, propelling a cloud of ashes into the air and then careering towards her. Serena grabbed the merman's arm and spiralled down with him towards the riverbed.

Like a fevered bat through the very gates of hell itself, a fireball erupted from the gloomy depths and shot towards Serena. Its fierce glow illuminated the surrounding rocks and reeds. Despite her primal urge to flee, the fireball halted inches from her, encircling her and creating a barrier between her and the merman that she dared not cross. Framed by flickering flames, a hazy image of her great-aunt Yatika's face appeared, wearing a thunderous expression.

"You didn't listen to any of my warnings," Yatika said. "You disobeyed and disrespected me after my death by stealing from me!"

Tears streamed down Serena's cheeks.

Soon her toes and legs were bound together, morphing into a beautiful fishtail, shimmering with iridescent scales. For her whole life, Serena had possessed a mermaid's soul.

"I'm ... I'm sorry," she replied, trying to control the tremor in her voice. "Please ... please forgive me."

"I don't see why I should forgive you. You have acted on envy and greed. You don't deserve a mermaid's existence. Before I reunite with Varun in our aquatic afterlife, I need my ring back."

"Your ring?" Serena paused. She made a conscious effort not to emphasise the word *your*. The delicate piece of jewellery, which

promised so much, had only been in her possession for hours, yet it felt very much like hers.

"Are you sure you ..."

"Why the hesitation?" Yatika said, flapping her hands. "It's not yours, it's mine. Do you think I don't need it? Stupid woman. Give it to me now, or I'll make sure you pay for your foolishness."

Serena trembled, hastily retracting her ringed hand and putting it behind her in an uncharacteristic act of obstinacy.

"I'll do anything you want, but please not that. The ring will secure my future with the merman who has found me. Please give me this opportunity. We are family after all."

"Are you refusing to do as I say?" Yatika roared.

"The ring. Now! Or I'll prise it off you when you least expect it."

"But the merman ..."

Yatika tilted her head back and laughed.

"The merman? Oh Serena! Don't you remember what I always told you: the rivers run deep with marine monsters to thwart wilful merfolk like you."

Serena glared at her great-aunt. She had been obedient her whole life, wasting it under a shadow of fear, but no more. Resentment festered within her. Fully prepared for the fight of her life, she waited for Yatika to reach out and snatch the ring. Instead, her great-aunt bellowed with such force that the riverbed trembled, catapulting turbulent waves through the water. Schools of fish darted past with a frantic energy as if they sensed the forewarning of an unprecedented change. Serena cupped her hands over her ears and tensed every muscle in her body. Gradually, the tremors subsided into stillness, Yatika's screams faded, and the

fireball, along with her image, dwindled.

As it extinguished, Serena let out a huge breath and pressed her hand to her pounding heart. It had been a petrifying experience, yet not only had she survived, but she had also emerged victorious. On her finger, Yatika's ring shone brightly. It was a symbol of her emancipation, the beginning of a new and exhilarating chapter.

Seeking reassurance, Serena spun around and grabbed the merman's hand. But beneath her touch, she could have sworn that the texture of his skin seemed oily and no longer smooth. To her horror, his features began to distort. Serena snatched her hand away, her body thrashing frantically as she sought to escape.

A strong undercurrent dragged her closer to the merman. A helpless spectator, she gaped at his fishtail transforming into contorting limbs. He was tearing and peeling at flesh, his whole body convulsing as if he were engulfed in flames. When his chest burst open, his skin mutated into an alarming shade of crimson, its texture amphibious.

Serena recoiled. His metamorphosis was complete. He was no longer a merman. He was a grotesque sea serpent. Its beady yellow eyes glinted with malice, and its cavernous jaws were agape, revealing rows of jagged teeth. A red tongue shot out from its mouth, the green forked tip reaching for her. Its breath was getting warmer against her cheek, the stench of rotting meat and curdled milk growing stronger.

Milk. Just as Yatika had warned her.

Serena whimpered, willing herself not to move as the serpent's slimy tongue trailed along her arm, shoulder, neck, and chin. In her desperation to flee, her eyes darted from side to side and then to the riverbed. However, a chilling sight confronted her: a mass of sea

sea serpents surged from underneath the cavernous abyss. They writhed towards her, their eyes gleaming with a predatory glint.

Serena no longer felt light and free. She glanced down and noticed that she was losing her mermaid features. She tried to scream, but an agonising sensation in her lungs and chest had robbed her of her voice, making each inhalation a challenge.

Powerless, Serena watched Yatika's ring slip from her finger and float away. She tried to resign herself to her fate. If there were a choice, she would rather drown than have sea serpents feast on her. But there was no choice.

In the realm of the merfolk, blood was never thicker than water.

The price for defiance as a mermaid was high.

The rivers ran deep.

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Sarah has been developing a magical realism novel for the past three years as a member of The Novelry writing group. *Rivers Run Deep* is a separate piece which she has written especially for the Indian Gothic literary magazine. She is of Anglo-Indian heritage and has lived in London all her life, where she studied French and Latin. She has a passion for writing, and her debut novel is currently out on submission to several UK literary agents.



NAZAR

BY SELINE

Sometime in the past.

It's dusk. A capital city under siege takes a breather. A murmuration of starlings shifts shape in the distant skies. But deep inside a forest hangs the promise of a threat that hasn't made itself visible. Not yet.

The heavy sigh from the branches of thick-rooted trees. The rustle of dry leaves. The restless buzz of a swarm of butterflies. The eerie, intermittent crescendo of cicadas chirping. The trotting of horses. Swords clashing. A thud. The reverb of someone being disarmed. A heavy silence. The way final solutions tend to sound.

The sky is engulfed with the flaming reds of parting daylight, while swirling dark clouds move in covertly. A horse strikes mud with its hooves and neighs. A man, face wrapped in a red dupatta, towers over a woman brought to her knees.

He looks down on her. But the woman appears oddly defiant.

"Nazar jhukake rakho (Keep your gaze down)," he says, pulling out a dagger from its sheath.

The wind blows stronger, and the horse sounds more agitated.

The woman – with unkempt hair and striking eyes – refuses, locking her gaze on him with a furious intensity. She knows. This is where it ends. The end of all ends.

More than a lifetime or two later.

High Noon. Delhi. A raging metropolis with contrarian ambitions, repressed collective memories and unrealised hopes. An unpredictable labyrinth, with many a secret underbelly that could make you forget where you are.

Like the ridge.

Deep inside the ridge, there's a mayhem unlike any other. The whirring wings of dragonflies. The slither of insects. The shriek of birds marking their territory. Even the occasional solitary chirps from an unknown source are a reminder that you're not as alone as you think.

Today, the ridge has a quiet foreboding. The kind that sneaks up on you when you're focused on something else. Here, trudging along a secluded trail lined with intertwined

trees and thick shrubbery is Meher, a 22-year-old college student and part-time YouTuber. She has been recording herself with a phone that's mounted on a selfie stick. But now, she is focused on something else.

"Well, they, whoever they are, they say that some parts of the ridge come alive with all kinds of paranormal activities during the evening and through the night. I know it's broad daylight, but the general public is banned from entering the ridge at night, so here we are! But you know what? If something weird is meant to happen, it will happen, night or day. Right? Right?" She pauses for the comedic effect she hopes to achieve on the editing table, just as she gets smacked in the face by a passing dragonfly.

Meher flinches, but continues, "On that note, use my code MEHERYAHANHOON15 (MEHERISHERE15) for 15% off on my custom-made silver sunglasses. Shield yourself from harmful U.V. rays and ridiculous people. Just because something appears in your vision doesn't mean it's worthy of being witnessed." She angles her face to show off the product and is rather pleased with the effect.

"Anyway, back to the story! So apparently, some 17-18th century incel, upon being rejected by the woman he loved, kidnapped and buried her alive somewhere in the ridge. They say that this anamika's—the nameless one's—shrieks can still be heard to this day...Chilling." Meher shudders exaggeratedly. 'Wait...there was something else..."

She leans in closer to the screen, trying to discreetly read trivia trawled from a sketchy website. A solar flare obscures a section about Urdu begis on the screen; she switches to another tab that offers more theories buried among ancient shayari about two graves in the

On cue, as if to test her resolve, a man carrying a spade over his shoulder emerges out of the blue. Meher freezes. The man, with a staggering gait and bloodshot eyes, walks towards her. His silence is menacing.

area, one of which was a shallow grave. The screen freezes, and the video recording stops. Irritated, Meher fixes her phone and adjusts the screen brightness as she walks into a shadier part of the ridge.

"Sorry, guys. My phone froze again. Don't worry, though. These paths are unfrequented, but I have decided that I'm not going to get raped today. Not today, men. Not today."

On cue, as if to test her resolve, a man carrying a spade over his shoulder emerges out of the blue. Meher freezes. The man, with a staggering gait and bloodshot eyes, walks towards her. His silence is menacing. As if he really means to do something. Meher's breath feels trapped in her chest. She props up her sunglasses on her head and stares him down. But her free hand braces for the pepper spray in her fanny pack. As he gets closer, the man clasps his hands and greets her with namaste in a gruff voice. Like he really means it. Meher flinches. He walks away.

She turns to her still-recording phone and sniggers, a tad nervous of a sudden. "What was that?" She looks back, but he has long since left the scene.

The heat shows no signs of subsiding. Meher's t-shirt is soaked with sweat. She pulls out a water bottle from the side pocket of her backpack as her phone continues to capture her hike through the ridge. The bottle is empty, so she shoves it back into the bag.

"It's getting really hot. You know, they said it would be partly cloudy with a chance of rain. Guess not in this part. I've sweated half my bodyweight...And all that's fine...but where is

the supernatural chaos, bro?"

Meher looks at her phone and sighs. No signal. Distracted by the screen, Meher drifts slightly away from the trail. Uprooted bushes and partially dug-up ground show attempts to widen the walkable path. She stumbles and falls headlong over a stone lodged in her path. The phone slips out of her hand.

A gentle breeze begins. The calm before the storm. An hour or two passes. At least that's what it feels like to Meher, emerging from a blackout. She opens her eyes slowly, feeling her arm for bruises. Her heart jumps to her throat as her blurry vision focuses on the figure crouching beside her, the face covered with a red dupatta, revealing only a striking pair of eyes. Meher attempts to get up but passes out again immediately.

More time passes. Maybe 10 minutes. Or four hours. Meher regains consciousness and sits up with a jolt, snapping herself out of a feverish reverie. A weight in her stomach. She searches for her phone but can't find it. She gives up and uses a rock to pull herself back to her feet. Just barely. She winces as a piercing pain shoots down her left foot.

"Shit!" she says, bending down to examine her leg.

That's when she pays closer attention to the stone she tripped on. Something barely legible is etched in Urdu on it. As if the writer were running out of time.

It read, 'Tilism-e-gumbad-e-garduun... (The spell of the celestial dome...)'

But Meher can't read Urdu. She pockets the stone anyway. Maybe she could sell it online as a relic and hustle some gullible chump. She starts to feel uneasy now, so she picks up the backpack, tightens the fanny pack and continues on her trail. She finds her selfie stick

lying right there, but still no phone.

"Great."

Extending the selfie stick, Meher uses it for support as she limps along. She wonders if she should do a survival tutorial for her YouTube channel when she gets out. Exhausted by the exertion, she sits down in front of a wiry tree. Something feels very strange about this part of the trail. She realises that a circle of seven trees stands before her. The recurring thought that she might actually not be alone resurfaces.

A vision of the masked stranger flashes in her mind like a knife-edged memory - she can't tell if it's from a dream or reality, but it has left a deep cut. Meher shakes her head a few times, as if to dispel these morbid thoughts. It doesn't help. She takes deep breaths as the ambient sounds of nature become unsettling.

Buzzing cicadas.

Trilling birds.

Rustling leaves.

They are punctuated by the distant rhythm of ongoing construction work. She perks up to look in that direction, where life as she knows it is. Beads of perspiration trickle down Meher's neck. Her throat is parched. A faint breeze fans her hair from behind. Then, a husky voice breaks the alienating sonic landscape she's immersed in.

"You must be thirsty."

A shiver somersaults down Meher's spine. She turns her head warily in the direction of the voice and sees a familiar vision. A mysterious figure, clad in a black kurta-pyjama, with a bright red dupatta veiling the face! The piercing gaze is bone-chilling. Fragments of her memory return. The gnawing feeling - that the trail she has unwittingly taken has a touch of the sinister - makes sense now. Despite the tremor of fear running through her, Meher finds her voice.

"How did you just get here? Are you a Djinn... or something?" She's surprised by her own low-effort question.

A pregnant pause follows.

"Probably. I turn up anywhere," says the Djinn... or something, with a disturbing nonchalance.

Shoving the selfie stick in the backpack's side pocket, Meher springs up and tries to slip away, whispering to herself, "No, no, not today. This is an illusion."

She slows down immediately, flinching from the pain in her foot. The bustle of the city is audible now, but it soon drowns in the desolation of the ridge. Meher pushes on, sprinting through the pain and through thorny hedges alike. Like a woman intent on not winding up dead. And killed by another woman at that. Probably, asking to identify their pronouns seemed moot at this point.

So, Meher keeps running. Until she runs right into what feels like a pulsing force field. A full-blown body slam! Like being slapped by an impenetrable wave of wind and dust. Pushed to the ground by the impact, confounded, Meher tries to get up and walk. She can see what's past the invisible barrier, but a frightening suction pulls her back even as she fights against it, skidding to hold position on the dusty ground. She finds herself back at the circle of seven trees!

From her peripheral vision, she sees that the Djinn is standing mere steps away, facing the same direction.

"How did this happen?" asks Meher.

"All kinds of things happen here," reveals the Djinn, rather unhelpfully.

Meher chokes back a scream as a knot of pure panic comes undone within her. She makes a mad dash through the same trail, parting ways

with the veiled hallucination. She picks up the pace but soon crashes into the force field.

"This can't be right," she tells herself and runs forward again, only to be hurled back like before. "You're dehydrated. This did not happen! You can hear the traffic in the distance...with actual humans! Just keep running towards it!"

Traversing through a maze-like trail, however, Meher is back at the same circle of trees. Again! This time, she lands on the ground near a rock. The Djinn is crouched on it, as if she'd known all along how it would play out. She was waiting for her.

Running out of steam, Meher switches tactics and, for the first time, decides to humble herself.

"What should I do?"

"Everyone asks the same question," says the Djinn, with a jaded undertone.

The silence following this stunted conversation is louder than anything else in the ridge. A little girl, about six, with tousled hair and a thousand-yard stare, walks past, ignoring their presence.

Is she a ghost too? Meher wonders to herself.

Like a woman intent on not winding up dead. And killed Meher pushes on, sprinting through the pain and through thorny hedges alike. Like a woman intent on not winding up dead.

"She's lost. Wouldn't matter even if she was a ghost... No one hears her screams," says the Djinn, casually replying to the question Meher did not ask out loud.

The girl vanishes into thin air.

Meher is creeped out and scrambles to get up on her feet. Her own words echo in her head, Where's the supernatural chaos, bro? Snapping out of it, she decides to take the same path as the young girl. She makes her way through the serpentine bushes, where her backpack gets

entangled. As she tries to wriggle it free, a black cat with a golden bell slinks past her leg, unnerving her.

"Fuck!" Turning to the cat, Meher asks, "Do you know the way?"

The cat bares her teeth with a hiss.

"Classic! Damn you, Iblis!" Meher screams at the hissing back of the cat that races forward.

While shuffling through the meandering thickets and dodging sharp stones, at some point, she is struck by a gust of wind. Not as strong as before, but strong enough. In a blink, she lands back at the same spot and almost crashes into the Djinn this time, her will to survive, by now, at its dead-end.

She distances herself from the Djinn, but this time, locks eyes with the inescapable apparition. All out of options and determination, Meher decides to make a plea for help.

"Do you know where I'm going?"

The Djinn answers with a more disturbing curveball. "Do you know where I've been?"

Meher employs a different strategy. "Help me?"

"Aren't you like my sister?"

"Why would I be?"

"As a churail, why would you do this?"

"Guess I've been called worse."

"Aren't you one of the good ones?"

"It's a struggle being good."

The strategy has failed. Take Two. "What do you want?"

The Djinn tilts her head in surprise. "No one ever asks me that."

The bright sky has gradually clouded, with a chance of drizzle.

"So?" Meher asks.

The Djinn continues, "I want to escape too, but it feels strange to leave, as if all this had happened before. And then it all goes wrong, and I go back to the start. The trap of the tilism."

She takes a moment, then makes a proposition to Meher. "Hold my hand?"

Meher replies, straight-faced, "Are we on a date?"

The Djinn looks her up and down, unamused. "The arrogance with an ungainly form like that..."

Nevertheless, the Djinn stretches out her hand. Meher looks uncomfortable. "What will you do if we escape from this... tilism?"

"I don't know. I'm searching for the answer too." The Djinn replies.

So, trust the process, it seems.

The Djinn holds Meher's right hand. Meher decides to believe in what they were doing – whatever the hell it is. She pulls out the inscribed stone and holds it like a gun. "Don't try anything funny. I'll use this if I feel threatened."

The Djinn reads out loud, "Tilism-e-gumbad-e-garduun...", as the duo walk hand-in-hand towards the force field.

The sounds of the city grow louder as they near the impenetrable barrier. A strange mist drifts above, casting a coil of shadows below.

The Djinn grips Meher's hand tighter, as the latter turns to her and impishly says,

"Tilism-e-gumbad-e-garduun ko tod sakte hain. Zujaa ki yeh imaat hai. Sang-e-khara nahi."

("The spell of the celestial dome can surely be broken.

It's a structure of glass.

Not unbreakable rock.")

The Djinn's eyes flash as Meher grins, pretending that she didn't just learn of the shayari earlier today.

"Not bad for Gen Z-er, huh?"

"A Djinn what?"

Spurred on by the thundering skies, they lunge forward in an attempt to get past the force field.

They don't pass through again. But this time, something is different. A whirlwind descends on them, building up from a whisper to a chaotic force so powerful that the Djinn and Meher are barely able to keep their eyes open.

Together, they attempt to escape the net of crackling sound and spectral light trapping them. It seems as if the circle of enchantment has dramatically come alive to fulfil its purpose. They keep pushing through the immovable force that resists their persistence.

The Djinn gets pulled backwards by her dupatta towards the centre of the spiralling dust vortex. Meher screams through the unearthly tug of war - her hand is the rope.

"Leave her alone, bhenchod!" Meher yells.

The Djinn slips into a muddled constellation of memories as Meher's words from minutes ago echo from a different time.

"Aren't you like my sister?"

It's HER! With the same striking eyes, riding a horse, unveiled and confident. This is a different lifetime, with all the flash and pageantry of having been tasked with protecting, by and for, the royal court. A contingent of female fighters in battle.

The 'Djinn' rides through a sea of men in a crowded marketplace. The era of Urdubeigis is on the wane. A young girl of aristocratic bearing, about 10 years old, offers her a silver dagger as a gift. When asked why, she says, "You're like a sister."

A flood of images follows. Of colonial battles and chaos in the royal court. The young girl shrieks as she gets snatched up by a veiled man on horseback. The Djinn is cornered and outnumbered, as she takes a punch to the face. Blood everywhere!

Two graves - one smaller than the other. The Djinn was on her knees, glaring defiantly up at the red-cloaked brute holding a silver dagger over her head. Because this is how it ends.

Or does it?

This is a different lifetime, with all the flash and pageantry of having been tasked with protecting, by and for, the royal court. A contingent of female fighters in battle.

Back in the supernatural chokehold of the present.

"Now!" shouts the Djinn, getting Meher's full attention.

Meher slams the inscribed stone by the foot of the dusty giant, snarling around them. The Djinn snatches the selfie stick and plunges it into the eyes of their assailant. The dust storm releases an ear-splitting howl that goes up against the guttural screams of the two sparring women. A parting wail, as if a twisted game of fate unleashed centuries ago had finally been put to rest!

Done and dusted. Literally.

Then, a strange calm descends. The charged air around Meher and the Djinn slowly settles. Thunder rumbles distantly and lightning flashes. Meher and the Djinn emerge from the ridge's stronghold looking wrecked as they cross over to 'the other side' - closer to the noisy city and its visible concrete towers. They keep running, but Meher is euphoric now.

"We got out! Right??" Meher yells, her voice joyful and victorious.

When they slow down and walk at a comfortable pace, the Djinn smiles at her.

"Your hands are cold," says Meher before turning to the main road, which is now clearly in sight. Meher can hear cars honking, dogs

barking, and people arguing loudly amid the din of the nearby construction site. The Djinn lets go of her hand. A well-earned peace descends on them.

Putting on Meher's customised silver glasses, the Djinn has one parting shot. "Keep walking. And keep your gaze up."

Meher barely registers this as she dusts off her clothes. Suddenly, she realises the Djinn has slipped away.

"Oh no! Dude! Djinn? Your name? Shit!"

Disappointed, Meher turns towards the city and walks. She glances back once, just in case, but there's nobody there. Parched, she stops for water at a tap on the side of the main road. Reaching for the empty water bottle in the backpack's side pocket, she finds her phone in there. It is dusty but intact. She realises that her Instagram Live was on all the time!

Notifications blow up her phone. People comment, troll and enquire what bit she was doing to go viral or if she was on some potent drugs. Others just want to know whether her sunglasses discount code would still be valid if she died on the ridge.

Meher switches off her phone.

She splashes water on her face, fills the bottle and drinks deeply. Flashbacks of the ridge surface. She thinks of its rows of trees with twisted trunks and the secrets it sustains.

The insects. The heat. The silence.

The noise.

The inexplicable barrier.

The pulsating winds.

The Djinn.

At that moment, across the road, she sees the six-year-old girl again! Meher thinks she's hallucinating. She blinks once, and the girl disappears.

A honk from a passing car brings her focus back to the pavement where she has been sitting. She hears the tinkle of a bell behind her. It's the Iblis cat, walking past her, and shudders at the ominous vision.

She looks up at the rustling of a nearby tree and is stunned, for tangled around its branches is a familiar red dupatta.

Meher stares at it in disbelief, and after a while, turns her attention to the milling urban bedlam of the city.

*

About the Author:

Seline started out in the Indian film industry, gaining experience and insight into different aspects of filmmaking, and now that it has almost ended her, she has decided to walk the path she was fit for, all along - creating her own fiction while looking for normal jobs that aren't looking for her.



AFTERWORD

BY L A NOLAN
CHIEF MANAGING EDITOR

All writers set out to seduce you with their words. With a novel, they build a relationship, and in a novella, more of a May/December romance. But short story writers, well. They give you a quick kiss in the dark... a peck on the cheek from the shadows, and they are gone. But those kisses linger, don't they? No one else can feel them, but you do. They stay with you far longer than you thought they might. They whisper to you in your quiet moments, come back to you in the turn of a phrase, or an errant wink, or a random smile. That is their charm, their beauty...their power.

Lengthy works of fiction tend to settle in and take up space, almost crowding the forefront of your thoughts. But short stories...they burrow in and nest. Delicious. I sincerely hope you've taken pleasure in reading the tales that we selected for our inaugural issue of Indian Gothic as much as we enjoyed presenting them. Did you cosy up in the dead of night and read them one by one, or steal away to a secret place and devour them all in one go? However you soaked up these words, I thank you for joining us in this first go round. I expect to see you again soon. In particular, perhaps we shall meet along the narrow and dimly lit corridors of the flash fiction wing that will be added on to the mansion next issue. How exciting. And, if I may before we part ways...these stories of issue one, this will not be the last time you think of them. I promise.

“We make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones”.

Stephen King



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