



# Indian Gothic

MONSOON EDITION 2026

VOL 1 ISSUE 2

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with playwright  
Shweta Stormborn

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Mishika Bhatia

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**“MANY PEOPLE LIVE AND DIE WITHOUT  
EVER CONFRONTING THEMSELVES IN  
THE DARKNESS.”**

**— CARMEN MARIA MACHADO  
(HER BODY AND OTHER PARTIES)**

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PUBLICATION  
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FOUNDER & CHIEF EDITOR  
**ARPITA BHAWAL**

CHIEF MANAGING EDITOR  
**L. A. NOLAN**

EDITORS  
**ARTIKA AURORA BAKSHI**  
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INDIAN GOTHIC TEAM  
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CREATIVE DIRECTOR  
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# THE SEASON OF RETURN

BY L A NOLAN

**As a warm deluge pelts relentlessly against cracked red earth, it stands to reason that the soil remembers what is concealed beneath it. Monsoon, in Indian consciousness, is never just about the weather. Everyone expects living things, vibrant and green, to erupt in the petrichor. But they are equally aware that other things come home too – if all that was buried in the dry earth rises, then the dead resurface as well. Monsoon has always been the season of return.**

There are no choices offered. If you celebrate the riotous rebirth of the natural world, you must also accept what was never supposed to come back. In Indian folklore, the monsoon is a terrifying atmospheric catalyst, isolating villages, flooding roads, and cutting off ancestral mansions from civilisation. To embrace the season is to marvel at how grey fog and rising water create the perfect environment for aquatic demons, phantoms, and wraiths to emerge – bringing with them all their ancient evils and eldritch horrors. Monsoon is their permission slip.

Indian Gothic is open to global submissions, but we don't view Gothic and Horror as foreign imports – we regard them as the oldest stories India has ever told, simply forgotten by the literary establishment. We remember the Marsh Ghost, Mekho Bhoot, whose peak season for menacing Bengali fishermen is the monsoon. We recall Aleya, the swamp lights that lure travellers off the trail to drown in swollen marshes. When a monsoon gale in Assam forces a bamboo stalk to snap upward and impale anyone who steps over it, was that not the design of the Bamboo Garden Spirit, Besho Bhoot? And who dares venture into sunken bogs where the Headless Phantom, the Skondhokata, waits to drag you under?

The monsoon is not contained by borders. Darkness needs no passport. While we adore India's torrential rains, it's not just Asia that consumes us – we crave the horrors that Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Oceania have hidden away, each with dread lurking in its own brand of monsoon: whispering fog, windswept steppes, craggy peaks, ice-laden blizzards. We've been wickedly blessed this issue, as many regions have shared their darkest fears with us.

Oh, what a dark tomb of apprehension we have curated for you: creatures from America, apparitions from Russia, ghouls from India... the list is rich and bountiful.

So, here we are, you and I. The time has come. Put on your gumboots, pick up your brolly, and follow me into the rains. I can't promise you'll stay dry – or keep your skin, for that matter. But I can promise you'll be entertained, right out of your socks.

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05



## DREAMLIKE LIMBO

WITH SHWETA STORMBORN

In an exclusive interview with Arpita Bhawal, Founder & Chief Editor of Indian Gothic, playwright Shweta Stormborn talks to us about her play, *The Woman Who Took The Vial*, a historical fantasy that relies on gossipy history to examine human ambitions. Recently performed in Mumbai, the play draws on historical tales to address the age-old concept of ambition and how it is perhaps still relatable in the lives of women today.

**Qs. 1** *The Women Who Took the Vial* brings together women from history and mythology in a dreamlike limbo. What first inspired you to imagine these figures sharing the same space, and why did Razia become the character through whom you chose to tell this story?

Ans:

I wanted to write a story about women in power to show that any quest for power affects women as much as it affects men. Only that the obstacles are different and created by a masculine world, which affects men as much, but that is another story! Of course, the losses experienced by these women are what makes the audience evaluate the nature of ambition.

The different characters sharing space and interacting is what makes a fun story, I think. Razia is the central character in that she occupies the stage at all times. "The Women" in the title refers to the fact that it is about several women. There are several interactions between Razia and the women she encounters, and each character is crucial, including the one male character, to move the story forward.

**Qs. 2** Your play explores ambition through the experiences of women who have been celebrated, misunderstood, or vilified by history. What drew you to examine ambition from a specifically female perspective, and did your own understanding of ambition change while writing the play?

Ans:

I've always been overwhelmed by the idea of ambition and never thought of ambition driving me to do things (which does not mean desire fails to affect me!). Examining ambitions, especially when they can change histories and lives, is something that I feel I do quite a bit. I think being a woman is reason enough to examine the female perspective. I can't say my understanding of ambition changed as much as it informed my writing the play.

**Qs. 3** Limbo functions as much more than a setting—it feels like a place where history, memory, and myth intersect. How did you build this world, and what role does the fantastical play in revealing emotional or historical truths?

Ans:

Well, Limbo naturally makes for an interesting setting, in that death fascinates and scares us in equal amounts. And I have several characters from or based on world mythology, so that gives me tremendous leeway to play with history, ideas, or what humankind remembers as history. For instance, you know Razia Sultana as the only queen who ruled Delhi and even the way she met her end. But a lot of other details about her life, whom she loved, and how she felt about her throne will always be speculation. The same can be said about other characters like Medhia, based on the Medea from Greek mythology or Hatshepsut, another unusual female ruler from ancient Egypt. “Historical truths” might be an oxymoron, and again, that is what I use to create an interesting narrative here.

**Qs. 4** Many of the women in your play have survived centuries of retellings, each shaped by gossip, legend, or political narrative. How did you balance historical research with creative interpretation while giving these voices new life on stage?

Ans:

I do not think of it as balance, really. It’s unbalanced, and that’s what makes it fun – a potpourri of research spiced up with imagination and contemporary social and political understandings. Also, we had amazing actors, and they brought in their personalities and interpretations as well.

**Qs. 5** Without revealing any spoilers, what do you hope audiences continue thinking about after the curtain falls? Is there a particular question or emotional response you hope lingers with them?

Ans:

The narrative pretty much begs an analysis of ambition... the nature of ambition. I would like to think the audience goes through a riot of emotions through these intense characters. Our director mentioned this at the end of one of the shows – a single watching might not be enough.



This is the kind of theatre that seeks an audience that enjoys watching multiple shows. I'm not trying to make a hard sell. It is what it is. This is a complex, literary, character- and plot-driven play, and if films can be rewatched for the same reasons (again, not trying to brag, but think *Interstellar*), why not a play?

**Qs. 6 The Women Who Took the Vial has already been staged in Mumbai. For many emerging playwrights, getting a script produced can seem like an impossible dream. Could you share your journey from completed manuscript to opening night? What were the biggest challenges in finding a producer and bringing the play to the stage?**

Ans:

Yes. The whole thing was super intense and overwhelming.

I was unquestionably overwhelmed for the first show...actually throughout the rehearsals.

I imagine as much as actors want to bare their souls with their bodies or physicality as an instrument, writers yearn to do this with words. So here I was, my soul and heart, splayed in front of so many people that I had never known and suddenly feeling a strong bond with them

because they connected to me with my words.

It was amazing. Overwhelming. The challenges were there. To begin with, the patience it took. I wrote this as a short story in 2020 that got rejected several times. Then, I showed it to a friend I made in theatre around 2022, who showed interest in it.

I rewrote it as a play, but that never worked out. Then I showed it to a friend, an art director in Bollywood, who had worked as an actor in theatre and had the dream and means to pull off something bigger (He also directed the play). Inspired, I rewrote it without constraints to turn it into the play it is now. I must say, as much as this play is my baby – our baby, now – a lot of good fortune is involved here in knowing the right people and finding the right people. For instance, we had this fabulous, crazy-talented, team of musicians and dancers, without whom the play would have ended up being far too erudite given that it is a literary play.

Also, I was anxious that the feminist voice of the play won't go through. This was allayed soon enough during the making, all the same. One of my fondest memories is when the female actors said how glad they were to play strong, character driven female roles.

Unfortunately, our times are such that writing



and theatre are not as appreciated as they need to be. When the world is so separated by screens and addicted to them, theatre is such a unique form of storytelling, with so much interactiveness. The humanity and the beauty of feeling, rather than simply seeing a story, is hard to describe. Feeling the acting; the sets that leave so much to the imagination while being so gorgeous; the words are simply, sigh! One can only wish theatre would be more loved in our country.

**Qs. 7 Indian Gothic celebrates stories that explore the uncanny, the mysterious, and the psychologically unsettling. Although your play is rooted in historical fantasy, it also inhabits liminal spaces where desire, sacrifice, and the supernatural converge. How do you see *The Women Who Took the Vial* contributing to contemporary Gothic storytelling?**

Ans.

Like you say, Gothic as a genre celebrates the macabre, provides a closer examination of the unknown aspects of existence that we find terrifying and fascinating, and so does *The Women Who Took the Vial*. Examining ambition through Limbo is gothic, I'd say!

\*

#### About the playwright:

Shweta Stormborn is a playwright, teacher educator, and endurance athlete. Born in Odisha, brought up in Mumbai, and now living in Himachal, she has worked around India and in Mexico as a teacher and teacher educator. Her fictional writing can be found at [https://medium.com/@shwetamishra\\_51474](https://medium.com/@shwetamishra_51474).

**This play has been performed in Mumbai. The only readers are the actors and other crew, and of course, the audience in the experimental theatre where it happened.**



#### About the play:

*The Women Who Took The Vial* is a historical fantasy that relies on gossipy history to examine human ambitions. To achieve her ambition, the protagonist, RAZIA, travels into limbo in a drug-induced dream. Here she meets many other female prisoners, women of fame from world history and mythology, in pursuit of the ruler of limbo, GAG, who can fulfil her desires.

The women, HYPATIA, MEDHIA, HATSHEPSUT, and DEVI, with varied personalities and outlooks, show RAZIA the way around limbo and to GAG. The play ends with the protagonist's success but makes the audience question the nature of ambition and the path taken to achieve it. That RAZIA suffers and potentially loses her love, JAMAL, and, with lamentations and tears, aborts their unborn child for her ambition for the crown, also asks if for women, achieving ambition – as materialistic and vain as any man – entails a different level of suffering or is suffering inherent in ambition irrespective of gender?



## TO WRITE BETTER, YOU HAVE TO READ BETTER

**What Gothic Fiction Teaches  
Writers About the Human Soul**

**BY MISHIKA BHATIA**

One of the most common pieces of writing advice is also one of the most frequently ignored: if you want to write better, you must read better. Not more. Better.

Many aspiring writers treat reading as a form of market research. They read to identify trends, imitate successful authors, or learn the mechanics of plot construction. While these are valuable skills, they miss something more fundamental. Great reading does not simply

teach technique. It teaches perception.

The books we read shape what we are capable of noticing. A writer who has only encountered stories that prioritise efficiency and clarity may learn how to communicate information, but they may never learn how to describe a wound. They may know how to construct a scene, yet struggle to articulate grief, obsession, loneliness, guilt, or spiritual longing. They possess language for events but not for experiences. This is where Gothic fiction becomes invaluable.

The Gothic is often misunderstood as a genre of ghosts, castles, monsters, and supernatural horrors. Certainly these elements appear throughout its history. But they are merely some of the genre's most familiar visual languages. Beneath this familiar imagery lies something much more significant. Gothic fiction is fundamentally concerned with the forces that capture, wound, transform, and destroy the human soul.

At its core, the Gothic is a mode of confronting what disturbs the boundaries upon which ordinary life depends. It emerges wherever hidden truths threaten exposure, wherever the past refuses burial, wherever desire exceeds social permission, and wherever the self encounters forces it cannot fully understand or control. The Gothic is less a collection of aesthetic features than a methodology of inquiry. It asks what happens when repression fails.

This distinction matters because Gothic fiction can persist even in the absence of traditional Gothic aesthetics. A novel set in a modern suburb, a hospital ward, an apartment complex, or a corporate office may be profoundly Gothic if it explores haunting, psychological fragmentation, inherited trauma, forbidden knowledge, or the return of what has been suppressed. The architecture may change, but the underlying questions remain the same. Writers who understand this gain access to one of the Gothic's most valuable lessons. The genre is not teaching us how to write old houses. It is teaching us how to recognise haunting. Once you understand that haunting can occur within a family, a nation, a

memory, a body, or a conscience, you begin to see Gothic possibilities everywhere. The aesthetic becomes optional. The insight remains.

More importantly for writers, it has spent centuries developing a vocabulary for these experiences. Long before psychology emerged as a formal discipline, Gothic writers were investigating repression, trauma, fragmentation, alienation, and desire. Long before neuroscience attempted to explain memory, Gothic literature explored the ways in which the past inhabits the present. Long before contemporary discussions of mental health became widespread, Gothic novels were dramatising emotional states that seemed impossible to articulate directly. The Gothic understands that human beings rarely experience life in neat, rational categories.

We are haunted by memories that refuse to disappear. We desire things that frighten us. We love people who harm us. We carry versions of ourselves that we believed we had left behind. These contradictions are difficult to describe. Ordinary language often fails us. The Gothic responds by turning emotional realities into physical images. A locked room becomes a secret. A ghost becomes memory. A labyrinth becomes confusion. A monster becomes desire. A haunted house becomes the persistence of the past. This symbolic imagination is one of the greatest lessons Gothic fiction offers writers.

Many inexperienced writers attempt to communicate emotion directly. They tell us a character feels lonely, devastated, ashamed, or terrified. Yet emotional truth often emerges more powerfully through image than explanation. Consider the difference between writing, "She was grieving", and writing, "She continued setting a place at the dinner table for someone who had been dead for three years." The second image accomplishes what the first statement merely announces. Gothic fiction excels at this form of emotional translation. It teaches writers how to externalise interior states. It demonstrates how physical environments can

reflect psychological realities. The weather, architecture, landscape, and objects surrounding a character become extensions of the character's emotional world.

This is not simply a Gothic technique; it is a literary technique. The Gothic merely teaches it exceptionally well. Reading Gothic fiction also teaches writers to take darkness seriously.

Modern writing advice frequently emphasises relatability, likability, and accessibility. While these concerns have their place, they can sometimes encourage a shallow understanding of human experience. Writers become hesitant to explore jealousy, cruelty, resentment, obsession, despair, or moral ambiguity. The Gothic has no such hesitation. It recognises that human beings contain shadows alongside virtues. Indeed, one of the genre's defining strengths is its refusal to divide humanity into simple categories of heroes and villains. Gothic characters are often simultaneously victims and perpetrators.

They possess conflicting motivations. They act against their own interests. They sabotage their own happiness. In other words, they resemble real people. Reading these characters teaches writers an essential lesson—complexity is more compelling than perfection. Many beginning writers fear making their characters unlikeable. Gothic fiction suggests a different approach. Rather than asking whether a character is likeable, ask whether they are alive. The answer often lies in contradiction. The Gothic provides writers with a language for discussing suffering without reducing it to sentimentality.

This may be one of its most important contributions. Human suffering is notoriously difficult to write about. Too little emotion and the work feels detached. Too much emotion and it becomes melodramatic. Writers often find themselves trapped between understatement and excess. The Gothic offers a third possibility. Instead of describing pain directly, it creates structures through which pain can be experienced.

A cursed family, a decaying mansion, a mirror that reveals uncomfortable truths, or a landscape corrupted by hidden violence. These images allow emotional experiences to unfold indirectly, often making them more powerful than straightforward confession. The reader participates in the interpretation. The suffering becomes something discovered rather than merely reported. For writers, this is an invaluable lesson. Literature is rarely strongest when it explains everything. It is strongest when it creates conditions for recognition. The Gothic teaches us how to build those conditions. It also teaches writers to respect mystery.

Contemporary culture often values immediate understanding. We are encouraged to explain, diagnose, categorise, and resolve. Yet some aspects of human experience resist explanation. Why does grief sometimes return years after a loss? Why do certain memories remain vivid while others disappear? Why do people repeat destructive patterns despite recognising them? Why does beauty so often coexist with fear? The Gothic does not always answer these questions. Instead, it dwells within them.

For writers, this is a profound lesson. Not every mystery exists to be solved. Some exist to be explored. The most memorable literature often emerges from uncertainty rather than certainty. The Gothic understands that ambiguity can reveal truths that explanation cannot. Perhaps this is why the genre remains so enduring. Its concerns are ultimately human concerns.

Every generation develops new technologies, new political systems, and new cultural norms. Yet people continue to experience grief, shame, longing, desire, memory, fear, guilt, and wonder. The external world changes. The interior world remains remarkably consistent. The Gothic returns repeatedly to this interior world. It examines the hidden chambers of consciousness. It asks what happens when the past refuses to stay buried. It investigates the cost of repression. It explores the relationship between beauty and terror. And most important,

it provides language for experiences that otherwise remain difficult to articulate. This is why writers should read Gothic fiction. Not because they intend to write ghosts. Not because they intend to write haunted houses. Not because they intend to imitate nineteenth-century novels. They should read Gothic fiction because it teaches them how to see. It teaches them that every emotion has an architecture. Every memory leaves traces. Every wound alters the landscape of the self.

The Gothic offers more than stories. It offers a methodology for understanding human experience. It demonstrates how symbols, images, settings, and narratives can illuminate aspects of the soul that ordinary language struggles to capture.

To write better, you must read better. And to read better, you must encounter literature that expands your capacity for perception. The Gothic has been doing exactly that for more than two centuries. It remains one of the richest traditions available to writers because it recognises a truth that every serious artist eventually discovers—human beings are not simple creatures.

We are haunted by what we love, transformed by what we fear, and shaped by what we cannot forget. The writer's task is to find language for these realities. The Gothic teaches us how.

\*

#### About the author:

Mishika Bhatia is a student researcher and writer at the University of Michigan whose work explores literature, embodiment, and power. Her academic interests include Victorian and Gothic literary critique, representations of the body in literature, and the intersections of science and the humanities. In addition to writing, she is a biomedical scientist focused on women's/reproductive health.





## THE CLAW

BY DMITRY SARTAKOV

The sun in this part of the desert didn't just shine; it punished. Elias felt every step across the scorching stones echo in his temples as a dull, rhythmic throb. His grey trousers had long since turned orange with dust, and his cotton shirt clung to his back, stiff with dried salt. The only reminder of his past life was his boots. Exquisite Italian leather—thin, supple, and entirely unfit for this hell. Yet, against all logic, they were the only things keeping him on his feet.

When the shimmering horizon fractured, coalescing into the shape of a dome, Elias didn't believe his eyes. It looked nothing like a nomad camp or a military outpost. The massive, low-slung building, crowned with a heavy vault, resembled an observatory or an ancient temple forgotten in the middle of nowhere.

"An inn. Please, just let it be an inn with water and shade," he rasped through split lips. Inside, he was met by a cool twilight smelling of spices and ancient stone. Elias froze, pulling off his battered, wide-brimmed hat.

A bizarre hall opened up before him—a literal amphitheatre. Rows of tables descended in concentric circles toward the centre, where a circular stage stood, enclosed by a high metal mesh.

The place was crowded, with roughly thirty people. They sat in small groups, murmuring in a guttural, clicking tongue Elias had never heard before. No one turned around immediately. Staggering, he claimed an empty table at the very edge of the tiers. He dropped his sandy backpack with a sigh of relief, hung his hat over the back of the chair, and felt the numbness spreading through his shoulders.

A waiter approached—a giant with a bushy beard, his bare torso covered only by a heavy leather apron. Without a word, he dropped a sheet of parchment in front of Elias. The symbols on it looked like tangled roots. Elias scanned the list, understanding none of it, until

his eyes caught a line bolded in charcoal-black ink. In any decent establishment, that was how they highlighted the chef's special.

Elias jabbed his finger at the line.

"This. Please."

The bearded giant froze. He leaned down slowly, staring at the guest's choice, and then his face split into a grin that might have been mistaken for approval. The waiter straightened up and bellowed something to the room. The low hum of conversation vanished instantly. The silence became almost suffocating. And then, the hall erupted.

Patrons leaped to their feet, slamming their palms against the tables and shouting harsh, foreign words of approval. Every eye in the house was now locked onto the "brave soul" in the expensive boots.

Elias felt the first icy prickle of dread.

They didn't serve him at the table. Instead, the waiter gestured for him to come down—insistent, yet bizarrely respectful. Driven by either hunger or sheer, stupid curiosity, Elias obeyed. He was led through a gate and straight behind the metal mesh.

**The thought flashed through his mind. His brain refused to process reality. In this culture, food wasn't served on a platter. Here, you had to prove your right to calories.**

The moment his boots hit the sand of the arena, the gate slammed shut behind him with a heavy clang. The waiter and his assistants vanished. A tense, expectant silence fell over the hall.

Across the stage, a massive cage rolled out of the shadows. As the bolts slid back, something slowly crawled out of the darkness, its chitinous plates scraping against the stone. It was a lobster, if nature had engineered it in a nightmare. Two meters long, a muddy-brown colour, with a cluster of segmented legs and mandibles that clicked relentlessly and dripped sticky slime.

From somewhere above, someone tossed a heavy wooden club into the arena. It thudded into the sand at Elias's feet.

*My dinner...*

The thought flashed through his mind. His brain refused to process reality. In this culture, food wasn't served on a platter. Here, you had to prove your right to calories. But staring into the creature's ruthless, faceted eyes, Elias realised this wasn't about securing a meal. It was about who would digest whom. His heart hammered in his throat. The creature let out a dry click and lunged forward, staying low to the ground. Elias snatched up the club; it was heavy and rough against his palms. He began to back away, his expensive boots sliding in the sand. The crowd was roaring, whistling, and cheering, but his world had shrunk to those horrific mandibles.

*What do I do? God, what do I do?*

The beast lunged.

Elias barely managed to throw himself sideways, feeling something sharp graze past his thigh. He hit the steel mesh with his back. There was nowhere left to run. The lobster froze six feet away, coiling for a final strike. Its hunger was almost palpable.

In that fraction of a second, terror gave way to pure survival instinct. Elias was no warrior—he was a fugitive. Swinging his entire weight, he hurled the heavy club straight at the monster's face.

A dull crack echoed through the arena. The creature shuddered and paused, momentarily stunned by the impact on its sensitive antennae.

That second was all he needed. Elias didn't stick around for the rest of the show. He spun around, drove his fingers into the mesh, and scrambled upward with an agility he never knew he possessed. Vaulting over the rim, he crashed directly onto a table of patrons, sending dishes flying everywhere.

"Hey!" was all he could yell, scrambling to his feet.

Chaos erupted in the hall. The disgruntled groan of a cheated audience quickly escalated into a furious chorus of boos and jeers.

The bearded waiter rushed to intercept him, waving his massive arms in an attempt to catch the “ingredient” that had dared to break the rules of the game. Elias tore through the room, overturning chairs and dodging grabbing hands. He could see the exit—a bright rectangle leading back out into the inferno. His hat? His pack? Water? To hell with it all.

He burst into the open, the scorching air striking his lungs like a physical blow. He sprinted across the stones blindly, hearing shouts and heavy footsteps behind him, running until his chest burned and his legs turned to lead.

Elias collapsed onto the arid ground, far out of sight of that bizarre dome. No one was pursuing him—apparently, a manhunt wasn’t included in the price of his cancelled dinner.

He lay on his back, watching the sky bleed into the bloody orange hues of sunset. He didn’t have a single drop of water left, nor any protection from the sun that would inevitably finish him off tomorrow. Yet, staring up at the dying light, he smiled. His chest wheezed as it drew in the air, and every single breath felt like a triumph.

“At least I wasn’t eaten,” he rasped into the empty expanse.

After all, frying under the sun was a far more dignified, human fate than ending his days inside the belly of a giant crustacean for the amusement of a mob.

For the first time in ages, he felt truly alive—even if that life had cost him everything he owned, and perhaps, his few remaining hours.

\*

**For the first time in ages, he felt truly alive—even if that life had cost him everything he owned, and perhaps, his few remaining hours.**

#### **About the author:**

Dmitry Sartakov is a 49-year-old aspiring writer from Omsk, Russia, where he lives with his family. He works as a manager, but spends his free time traveling, reading extensively, and writing mystical and science fiction stories. Recently, he began sharing his work with readers on LitRes, Russia’s leading digital book platform (profile: [litres.ru](https://litres.ru)). As a writer, Dmitry would be thrilled and honored to introduce Indian readers to contemporary Russian speculative fiction.





# DAMAGED SCULPTURE TAKES HIGHEST BID AT AUCTION

BY SHEM LIM

## 1. "Damaged Sculpture Takes Highest Bid at Auction"

Tatum Art Brokers Conglomerate sold *Sad Lover* for £14,900,000 at auction this weekend, marking the costliest sale in Tatum's eighty-year history. *Sad Lover*, a two-foot bust in Turkish Pearl Marble, gained notoriety in 2023 gallery showings. Shockingly, the sculpture was partially destroyed by a vandal in 2024. The damage sparked a series of enigmatic revelations involving an unsolved homicide, as well as the alleged hospitalisation of the sculptor, Benito Garcia, in a psychiatric clinic.

The mystery surrounding the sculpture became a viral sensation in online art communities. When the reconstructed *Sad Lover* reappeared, its value skyrocketed. Professor Evelyn Qualtrough from Simmonds Institute explains, "There are precedents for damage to a work of art increasing its value. Banksy's partially destroyed *Love is in the Bin* is the most recent sensation, but consider even the *Venus de Milo...*"

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## 2. Recorded session between Cori Bothwell, LCSW, and Benito "Ben" Garcia

Published with patient consent

**Bothwell:** You didn't really do realism in your sculpture, right?

**Garcia:** No. I mean, a little in art school, but after that, never. Never any portraiture. Busts are especially boring to me. My work isn't completely abstract. My last series was based

on cross-sections of marine invertebrates... most people just see interesting shapes.

**Bothwell:** So why make the bust?

**Garcia:** I dunno how to put it, other than that I had no choice. His face was in my dreams, I think. I couldn't remember the dreams, but I'd feel him beside me in bed, like a lover. I'd look up from my coffee and realise I'd sketched his face on a napkin or even on the tabletop. Like my hand was possessed by some Japanese guy I'd never met.

**Bothwell:** Can you describe the sculpting process again, for the recording?

**I was killing myself, but I couldn't stop. Always, I'd see his face, that jawline, square chin, lips almost smiling, those sad, sad eyes. Thought I'd die from blood loss.**

**Garcia:** It was agony. I felt every cut, every impact of the chisel, the grinder, the carborundum stone. Even the finishing sandpaper. Chipping, grinding, scraping my own muscle and bone. The stone was me. I'd work all day, just weeping, dripping blood everywhere. Passed out maybe ten times. I was killing myself, but I couldn't stop. Always, I'd see his face, that jawline, square chin, lips almost smiling, those sad, sad eyes. Thought I'd die from blood loss. But each morning, there'd be no blood, no scars. At least not visible ones. Sometimes, if I don't take my meds, I still see my body covered in gashes, dripping blood like Jesus Christ.

Five days, working nonstop. I never touched alcohol, no weed. At least I can say it wasn't some drug trip. Maybe hallucinations from withdrawal? But I've been sober, and it's been what, a month here?

**Bothwell:** It's seven weeks on Monday. How do you feel now?

**Garcia:** He's still here sometimes. He's almost like a brother now, or a friendly parole officer, heh. Really, he's comforting. I'm just worried that if he tells me to start fires or jump off a building or something, I won't be able to stop myself...

### 3. Confession Transcript of Curtis Liggett Souta "Simon" Sakamoto murder Case #A78866516

Interviewing officer: Detective Ed Coale

**Liggett:** I'd noticed the junkyard off the highway on camping trips. No gate or anything, just a bunch of wrecked cars in a roadside lot. Simon was in the trunk under a ton of cedar chips to keep critters from swarming around and attracting attention. Drove into a tree a few times to bust the car up. Smashed the windows, threw dirt on everything. Then I just left the car there with the other junkers, took my e-bike back to the gas station, and called an Uber.

**Coale:** That's how you hid the body?

**Liggett:** Yep. It worked, didn't it? I told everyone we fought, and he ran off, which was almost true. Everyone knew he was leaving me.

**Coale:** Can you talk more about your relationship?

**Liggett:** I admit I was controlling. Possessive, dominant. He liked it at first. But my obsessive attention built up his self-esteem. Then he didn't want me to control him. I thought, it's not fair; I gave him this confidence, and it's taking him away from me...

Our fights got crazy. We yelled and threw things. Guess mostly I threw things. Simon's not dumb. He knows a red flag when he sees one. The trust was gone.

I felt powerless to communicate how sad and scared I was. So I threw stuff, as if shattering a coffee cup could say what I couldn't. I never



threw to hit him. I played baseball in high school. I can aim a throw.

There was this jar of change. In my mind, I saw it break against the cinder block wall, quarters and pennies flying everywhere. Then we'd calm down, pick up all the coins, laugh about it. I'd buy him something with the change, and it'd become a fun story we'd tell our kids, how everything got better between us. That's what I imagined.

I swear he moved at the last second. I never threw to hit him. The jar, the heavy jar of coins, hits him right in the head, like a cannonball. He drops.

*(Liggett pauses, overwhelmed by emotion.)*

The jar landed on a chair, and it didn't even break. But there's blood everywhere.

**Coale:** So you put him in the trunk, stashed the car in the junkyard. No one suspected murder. What happened?

**Liggett:** I saw that goddamn sculpture in a magazine. It's his face. Like he's alive. Staring at me, those sad eyes. I don't really remember anything after that.

**Coale:** You charged into the exhibit in broad daylight with a three-pound handheld sledgehammer. You got in two swings on the *Sad Lover* sculpture before security restrained you. In custody, you confessed to the murder. Do you remember?

**Liggett:** It's hazy. I just remember his face. It ate me up inside. What person could bear to see his love, his crime, carved in stone?

\*

**I saw that goddamn sculpture in a magazine. It's his face. Like he's alive. Staring at me, those sad eyes. I don't really remember anything after that.**



**About the author:**

Shem Lim is a Chinese American High School English teacher and author from Salt Lake City. He stubbornly endures reality alongside his loving spouse, anarchist baby son, and ridiculous mongrel dog. He lives for dim sum, comic books, and rare bird sightings.





## REUNION

BY MALCOLM CARVALHO

Amit scratches Daisy's forehead as she digs her muzzle into his side.

"I'm so glad you took this well, Neha," he says, unfastening his seatbelt.

Daisy wags her tail. "Just happy to be back with you," Neha says. "But why do I have to lick your arm so much? Ugh. Couldn't you do it any other way?"

Amit laughs. "You mean, use someone or something else instead of Daisy? That wasn't quite possible."

He adjusts his earpiece. The technology fascinates him—it decodes the dog's sounds smoothly and is so easy to use. It was several days of grinding work, but Amit is glad he made it through. He had to train the tech with all of Daisy's sounds—the barks, the yelps, the whimpers, and the yips. And even the non-vocal sounds—the panting and the licking. And then

feeding the tech with Neha's sound bites, whatever he could get after her death. Training the tech with her accent, her inflections, her slightly roundabout way of talking.

Daisy barks again, pulling him out of his thoughts. "I'm surprised how it doesn't disturb you seeing me like this. How is it not freaking you out?"

"I thought it would, but this way we're back together. After all those months trying to make sense of your death—"

"Glad you got the tech in time."

"Yes, and Daisy's still fit enough to host you."

"Easy for you to say," Neha snaps. "You're not the one being hosted. You're not walking on all fours."

"Hey! I'm not the dead one either."

When he had first contacted Psyche Graft, the implanting agency, Amit had wondered if it would all work. It was, of course, a nascent technology, and casting Neha's consciousness into their pet Labrador came with risks. What if the casting failed? What if Daisy would not host Neha, or even worse, what if she turned out to be a violent, aggressive host?

Thankfully, none of those risks had materialised. Amit was glad the implanting had gone off smoothly, and here they were, back as a couple. Daisy was still the playful dog she had always been, and she had room for Neha's personality, too. So what if it looked twisted and grotesque? As if his relationship before Neha's death had been smooth sailing all along.

"You sure we shouldn't tell anyone in our families?" Neha asks, as if she has been reading his thoughts.

Amit ruffles the fur on Daisy's neck and kisses her. "You think anyone would understand? But you have a point; we should share it with someone. That's why we are here."

He carries her out and passes through the gate into the building.

"Know this place?"

"Umm, nope," Neha says even as Daisy struggles to break out of Amit's hold.

"Ranvir lives here."

"Ah, why haven't we visited his place before?"

"People get busy. And my friend's a super busy man." He places Daisy down and secures her leash.

**So what if it looked twisted and grotesque? As if his relationship before Neha's death had been smooth sailing all along.**

"Come on, honey. You think I'll run away?"

"You won't. But you know how Ranvir gets jumpy around Daisy." He walks her up the stairs. Three flights might tire him, but Daisy gets restless in the elevator. "And she doesn't like him either."

Daisy whimpers. "I thought we'd have a more romantic reunion, just the two of us."

"In time, it's only your second day. You have to get used to Daisy. And I haven't met Ranvir in months."

"Ah, the bromance!" Daisy bounds off onto the first floor. "Figure out how I died?"

"Someone poisoned you. We never found out who did it."

As they get past the second floor, Amit slows down to catch his breath. He leans on the staircase railing and curses his ankles. Daisy dashes off further up the stairs and stops at the left-side door on the third floor.

Amit trudges up and rings the bell. Daisy's scratching the door with her forepaws.

"Now, that's interesting," Amit says. "Daisy hasn't been here before."

Daisy whimpers and stops scratching.

"Umm... maybe dogs have a sixth sense?"

"Is that why she's wagging her tail too—"

The door opens. Ranvir smiles at him. "What took you so long, man? What the—"

Daisy jumps playfully on Ranvir. Then she stands on her hind legs, presses her front paws on his hips, and licks his elbow.

"What the hell, Amit! You know I don't like dogs."

Daisy jumps back. Neha's apologetic voice booms into Amit's earpiece. "Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to."

Daisy turns towards the stairs, but Amit pulls on her leash.

Then, looking at Ranvir: "Knew it was you, asshole!"

With his free hand, he draws out his pistol and fires a single round, getting Ranvir between the eyes.

Daisy yelps. The body falls to the floor. She strains to escape, but Amit tightens his grip on the leash.

"You wanted a romantic reunion, didn't you?"

She tucks her tail between her legs. "Look... it was a mistake... I didn't mean to... it was a one-time thi—"

"I didn't need you around for this." He pats her head. Her ears have flattened, and he can see the whites in her eyes, the naked fear in them. "I thought it would be an interesting experiment."

He drags her to the living room and ties her leash to a leg of the dining table. Then he pulls

Ranvir's corpse towards the table, the dark stream of blood marking its trail, and leaves the body near Daisy.

The whimpering gets louder as he walks to the door.

"Please," Neha says. "Don't leave me here."

He turns the doorknob. "It's been twelve hours since Daisy had her last meal. And as advanced as the tech is, you can't control her instincts."

Daisy licks Ranvir's face and laps up the blood from the gunshot wound.

Amit smiles. It's only a matter of time now. He slams the door closed and skips down the stairs.

Serves her right.

\*

**Daisy licks Ranvir's face and laps up the blood from the gunshot wound. Amit smiles. It's only a matter of time now.**



**About the author:**

Malcolm Carvalho has contributed fiction and poetry to several magazines including Kitaab, Bengaluru Review, Spark and 365 Tomorrows. His fiction has been shortlisted for the 2023 Deodar Prize and the 2025 BWW Short Story Award. He is a graduate of the Odyssey Writing Workshop 2021, where he received the Quantum Entanglement Scholarship. He lives in Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany, with his wife and toddler son.



# PALADIN

BY PHIL AARON

As my comrades and I sat in prayer, our enemies sharpened their knives. As we sang out our hearts to The Creator, our enemy called on old Gods. As we echoed creeds, convincing ourselves someone would be blessed with the power to strike down our foe—become Light-Struck—our enemy gathered cruel magic and set in ambush. We thought we'd already won; we were sheep before the slaughter.

Wrapped in our pristine grey cloaks made from fine wool of the very land we set to conquer, I stood by my friend, Felix. His archery skills alone made me feel invincible. We stood saluting the High-Priest General. His stoic face was unflinching, illuminated by flickering braziers in the wind. A white cloak clutched at his shoulders, giving the visage of a man untarnished by war. I now know I saw a different man. The weariness that only comes from a bur-

den of heavy lies...

"Donnovin!" someone scolds. "Gods, man. You better not be sleeping."

Bruno's bright, red hair sips up the candlelight as the flickering glow soothes the rough-hewn wood of this pub. He looks at me with not a bit of anger and swaps my empty tankard for a full one. My head is heavy with a haze. I'm about to let Bruno have it for giving me such a look of pity, but when I try to speak, my mouth feels full of mud. Grabbing the tankard with a full fist, I choke down my new drink.

"What kind of swill are you serving these days, Bruno?"

"That's water," he says, putting his hands on his hips in more genuine disapproval. My respect for him returns.

"Oh," I say, finishing the mug. It's the clearest thing I've drunk in days. I slam down the tankard, ignoring the ache in my leg. "Another round, Bruno." I give him a smirk, and he obliges me, then turns to tend to someone else.

Realising my tab hasn't been paid, I fumble

for my coin pouch. It's bloody fierce inside—just a few meagre bronzies. Not nearly enough for what I've had tonight. Guilt hits me like a hammer. I chug the second tankard of water and go to pull out some coin, but a hand stops me. My head whips up to curse at the fool, but it's Bruno. He knows well, but he doesn't know well enough.

He's brave and keeps still.

"You'll need that for breaking your fast. And for Martha. Get me back when you're working again. I hear the guards are hiring." Bruno winks.

I feel naked by his generosity; all I manage is a nod and slink away. A prayer for him escapes me, but I do not know where it goes. Maybe to the gods Bruno respects, the same gods I've forsaken.

Outside the pub, the cold clutch of dusk turns my sweat to ice. I wrap myself in the blanket I cut into a cloak to stave off a shiver. The wool bears a few holes, and a stain on the shoulder mocks me. I must have looked like a child when I fell in the mud, running away with my stolen prize. The merchants wouldn't come back for months, just before the first frost. Cold is a cruel thing.

**I snap off a leg and start swinging, but there are no barbarians here. Just a man and a woman, their mouths silent and open, eyes wide and screaming.**

I turn my back toward the edge of town, away from Bruno's. Something like my mother pinching my ear tells me to stop. The old ways bubble up, and I turn toward the woods and pay my respects. The trees stretch up like dark, winding forks trying to skewer the stars.

Months ago, all their leaves fell during strange weather. Some say it was the witch. A warning to the Baron, who heeds the new Queen's love for the Creator. The old Gods are angry, and the Witch holds them dear. The trees stand unchanged by my courtesies.

Much later, I'm leaning against a stone house, staring at the stars, unsure how I got here.

The harvest constellations are my favourites, despite the fact that this is when the sky turns for the worst.

An owl hoots out from the night. Something moves, but I can't see anything. Then they are right on top of me. A squad of footsteps pepper the air—heavy men on cobblestone—ricocheting through the streets. Panic pins me to the wall, and then a stench cuts through the air like upturned earth. I hear the rattling of bones; the remains of the slaughtered clinking upon their chests. The same barbarians that skewed my leg with a cold magic; they're here.

I dive across the alleyway to my left, crashing into a stool. I snap off a leg and start swinging, but there are no barbarians here. Just a man and a woman, their mouths silent and open, eyes wide and screaming. The pain in my head, the haze, it twists my mind. There's a ringing of magic in my ear.

The couple backs away as I drop my weapon. A hoarse brook of apologies babbles out of my mouth, and I run off into the night. I need to be away from here. Away from them.

\*

A snorting pig wakes me up the next day. The sow is polite in her curiosity, and I reward her with some scratches until she wanders off. Judging by the fence corner I'm cuddling against, I'm in some poor lad's back acre. My legs burn like I've been running. The old wound is getting worse. Magic does that when it's not killing you. It lies dormant, then sputters to life again like the sparks from a campfire thought long dead. Some ugly druid slung the icy shard into my leg during the final battle of my career. Hell broke open after all the woods held were the hooting of owls. That was the beginning of my end.

Back in town, the streets are filled with children playing and working folk. Nobody seems to see me. They avoid my eyes. They're too good for me now. They were different before I left for war. I wish I had never come



back here. The only thing that hasn't changed is my darling, Martha.

Nearly thirty paces from my father-in-law's house, I see Martha's mother, through the front window. She sees me, and whips her head to the side, talking mighty fast to someone else, keeping her eyes on me like a white crow. I reach for the knob, but the door swings open, blocked by Martha's father, Jerome. He stands there scowling, as if he had stepped in something foul. I see Martha behind him at the kitchen table, clutching her dress. She looks frightened. The feeling doesn't sit right on her face. It's foreign to me now, but something pulls at me somewhere deep. Like, I've seen that face but can't remember when.

Jerome stops me with an open palm, "Ye can't come in, Donnovin. The family has talked, and we've rescinded the offered dowry. You've no steady wages, and I—in my good conscience—can't allow this to go any further."

He says this to me with all that proper tongue of a town official—what a load of shite. I yell for Martha to tell me the truth. I see tears in her eyes. I wave my finger in Jerome's face, reminding him of the vows Martha and I made in front of the Creator's altar at the temple. Priest Marcus was there. I ask him if that means anything to him or the great Queendom my people have built. If it means anything to the blood spilt in the fields, and holy heavens called down to keep the borders intact. To keep ruin from every township.

"I can't disregard your service, Donnovin. But we can't have the family's future built with rotted wood," he sneers, "You must understand."

I feel my knuckles break blood vessels before I know what's happened. Jerome stumbles back with a yelp. Martha flies from her petrified perch, a bird from the nest. Arms open, she runs to catch her father. Surely, she must mean to hold him back. Her tears have gone, and now I wear them, in front of everyone. I don't know how to fix this. Martha yells at me, asking if this is what I wanted, if I'm happy now. She screams for me to leave. Jerome starts cursing like he's

never seen a silver platter in his life. I scam. My body is empty and surging like a storm. All hunger, ache and weariness are gone. The haze in my head returns. The curse that swaps my soul for something ugly.

Hobbling to a stop, I clutch at my scarred leg. The flesh riles with the might of a hundred yanking fish hooks. I flop into the back alley of a flower shop, gasping for breath. Some barrels of soil hide me from passing eyes. A horrible dread, like an angry shark, swims inside my soul. Time is my only friend, and I finally pass into sleep. It is not a peaceful thing.

My eyes open to a sky full of stars. After managing to steal some bread, I find myself behind a building corner, eyeing Martha's house as her family leaves. Jerome's got a right shiner where I hit him. I chuckle. They get down the street a way, and I hobble to the house to sweep 'round the back door. Amongst dozens of small stones, I find what I'm looking for—my old key! Moonlight is dull on the iron handle, and the door clicks open.

**I don't know how to fix this. Martha yells at me, asking if this is what I wanted, if I'm happy now. She screams for me to leave.**

As if I were walking on glass, I find my way to the bedroom Martha and I once shared. Scuttling under the bed, I lift a few floorboards. My old set of armour has a wicked smile to it. I gather the pieces together, and just as I set the floorboards back into place, I hear a creak. Someone shifts their weight just outside the room. I stand up slowly, and it's her, my darling, Martha. Her eyes darting from the armour, to the bed, and then to me.

Any hope that I could change dies in her sapphire eyes. This breaking of trust is too deep. She sees me as a thief, breaking into her home; a liar. A set of armour sold would be plenty to give us a new start. But I couldn't part with it. This moulded steel is the only thing that feels safe. We stand there for a long moment looking



at each other. A full decade of memories crystallising. I wasted it all. I let her go in all the wrong ways. She fought for me, for us, while I wallowed.

"I just came back for my scarf. It's getting chilly now," says Martha.

"Aye, the season's shifting."

"Are you going back to the Order?"

"I pray it's where I belong."

She stiffens. I've wounded her again. How many barbs has she had to withstand? Moonlight pours into the room and paints her in silver. Tears in her eyes twinkle like stars. She centres herself and stands like a longsword. I sulk like a weary sentry's bow.

"I love you still, Donnovin, I do. But these outbursts. You're a storm ready to break at any moment. All the relentless tossing in your sleep," —she bites her lip in anguish— "I have to provide for my family. 'Tis my duty. You must know this. The war changed you, and that's not your fault. But...well, you must know this."

**This steel is the only embrace that feels familiar, like the armour needs me to live. My grief for Martha seeps into every cinch of leather strapping.**

She ripples again. The truth leaks out, but she covers her mouth, stretching her face like dough. She must think herself a widow in the making. I leave my spare key on the bed, and lurch toward her, a cradle of steel between us. I kiss her on the cheek, for the last time, and walk out the back door.

\*

West of the Baron's estate, on the edge of town, there is a lake that looks towards the woods. I do not have to answer for anything here. Tonight, the water is still as a polished shield. I use its reflection to see my messy hair and a haggard beard. I donned my armour on; a simple task for two, but arduous for one. The

Creator's sigil is worn but distinct on the chest plate. This steel is the only embrace that feels familiar, like the armour needs me to live. My grief for Martha seeps into every cinch of leather strapping.

Sitting atop a blown over tree, I stare out at the lake. Snow starts to fall around me, like ash. There is the crash of metal. Screams of men under ambush. I tumble and take refuge behind the log. There's blood on my hands. Or is it mud? I hear magic roar, flesh scorching.

I howl in defiance, in rage. My throat is raw from screaming. Nobody comes for me. The moon drifts on, a silent observer. All I can do is keep my eyes on her until sleep hits me like a punch to the face.

In the grey morning light, I awake shattered. Hours pass before I slink into town to steal more food. Any remains of faith I had drowned in the lake; yet, the chains of faith still clutched at me as I turned the corner to beg for someone to have that very thing. I pray this is my saviour and not my executioner.

"Donnovin! Is that you, my good man?" My old comrade Felix greets me with boisterous surprise.

Creator smite me.

He looks like he's never seen a horrid thing in his bloody life. All that magic missed him while the rest of us were down in the muck. Rangers; so noble, so loved.

"Eagle Eyes, you haven't aged a day," I say, trying to mimic his charm. We embrace like brothers of the Order do. I ask him about his life. His wife is with their second child, and Felix has been given a key recommendation for promotion.

I push down my disdain and broach the subject of advancing my career to my own ambition. I tell him I've kept up my training since being out of deployment. Thought I could find work privateering, but felt it was lacking. He chuckles at me—the prick. I say I'd like to join up with the Order again, and his face falls.

"Donnovin...that's an interesting idea. Last I heard, you spent more time in the drink than



looking for work. True?"

I squirm to say something, but before I can—Felix acts. Faster than I can register, he whips at my bad leg with his sword's scabbard. I gasp at the pain. Sweat breaks out on my forehead, and I'm about to buckle, but I hold fast.

"That was a dirty trick."

"Aye, and I'll pray to the Creator for forgiveness; moreover, criminals are made of dirty tricks." His face settles into stone, and the air is filled with a dread that I am becoming far too familiar with. "Your wounds haven't healed proper. I couldn't, in good conscience, readmit you to the Order nor the town guard. I am sorry, friend. Damn shame what those barbarians did to us."

Did to us?

I try to retort, "Please, Felix. I—I could just watch the training yard! I could get better with the proper medicine like you get."

My armour clings to me like the dead, as Felix shakes his head as slowly as a funeral bell.

I leave, maybe run. In my rage, I decide to snatch a sword from the backside of the grounds.

I trudge through town aimlessly. Not a single soul looks at me. No one handles the sight of grief on a man's face well. Especially a dirty man. I'm too harsh a thing.

\*

The world stops its turning, and I'm walking through the local temple. Like a ghost, I pass through the pews to find the shuffling man my heart wants to show me. His grey robes cling to his arching back as he sweeps the floor. When I'm nearly on top of him, he shows his face, his pleasant smile fading. I've stolen him from his blissful worship.

The hug from Priest Marcus breaks me like he is the Iron Shore and I am the ocean wake. The small man somehow holds all of me. Relief floods in to be burned by hatred.

"I'd ask what troubles you, Donnovin, but I think we both know." He gives a polite smile

that somebody makes when the person they're talking to has bad breath.

"My head, it ain't right, sir; and Martha—" The Priest puts a small, claw-like hand on my shoulder, and I stutter shut, knowing what's next.

"How can the Creator reach you if you don't keep him in your heart? You don't. You drink his world away."

Marcus goes on like this for a while. I'm an unruly child to him. He tells me how my other brothers, with worse afflictions, have surpassed me. Made their lives better. I realise he was never cradling me; I was crushing him.

**The world stops its turning, and I'm walking through the local temple. Like a ghost, I pass through the pews to find the shuffling man my heart wants to show me.**

Approaching Bruno's pub, I hear how lively it is this night. I ignore the itch of wooden splinters in my bloody knuckles and think to ask the bar owner for work. I could keep things clean or learn some brewing. I know I could be of some use. I have to be. As the music from the pub swells, so does my heart. Then the haze grows, and my strength to fight it fails to arrive.

The music twists wickedly in a gust of wind that rushes through the trees but doesn't move the leaves. I feel eyes on me. From the darkness of an alleyway, a growl that could reap a wheat field retches out. It's a broken glass bottle, teeth glinting off the moonlight. I bolt for the woods, past Bruno's.

Trunks screech against my armour until I pop into a small clearing that's nothing but a lake of orange leaves. I wade in, looking for a place to hide. The leaves flow up to my hips, making me slow and loud. I surface on the other side to scurry behind a large oak tree. I draw my stolen sword as my chest heaves like a blacksmith's bellows.

Hours pass, but the beast doesn't show. The silence of the forest is the loudest thing I've ever



heard. Nothing seems to stir, but I know the creature must be out there. My fear is boiling, and I am the tea kettle ready to scream.

Scanning over the clearing, there is a sudden ripple of movement. The quiet crackle of leaves shatters the silence. Moonlight spears into the forest in pale, stretching shafts. The shadows of tree trunks are like prison bars. There's nothing but the cold, and leaves and—

Across the clearing, a single alabaster face dips out from the tarry night, like a mermaid emerging from dark water. In between two birch trees, a head presses out past the large, curled shavings of bark. The curls wrap themselves tightly against their trunks, cowering away from the Witch.

She turns her floating face from side to side, searching for something. The face dips back into pitch black shadows. I wait in frozen agony for something to happen. Some notion of a spell already cast.

**"They don't understand, oathbreaker. They cannot see the darkness your heart holds. You cannot root it out alone nor under empty sky..."**

Not a pike's length away from me, she reveals her face as if she swam through the shadows. Not a step upon the earth in a hundred years. Or perhaps her bond with the land is far greater than I'll ever understand, keeping her a secret. I clatter away in terror like an upturned cart of cooking pots and point my sword.

A low flute blooms from her throat, "You look like you've seen a shadow, warrior." She ignores my sword and looks into my eyes. "Tell me, are you afraid of the dark?"

I begin to open my mouth, but her eyes quickly narrow, stealing my tongue.

"Ooouuuu," she giggles like a hundred wind chimes underwater. The sound inspires a queasy feeling until her porcelain arm, like a spider's leg, stretches out from the dark to cover her blue

painted lips. Her hand is stained with dark, dried blood.

"An oathbreaker," she whispers.

My eyes flash to my chest to see the Creator's sigil besmirched in blood.

"Your Creator couldn't hear your prayers anymore? Or maybe he's been choosing not to listen."

Air finally pulls past my tongue. "You ain't my enemy, dear Witch. The foul creature that chased me here is."

"You do not see, warrior. Your shadow has fled, but wishes to replace you. Do you not have companions to call for aid?" She croons.

The witch sheds their mischievous grin for sorrow. Her voice gets close, like a mother comforting her child.

"They don't understand, oathbreaker. They cannot see the darkness your heart holds. You cannot root it out alone nor under empty sky. The villagers forget their own in their new ways. They've forgotten how to take care of those that fight for them—"

An owl hoots out from the night. The witch's face contorts in confusion, hearing the same thing I do. Then her sorrow is killed by fear. Her eyes go wide like a fish as they are sucked away into the void of night; a drowning sailor into a dark sea. A sound like the shattering of glass scars my ears. I hear the howls of battle. A clattering of wind chimes in a storm cries out, "Run!"

I shuffle blindly along the edge of the clearing. The moon has fled. A roar of wind charges through the trees. In my panic, I trip over an exposed tree root. I try to keep upright, but the earth pulls me down to stumble into the clearing until my footing finds nothing but empty air. Instinct kicks in, and I jerk wildly away. A gale rushes through the forest, making a wave of orange leaves like the ocean tide. It hits me hard. My sword soars into the air as I collapse under the force. There is nothing to see, only wet decay to smell as the leaves cling to my face like thin, dripping hands of death.

Moments pass in the still. My senses crawl

back, and my hands find flat, cool stone. I press myself up out into clear air. There's a pain in my side, and warm blood sprinkles the ground. Moonlight has returned, but it's shaken and cracked. Snow is falling. A man stands before me, white flakes gathering on his pitch black shoulders. It is my shadow.

Panic dies, and cold fear holds on like death. The Shadow readies to fight as a dark sword is pulled and then thrust at my heart. I roll to the side, my armour squeaking and scratching on stone. My hand finds my sword. I feel magic in it now. Some miracle thrums in its pommel. The Shadow lets out a roar like a battered pipe organ.

I know in this moment I have not been abandoned. I've been given a gift. A first and final strike. Heat rises, and snow melts. My grip is assured. My body remembers what I've been trained to do.

In and out of the moonbeams, I begin my advance. The Shadow now on the back foot, slashing at me. I've become a painter; my sword the brush that hums in my hand. The Shadow jumps back; I feint to the left and call the light. The heavens open. Like a serpent of coiled fire, lightning follows my swing to skewer and scorch the Shadow. With a final scream, the evil thing withers in smoke and melts onto the ground.

"Witch of the Woods!" I shout, "Aye, I ain't afraid of the dark!"

The night is still as coal in the hills. I hear a prayer on the tongue of my heart. There is still a place for me in this world. I let out a sigh that no one could hear but the smouldering Shadow at my feet.

That's when it strikes.

I hear my breath hiss from the hole pierced into my chest. The Shadow's last thrust punctures my heart and lung, then dissolves and is gone. All I can do is tumble away, the snow swirling around me, down to the base of an oak tree. Its warty knots prop me up like a lover's arms.

I cry in anger. The dream danced before me, another painting that never was. I was light-

struck—blessed. The Order couldn't deny me now; the evidence clear upon my sword. Martha would care again. Never having to thief for any scraps of sour food. Cold would never touch me. To see Priest Marcus choke on the sheer idea. Maybe he'd faint at the sight. That's what breaks me. I laugh, but it's ragged, my chest spitting blood upon itself.

The witch is here now, holding my hand. She's bruised, but still the figure of a darling spring day. She kisses my forehead and tells me sweet, comforting things. She'll make sure that I am found and remembered. Far too late.

I cry again, but not out of fear. I did something honest and good. Maybe it was selfish survival, but I was no coward.

I'm spilling out in more ways than one. I don't know how long I lay here, but the witch stays by my side. Realisation kisses me on the crown of my head, and a warmth trickles in everywhere. I am no longer cold.

\*



#### About the author:

Phil Aaron is a Portland, OR based writer and avid Dnd player. In an attempt to make sense of life's endless conundrums and suffering he decides to spend a lot of his time trying to write down the human experience--which is a very easy thing to do. He hopes that Professor Keating would be proud of him in his own pursuit at sucking the marrow from the bone.

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# SHADOW STITCHER

BY LAUREN KELLEY

Most people don't notice when their shadow begins to loosen. It usually starts at the heel, a gentle lag between the body and the dark shape that should follow. Half a second stretches to a full second. Then the shadow begins to hesitate, as if contemplating a different life on the floor. By the time someone brings it to me, it has usually slipped free entirely, folded like a discarded coat.

The first thing I learned about shadows is that people lie about when they noticed the problem.

The teenage boy said it was recent. His shadow staining the wall said otherwise.

The shop is packed with candles and bare bulbs. Wax puddles mark where older candles burned into the wood. Mirrors line one wall—full-length mirrors that reach to the ceiling, a pile of small compact mirrors, and convex distortion mirrors. No angle left unaccounted for. It crept

into the nooks of the room, hiding where the candlelight didn't reach. I caught it as it tried to slip between the couch cushions.

The first stitch holds the shadow in place. The second secures it to the boy. I stitch thick lines, turning him slowly under the lamps to check every angle. His shadow fought the needle, trying to hide with each turn. I caught it and tightened the stitch. They both flinched at the tug.

The floor is covered with chalk outlines layered like fossils. Some stains refuse to be cleaned. Low stools and poufs are set up for clients during services.

A businessman came to see me midweek, judging by the cut of his suit. He had a shadow that refused to stand upright. The shadow held the same curl in the spine. It wasn't fully detached yet. A second tool is used here—a thick needle stitched up the spine.

The shadow ended taller than the man.

Mariette said electric light lies. I didn't believe her until I saw a shadow stitch itself crooked under a fluorescent bulb. I remember the last day of my apprenticeship. Mariette walked



through the shop, checking all the lights and erasing any chalk lines she could find. I asked if she needed help, and she said no. She left her ledger after flipping through it one last time. It was filled with notes about previous clients. She left me with one more thing.

"A good stitcher never watches their own shadow while working."

The shop is situated above another business. I have my own set of stairs outside that lead up to my shop, as well as an internal staircase that goes down to the lower one.

Some stitches take minutes.

Others take hours. A small complimentary drink-and-snack station sits in the corner. No one touches it. Clients tend to avoid looking while they're here.

Most arrive feeling embarrassed—they stare at the floor instead. In and out—a quick transaction. The shadows stain the room the most. Residue from shadows that resist repair.

Too many of them do.

Mariette once said, "Shadows remember where they almost lived."

**She left her ledger after flipping through it one last time. It was filled with notes about previous clients. She left me with one more thing.**

My magnifier slips from my hand. A crack runs through the lens. I light the candles, chasing hidden shadows out of the corners. Morning light barely reaches the shop windows. The eyeglass shop isn't open yet, but Sylar and I get along well. My business is right above hers. Sylar knew Mariette first. Somewhere along the way, she decided to keep me too.

I knock before entering.

"Sylar?" I call out.

She pops up behind a shelf displaying sunglasses.

"What's up, Mara?"

"Do you have a magnifier? Mine broke."

She laughs. "I keep extras just for you," she

says and rummages through a drawer and pulls one out, tossing it to me. I barely catch it.

"Watch it!" I place a hand over my heart.

"You're lucky I caught that."

Sylar smiles. "But you did."

I dig in my pocket and pull out a crumpled pile of bills.

She waves me off. "Don't worry about it."

I baulk. "These aren't cheap."

"If I ever need shadow work, you'll just owe me one."

"Really, you don't have to—"

"Please. It's a favour for a friend."

I smile and give her a hug.

"Best of friends."

"Speaking of," she stops me as I reach the stairs. "I think I saw a loose shadow in the shop. I can't be sure, but through the mirrors I swear I have."

"Loose shadows? I'll look into it." I make the mental note but file it low on the priority list. Loose shadows aren't supposed to happen.

"Will you?" she asks, quieter this time. A plea that turns me toward her.

"I know what I saw," she continues.

I believe her, but I know that people who don't work with shadows don't understand how they function. Loose shadows are never loose; they're lost. Detached from their owners, decay begins in minutes. They flatten, thin, and dissipate.

Sylar frowns as she reads my face. "You don't seem to care."

"No, I do." I shake my head. "I just don't know what to do about it without seeing it or knowing it." I reach for some forgotten lesson, a warning buried beneath six years of apprenticeship. I can't remember Mariette ever mentioning anything like it. "Listen. I hear you. I know you saw something. I just can't give you a definitive answer on what it could be."

"Mariette would have looked into it."

The air hangs between us. The months since Mariette was gone had left everyone looking at me as though experience could be inherited. Her home sat vacant. Her favourite places

stayed empty. After a while, people stopped expecting her to come back.

"I'm doing my best." My voice is more clipped than I intended.

I take the stairs up two at a time, the magnifying glass clutched safely to my chest. The warm bubble of the gift lifts me over my threshold while the weight of Sylar's words keeps my feet on the floor.

I can't shake our conversation. Between dusting shelves and pretending to organise receipts, I catch myself leafing through Mariette's old references.

Nothing mentions a shadow staying loose.

No clients come in the first hour.

The second brings a mother and child. The mother lost her shadow after the birth of her child.

This shadow doesn't resist.

The weight attached to each pull is heavier than most. It is dense and loose, almost losing shape.

I use overhead white light to make sure I don't miss any seams. I tighten a few that have already loosened.

The baby starts crying.

"Here, let me," I say, snipping the final thread.

Gently, I take the baby from her. Like her shadow, it doesn't resist. The baby and shadow weigh the same. I don't remark on it. I rock the baby as the mother puts on her coat.

"Thank you," she says, taking back the now-sleeping baby.

"Come back for anything, yeah?" I say from the top of the stairs.

She nods with a smile.

\*

When I go to add to my ledger, a large manila envelope completely covers it. There is no address attached, only my name in bold letters:

MARA IONESCU.

Sylar said she'd seen a loose shadow in the

mirrors downstairs. I turn the envelope over again, studying the letters.

The handwriting feels familiar, like an old scar. I stare at the envelope for a long moment before I tentatively step toward it. I'm positive it wasn't there earlier. The post doesn't come until around five. He leaves deliveries downstairs anyway.

I move around it. I clean the floor. Adjust the lights. I even straighten the doormat.

The handwriting drags something old to the surface. If I leave it unopened, it remains impossible.

The moment I touch it, it becomes real. I keep expecting the envelope to disappear if I don't look directly at it. My fingers slide underneath, and the package moves. Like thick liquid, it rolls in my hands.

The light shifts.

The candles flicker as if a breeze has come through the closed window.

It spills out slowly, like dark water pouring across the floor. The boards drink the darkness without protest.

**The edges blur when the light shifts, yet the centre remains dark and stable, as though some invisible structure keeps it from collapsing.**

A dark shadow with a blurred outline.

Detached shadows shrink from light. Flatten against whatever will hold them.

Look for the shape they once belonged to. Left alone long enough, they thin to a smear. This one does neither.

It doesn't flee the light. It doesn't cling to the floorboards. It drifts slowly along the wood grain, maintaining the same vague outline no matter where the candles flicker.

When I reach toward it, the shadow shifts back just enough to stay out of reach.

Not fear.

Avoidance.

That alone is wrong.

Most don't last the day. Shape goes first. Then density. This one holds together. The

edges blur when the light shifts, yet the centre remains dark and stable, as though some invisible structure keeps it from collapsing. I lean closer.

For a moment, the shadow rises slightly from the floor. Not fully lifting, just enough that the edge curls upward like the lip of a wave. It settles when I pull my hand away. Not fading. Waiting.

I try to approach it, but it moves away from me at the same pace.

I open Mariette's ledger and search for anything on loose shadows with no body attached. The first entry is from a decade ago.

### Ledger Entry I

**Client: Henrik L.**

**Occupation: Dockworker**

*Shadow separation started at the spine instead of the heel.*

*The client reported a persistent feeling of "being watched from below."*

*The delay between intent and shadow response was around two seconds.*

*Shadow initially resisted stitching at the first anchor point. Texture heavier than expected. Almost sticky.*

*Once secured, the shadow behaved normally.*

*Follow-up appointment scheduled.*

*The client did not return.*

**During examination, the shadow moved when the client thought about moving, not when she physically moved.**

At the bottom of the page is a sticky note with follow-up information:

*Returned to the client's residence three days later.*

*Shadow present.*

*But it did not match the angle of his body when he stood.*

*Observation likely due to poor lighting. The alignment was wrong.*

I flip to a more recent entry, less than five years old.

### Ledger Entry II

**Client: Unnamed / refused documentation**

*The woman arrived near closing with a detached shadow contained in a cloth bundle. Shadow extremely stable despite the client's claim that separation occurred two weeks prior.*

*Violation of the standard decay window.*

*During examination, the shadow moved when the client thought about moving, not when she physically moved.*

*When questioned, the client became distressed and asked whether shadows could leave permanently.*

*Advised her this was impossible. Repair completed successfully.*

The page ends with a faint scratch of ink. At the bottom corner, Mariette has written:

*Second occurrence this year. Unlikely coincidence.*

The words are imprinted into the page. That sounds impossible.

Two weeks?

Most shadows don't survive a day without their body.

I flip to an entry written just a few days before Mariette left. Her knobby knuckles shook as she wrote the page. She'd grown quieter in those last weeks, sitting more often between stitches. Her work never slowed. We closed the shop together that evening.

When I came in the next morning, she was gone.

Sylar asked after her, and I didn't know what to say.

### Ledger Entry III

**Client: —**

*Shadow arrived detached but intact.*

*Unusual density.*

*Edges remained sharply defined without an anchor.*

*Shadow did not resist examination. Instead, it*



*followed my movements. Testing revealed inconsistent standard behaviour. Shadow aligned with my intention. Not client's—*

The rest of the page stops abruptly. The final words trail into an unfinished line:

*Possible explanation—*

The dash drags down.

The journal grows heavier the longer I stare at the unfinished page.

Nothing in here made sense. I wasn't told anything like this had happened before. I would have experienced something during my apprenticeship.

In those six years, I saw so much.

\*

Early in my apprenticeship, Mariette only let me watch from a distance. A small purple pouf became my note-taking station. The thick, aged paper was coarse in my hand, soaking up the ink like a desert cactus after the first rain of the year.

Mariette worked a few feet away while the woman stood eerily still beneath the workshop candles.

The woman's shadow lay stretched across the floor between us.

The candlelight flickered, the shadow reaching beyond its borders.

I reached for it without much thought. It reached for me, too, stretching—

Mariette slapped my hand away.

I looked up at her, eyebrows pinched together in shock. How did she get over here so fast?

"Don't touch a working shadow," she said and went back to work.

I went back to my notes.

My hand shook as I wrote.

Pressure broke through the page.

I had so much to learn. I still do.

Never detached shadows.

\*

I watch how the candles make the shadow thin at the seams. I turn on the bright lights and move toward the mirror wall.

There.

Just there.

I'm not sure I saw anything. I pass the mirrors again. My own shadow lags behind me. I take a few steps, and it hesitates before catching up. Sometimes, it moves before I do.

I blow out all the candles.

Turn off the lamps.

Close the blinds on the windows.

The brightest light hangs from the ceiling.

I stand directly beneath it and switch it on.

I take inventory of the room—chairs, mirror, candles. Everything that my shop should hold.

**Mariette worked a few feet away while the woman stood eerily still beneath the workshop candles.**

I look down.

Two shadows appear.

One is attached, as it should be.

The other rises upright beside me.

It doesn't match my stance. It crooks, staggering as it moves.

Eyeless, it watches me.

Mariette's advice threads through my mind: Don't look at your own shadow.

Shadows leave.

Some get replaced by something else.

The ledger entries line up in my mind, one after the other.

Not records, warnings.

The dockworker.

The woman with the cloth bundle.

Mariette's unfinished page.

I had been repairing my replacement shadow. Only now do I wonder what it replaced.

I pick up the loose shadow from the floor.

It settles perfectly in my hands. It gathers between my fingers like cool smoke.

We never knew why Mariette disappeared.

But I think I know why she never finished the page.

The shadow at my heel twitches.  
For the first time in years, it hesitates.  
Then it pulls away, just enough to begin.

\*

**About the author:**

Lauren Kelley is a writer from Minnesota whose work explores thresholds, memory, and the body. Her work is forthcoming in Foglifter Press, Inglenook Literary Magazine, and Ilanot Review, and has appeared in Panorama Literary Journal, Third Wednesday, and Write Pittsburgh. She lives with her husband and a small constellation of animals.



# RASPUTIN'S CURSE

BY SUNIL KUMAR

## The Ipatiev House

**They think I'm dead. Maybe I am.**

Somewhere above me, the snow howls like wolves. I haven't seen the sun in twelve days. My fingernails are black. My lungs rattle when I breathe. There's a crack in the stone wall that weeps in the cold, and I press my eye to it, watching the world forget me. A shadow of oblivion.

Mama used to hum when she brushed my hair. Nastya, Anastasia. She stopped the day Father invited that mad monk into our home: Rasputin, with his rotting teeth and eyes that glowed like furnace embers. He told her; we were all going to die.

"The end begins in a cellar, not a basement," he whispered. "But one will linger."

I think he meant me. I still hear them at night — the others. Olga screaming. Tatiana's heels scraping the floor. Maria shrieking like an animal being slaughtered—bullets like pulverising hammers. Bayonets grunting through flesh. Blood gurgling, churning, the ghosts of history and a dynasty dying. Grand duchesses skewered like meat. Three hundred years of visceral Romanov history— my family's saga stamped out.

And Father. God forgive him. Still kneeling as if prayer could stop revolution. Nikolai Alexandrovich Romanov. Tsar Nicholas II, the last sovereign. Emperor of the largest country the world has ever known. Imperial Russia. They dumped us like stray dogs with bubonic plague. But I... I crawled through the ash chute, blood in my mouth and candle wax in my hair. Sometimes I think I died there. Or maybe I didn't. I also believe that Khlysty charlatan Rasputin is not dead either. I saw his body floating in the river. I think it got up and smiled.



Yekaterinburg, our bleak jail, this city of the devil, freezes. But something still burns beneath it.

\*

The cellar is quiet tonight. No footsteps from above, no bottles clinking in the guards' room. Only the breathing of the stone: slow, cold, and damp.

I've always hated silence. Mama said I was born talking, and Aunt Olga called me Shvybzik; her merry little one. I was the youngest - the Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna.

Even now, I can't stop whispering to the shadows. I tell them jokes and play guessing games.

"Which is better?" I ask, "A crown made of gold or one made of bones?"

They never answer, but sometimes they move. The silence lasts too long. Then, faintly, the sound of teeth clicking. Not mine.

Yekaterinburg, our bleak jail, this city of the devil, freezes. But something still burns beneath it.

**Rasputin steps through the dark as if it's a curtain, his beard dripping river water. His eyes glow like stove coals on a winter night. Dark and endless.**

\*

I laugh anyway, the wild, fractured kind of laugh Papa used to scold. My voice bounces back at me, but on the third echo, it's no longer my voice. It's lower. Wetter.

Alexei would laugh; my poor, breakable brother. The hope of Russia, everybody called him; a boy who could not even climb stairs without bruising like a plum.

Haemophilia, the blood disease, was no illness but an omen, a slow knife slipped into

the heart of the empire. It bled the Romanovs long before the bullets came. Sometimes I used to tell him stories in which he was a girl, so no one would care if he lived or died.

He liked those, but Papa didn't. I wish I had been born a boy. I would have saved everybody better than that wimp Alexei ever could have. I know it sounds cruel, but that's the truth. Mama, Papa, the Romanovs, the greatest empire the world has ever seen. We would rule forever.

The shadows stir tonight. I know why. The wall by the coal bin is sweating again, like it does before he comes.

I smell him first: something sweet gone sour, like wet wool, and the metallic sweetness of blood. Rasputin steps through the dark as if it's a curtain, his beard dripping river water. His eyes glow like stove coals on a winter night. Dark and endless.

"You kept us laughing, little one," he says. "Now you'll keep us company."

I laugh again; the feral laugh Papa hated, the one I used to wake the palace with. Merry, gay, full of life, everybody said. But in the cellar, it sounds different. It sounds like someone or something else is laughing with me. The candle's flame is a needle now, trembling on the wick. Rasputin leans in, and the shadows cling to him like they're afraid to be left behind.

"Let's play," he says, kneeling so his wet beard almost brushes my hands. His eyes don't blink. "First game: Tell me what I whispered to your mother."

I want to say nothing, but the words leak out of me like steam: that you could save Alexei, the Tsarevich. That your hands on him, on his skin, could seal the bleeding. That God spoke to you in dreams, and you were his knife and balm both. Our Lord sent you to save Russia from eternal damnation.

"Good," he says. "Second game: tell me where I put my hands."

My stomach tightens. He placed his hands on Mama's wrists in the chapel, fingers pressing her shoulders when she wept, his thumb brushing the edge of her lips. His hands glided under the table, touching the hem of her gown;

his smile slow and rotten as the governess looked away.

His hands were where they should never have been — with my sisters, too. Olga stayed silent. Maria trembling. Dirty and suggestive songs made by wagging tongues— Rasputin, Rasputin, seducer of the Russian queen. Heaven knows where he's been.

The cellar tilts. The walls ripple. Stones behind him turn into our home, the Alexander Palace in St. Petersburg — chandeliers dripping gold, courtiers whispering like cornered rats.

Beyond the palace gates, Russia burns: peasants queuing for bread, soldiers turning rifles on their officers. Serfs and the bourgeoisie — that weighty French word for people like us, the elite and the privileged. I had heard of the German Marx, who died in London, and his present-day protégé, the peasant Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, who wanted to exterminate us.

Rasputin opens his mouth, and the room fills with chanting, those low, inhuman syllables. The Khlysts' secret prayers, the kind he said could peel the soul from the body. The supposed orgies and the ecstasies. I see his death as they told it: poisoned, surrounded, shot, drowned. Yet here he is, wet from the river, grinning as if the bullets were kisses.

"Third game," he says, his voice so close I can feel the heat of it in my ear. "Tell me who will rule when all of Russia is ash."

I want to say no one. I want to say the snow will bury everything. But something inside me; something not me, says, "I will."

His laughter shakes the candle into darkness.

"Mother Russia does not belong to you, young lady. Never will." His mouth opened wide, a gaping hole that stretched to infinity.

The cellar seldom sleeps. Some nights, it hums like a hive, each brick buzzing with things it cannot contain. Another night. Again, that hideous priest, the apparition who is my constant companion.

Rasputin stands in the corner, his wet beard dripping onto the floor, and the stones behind him become the staircase of the Ipatiev House.

I smell gun oil and sweat. I hear Dr Botkin's voice, gentle but taut, telling us to dress; quickly now, your Majesties, we must leave the city.

But the air in the vision is heavy. Even my brother Alexei senses it, his face pale, his breath catching. Mama asks for chairs; for herself, for him. The rest of us stand. We are statues pretending not to tremble.

Double doors open. Yakov Yurovsky enters first, his boots leaving wet prints on the floor. Behind him: men with pistols, eyes dull as lead. I know their names now, though I never did then: Medvedev, Ermakov, Vaganov. Three others hang back, faces pale. They will not shoot. I envy them.

**Even my brother Alexei senses it, his face pale, his breath catching. Mama asks for chairs; for herself, for him. The rest of us stand.**

Yurovsky says something about relatives, about a failed rescue, about the Soviets being obliged to shoot us all. After Papa abdicated, the civil war grew stronger. The word 'obliged' makes my stomach twist.

And then—the fire.

It's not gunfire at first, but a blinding storm of light. The smell of burnt wool and skin. Women's bodies jerking as if pulled by unseen strings. The sound of bullets flattening against hidden diamonds, a strange, chiming tink-tink under the screams. Twenty minutes, maybe more. It feels like years.

Rasputin watches it all with the patience of a saint or a butcher. When the last breath rattles out, he turns to me.

"They all went quickly, Shvybzik. My dear Anastasia," he says, his voice too warm. "But you? You were clever. You crawled. You hid. And now you see how the world ends."

The vision fades. The cellar is just a cellar again: cold stone, a candle stub, my breath in the dark. But the smell of gun oil lingers. And somewhere, far above me, I still hear the faint tink-tink of diamonds deflecting bullets.

\*

Time has no meaning here, yet nothingness has a shape: the beating pulse of darkness. Another day, the walls peel open. Not crumbling, but unfurling, as flesh pulled back to reveal bone. Rasputin steps into the centre, floating with arms out, and suddenly the cellar is as vast as a cathedral. Candles spiral up into darkness, a macabre dancing symphony. A black mass of despair. The air smells of wet fur, incense, and blood.

"Come, Shvybzik," he says, and I follow, though my feet feel nailed to the floor.

Christ hangs on the cross above us, but His eyes are open, following Rasputin. His mouth moves, whispering in a tongue I don't know but somehow understand: The kingdoms of this world are mine to give.

The Khlysts circle below him, naked, writhing limbs, bare feet stamping, robes whipping the air. Their chanting is a hammer against my frail ribs: suffering is ecstasy. Pain is the truth. Their shadows twist into forms, not human—horned things, bird-headed things, things that bend backwards in impossible shapes. Lucifer's minions, I think.

**The Khlysts circle below him, naked, writhing limbs, bare feet stamping, robes whipping the air.**

It feels like the Adagio Lamentoso from Adrian Tchaikovsky's Symphony No.6, the Pathétique. Papa used to listen to that for hours. Rasputin takes my hand, and we are suddenly in the snow outside Yekaterinburg, the night of our death. The closing curtain of our bittersweet tale. Red sky over black ice. Behind us, the Romanov crest, my family emblem, burns like paper.

Ahead, Russia's history stretched out like a road: Catherine the Great, laughing in silk sheets, lovers tangled in her legs, while peasants

starve. Shiny black hair, diamond necklaces, and a huge corset on her pale, corpulent body. The kiss of death sings the lips of her lovers. She then sits on a throne of skulls, feeding her shrieking paramours to an endless pit. Serfs breaking under whips, fields of wheat bending to the wind that tastes of iron.

Emperors in gold halls, feasting while cholera rots the villages. Another one of my ancestors, Peter, declares his intention to make Russia the greatest nation in the world. Endless balls, mindless dancing, and grinding poverty. Let them eat worms. Soldiers bayoneting their own, white against red, red against white, the snow sucking it all down.

The snow lifts, and we are in India. Gandhi, barefoot in a loincloth, ribs like prison bars. Famished crowds wail in pain, hollow-eyed, ruthless and domineering soldiers with torches setting people on fire. The smell of burning grain.

Tolstoy dressed in white, but his face drips wax. "Freedom without virtue is another chain," he says, as people collapse into ash.

Africa. A plain of skulls under a sky of flies. Regal lions gorging on flesh. Tribal women in bright cloth lifted by their shadows. Floating in la-la land. Heaving bosoms and twerking bums swaying in a voodoo trance. Children with one hand and one foot severed, their eyes alive with a silence louder than screams.

Rasputin lifts a warm skull and whispers, "We fed them God and took their hands."

Mexico. The crucifix is a human spine. Priests in gold masks pour molten silver into kneeling mouths. China, a dragon with gouged eyes, breathes hellfire. The last emperor, Puyi, kicks and screams as demonic, impassive guards with snake-like heads drag him to a damp, soulless prison.

Then—trains, factories, prison camps.

And after that — nothing human. An infinite, endless abyss.

I see cities without light, screens glowing in faces like skulls. Glass towers over empty streets. A silence worse than gunfire. A nihilistic void.



"You see?" Rasputin's voice is velvet over stone. "Our redeemer was a fool. Misled. He would save men from themselves. Die for our sins. But men are ravenous wolves, and women are dirty whores. The Khlysts knew the truth. Flesh must be eviscerated to free the soul."

I want to pull my hand away, but I can't. His grip is the gravity of the world.

"You will live, Shvybzik. And you will remember. Float in this ethereal void of existence. You will walk through the centuries with their blood under your nails. Transform into history's most enduring myths. Ignorant fools will build a church here. In the end, you will reveal the truth: Russia never died. She put on another mask. Pulcinella, the jester."

Behind him, our noble saviour Christ smiles, and his teeth are black and rotten. Splotches form as blood drips from gigantic eyes. I wrench my hand. But it isn't a hand anymore. It's a knot of hair, bone, and Iset riverweed.

The vision rips like cloth. I'm back on my knees, crawling in the cellar. The stone is wet. Something is dripping onto my shoulder; not water. Thick. Warm.

The silence is wrong. Above me, a single bootstep. Then another. Slow. Measured.

I press against the wall. My fingers touch a shard of glass; no, diamond: slick with the same warm liquid dripping from the ceiling.

The steps stop at the door. A voice snakes through the crack. Shvybzik...

It's Alexei's voice, and Rasputin's, and my own, all speaking together. A warm drip from the ceiling lands on my cheek. The door opens. An obscure figure fills the frame, eyes burning like coals in a skull with no skin. It smiles, no smirks; Baba Yaga, gender neutral.

"Time to go," it says. And the words stink of river water.

I rise, but I can't feel my legs. My feet leave no sound on the stone.

Behind us, the candle goes out, and the dark doesn't stop at the cellar walls. It keeps coming.

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#### About the author:

Sunil Kumar comes from a life stitched together by ships, classrooms, airports, bus stops, as well as railway platforms, and an unreasonable number of books. Growing up in Bombay before it became Mumbai, he learned early that cities have memories, gods have a devious sense of humour, and people rarely say what they mean; but always reveal it anyway. His writing spans fiction, memoir, and speculative thought, exploring themes of love, loss, myth, time, and the quiet violence of everyday life. He is interested in a passing stranger as he is in ancient ideas, and he enjoys placing them in the same frame to see what intrigues and what survives. He writes not to explain the world, but to sit with its contradictions seriously, playfully, and sometimes dangerously close to the truth. If a piece lingers after you've finished reading it, he considers that a successful conversation and love's labour consummated.



# THE STRANGLER IN SEONEE

BY SHREYAS ADHIKARI

Dawn had broken over Seonee when Ramoo Chowdhry produced an aromatic wad of paan<sup>1</sup> from his breast pocket and popped it into his mouth. A travelling paan seller had sold it to him earlier that morning with grand claims of it being the fabled stuff of Benares. As the sharp, sweet juices stung his mouth, the old constable decided his coins had been well spent.

"Incredible!" he exclaimed. "Magical!"

Another sentry sat cross-legged against a pillar behind him, humming a bawdy song from his native village. At six feet five, with shoulders as broad as beams, Pooran Rai looked capable of wrestling bears. For the moment, however, he was occupied with mending a boot. The Burra Sahib<sup>2</sup> wanted it done before the evening inspection.

"What do you think, Pooran?" Ramoo asked through a mouthful of paan. "Will Applegarth Sahib increase our salary by three annas<sup>3</sup> a month?"

"Three annas is a drunkard's dream. Methinks it'll be half. Not enough for men who risk their lives for the Company, eh?" Pooran grinned, widening a lace hole with a bodkin.

Ramoo nodded. At home waited an unmarried daughter with a heavy dowry ahead of her and a wife whose lungs had long been failing. Stroking his beard, he resolved to beg his superior for a few days' leave to spend with his family.

"Aiee, you speak as if you leap among bandits every day with a naked scimitar! The last raid we joined Raheem Khan on was three months ago. And that too against illicit distillers."

"Scum of the earth," Pooran snorted. "They ruin good liquor, then thirsty penitents like us have to visit disreputable holes for an honest drink."

Both men laughed.

Then Ramoo's gaze drifted towards the other two constables, who sat apart in a shaded corner. New arrivals from Jubbulpore were sent to bolster Applegarth's campaign against the thuggee<sup>4</sup>. They kept to themselves at all times, lean and haggard, forever tugging at their red coats and handling their rifles with awkward hands.

"What about you?" Ramoo called out to them. "Many adventures in Jubbulpore?"

The constable with the scar down his cheek looked at him for a long moment.

Pooran resumed lacing the boot and told Ramoo, "Man must find adventure where he can. We are the Company's hounds. And a hound bites, whether the victim is a dacoit or a moonshine seller."

Ramoo Chowdhry was about to comment on the young man's wit when he saw something strange. About ten paces ahead of their post, a yellow light suddenly appeared amid the thick winter fog. He immediately hissed an alarm and grabbed his rifle from where it lay propped against his leg. The light swayed unsteadily, as though held by a drunkard, creating a bar of amber through the grey murk.

As the knot of surprised constables watched, a dark figure eventually materialised behind the light. It was a man, they realised. A man tottering and teetering along the pucca<sup>5</sup> road. He held an oil lantern in one hand.

**The man had no shoes. His feet dripped red. Pooran Rai set the boot aside and held up a hand to stop Ramoo Chowdhry. He stood up and went directly to block the stranger.**

Ramoo Chowdhry raised the rifle to his shoulder and levelled the barrel at the newcomer. "Halt!" he roared. "Who goes there?"

The man stopped.

In the sharp light spilling from the lantern, they saw that he was gravely injured. His long black locks were matted with blood, and a flap

of skin hung from one side of his face. Bruises mottled his knees and elbows as though he had been dragged behind a galloping horse for miles. Patches of red marred his ragged clothes. The man had no shoes. His feet dripped red.

Pooran Rai set the boot aside and held up a hand to stop Ramoo Chowdhry. He stood up and went directly to block the stranger. The wounded man stopped and looked up slowly at the constable's earnest face, on which he must have gleaned some trace of compassion.

"What is your name?" Pooran Rai asked, his tone gentle and soft.

There was no reply.

On that cold, dreary morning, a raven suddenly croaked and took flight from the branches of a nearby Gulmohar. The two sentries glanced at each other. This could very well be the victim of a bandit attack. The thickly wooded and hilly country around Seonee teemed with rogues of every stripe. Perhaps some of them had caught this poor fellow unawares and beaten him to within an inch of his life.

The standard procedure was to take the wounded man to the nearest hospital, two miles away. But the events were probably still fresh in the man's mind, and the Burra Sahib would want a statement first. The Rajah of Nagpur, in tandem with the insufferable Englishmen, had roused his militia to scour the forests and end the menace preying upon his trade routes. Every scrap of information was a gain.

Ramoo Chowdhry scrutinised the man's face. Then he held his rifle at the ready and slowly lifted the man's chin.

The man's eyes were two abyssal pits of pitch darkness. Though he could not explain the feeling of staring into them at that moment, Ramoo Chowdhry felt something akin to a sliver of ice brushing down his spine. As though Yama himself had come to lay cold, a pair of clammy hands upon his soul!

"Tell me your name," the constable said.

The man licked the blood from his split lips. "Bheriya. I am called Bheriya," he said.

Inspector Lawrence Applegarth was a very fastidious man. He did not believe in the newfangled nonsense of fighting three wars upon four fronts. If the brass wanted him to solve the Umballa Murders, he would do so until the villain was caught. If it was to provide security for the resident during his less respectable excursions, so be it. But he absolutely refused to handle both problems at once. Let alone a third. So, when Ramoo Chowdhry crashed through the door of his office, turban askew and whiskers in disarray, it was all Applegarth could do to restrain a barked curse.

The constable was huffing like a greyhound at the end of its race. Applegarth set aside a sheaf of papers distractedly and glared at him.

"What is it, for God's sake?" he asked.

"Sir, you must come to the gates immediately!"

Applegarth leaned back with a frown and breathed deeply. The natives were forever making mountains out of molehills. In Cawnpore, he had once been summoned to shoot a maddened bull that had eaten the Datura fruit. The villagers, however, described it as though a demon had emerged from the bowels of hell.

"Why? Has Mrs Fanshaw lost her bulldog again?" he asked wryly. "Tell her we cannot spare men to look for it now."

Ramoo Chowdhry hesitated. "It is Bheriya, Sir...Bheriya is at the gates."

In a trice, Applegarth snatched up the heavy cavalry sabre from his military days, thrust the regulation pistol into the holster at his side, and rushed out from the office.

The entire thanah<sup>6</sup> was in an uproar. Two other constables had emerged from their bunks to join the crowd. A sweeper woman and a chuprassi<sup>7</sup> added their own wild theories to the excitement. Pushing, shoving, and babbling like a madhouse, the police station turned inside out as everyone hurried for the gates to glimpse the bloody devil.

Applegarth was at the forefront of the small throng outside. He found the tall constable, Pooran Rai, standing guard over a man of savage appearance in the courtyard. The latter bled from a variety of ghoulish wounds as he sat cross-legged upon the ground. Applegarth felt his throat constrict at the sight of him.

"Are you truly Bheriya?" he asked.

The man looked up at him, paused for one brief second, and nodded.

Gasps of fear and surprise rose all around. The sweeper told one of the constables that the person kneeling at their feet was, in truth, a shapeshifter, the child of a Rakshasa or a demon, who was able to turn himself into a wolf at will.

**The entire thanah<sup>6</sup> was in an uproar. Two other constables had emerged from their bunks to join the crowd.**

Applegarth felt a fleeting burn of irritation again. "How come you are here, eh? It sounds too good to be true," he remarked, leaning forward.

And suspicious indeed it was.

For six months he had pursued Bheriya through the leopard-infested jungles of Nagpore and taken his fair share of knife cuts from the man's gang of thugs. One night he had even come close to being throttled and gutted during one of their macabre rituals before faithful Ram Charan, his old adjutant, had leapt to his rescue with his rifle spitting hot lead.

Applegarth's scars twitched as a warmth of satisfaction spread through his veins. He gazed at Bheriya: the thug prince, the eternal barb in his side, beaten and bruised, was within his grasp at long last. "It is not every day that the fawn comes ambling to the hunter, isn't it? Did he have any other men with him?" he asked Pooran Rai.

The constable shook his head. "No, Sir. He was alone. Just stumbled upon us through the fog."

Applegarth ordered a thorough search of the entire perimeter. He wanted every approach to the thanah watched and every patch of scrub within musket range searched. If Bheriya had come as part of some elaborate deception, Applegarth intended to expose it before his men walked blindly into the trap.

Ramoo Chowdhry gathered the other constables on account of his seniority and led them to beat the Jamun thickets around the thanah, disturbing foxholes and mynahs alike, as they searched for hidden watchers. None were found. After about half an hour, the men returned sweaty and scratched by low-hanging branches, but there was no sign of Bheriya's confederates lurking nearby.

Applegarth considered the possibility that this might indeed be his lucky day. He prodded the squatting thug with his boot and said, "Well, it turns out you are not the cunning devil we were all expecting, eh? What's this, then? A surrender?"

**...he remembered plunging his sabre into the body of a man who screamed a battle cry in Hindi and clawed at him while he was disembowelling the wretch.**

Bheriya chewed his lip before replying. "Surrender? No, Sahib. I know nothing would please you more than for me to lay down my rumaal and place my neck upon your chopping block. But I burn with the fire of vengeance today. These wounds you see were caused by the very men I called my brothers for so long. They were my brothers...and look what they have done to me!"

Applegarth raised a brow and inclined his head with interest. He gestured Bheriya to continue, and there began the man's extraordinary tale.

Bheriya and his two companions—dreaded stranglers named Essuree and Kamran—had been lying low in the wildlands outside Bhokara after murdering a wealthy moonshee<sup>8</sup> and his bride.

Laden with gold, the two lesser men soon began quarrelling over why Bheriya deserved the lion's share when they had done most of the work. Bheriya reminded them that he was their Jemadar<sup>9</sup> and, by custom, entitled to the largest portion.

Essuree grumbled something under his breath and withdrew to his edroll. But when night fell, and Bheriya stepped away from camp to relieve himself, Essuree struck him thrice across the back with a log. The Jemadar fought back, but Kamran, all loyalties forgotten, helped pin him down and slashed his face with a dagger. At last, Bheriya ceased struggling, and allowed his greedy brothers to roll his still-breathing body into a shallow ditch beside a stream before absconding with the haul.

Near dawn, Bheriya woke naked and bleeding. He managed to drag himself from the ditch and stumbled towards the town. The clothes and lantern, he admitted, had been stolen from a woodsman's hut.

"So now you have dragged yourself all the way here for vengeance?" Applegarth inquired, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "And you presume to use Her Majesty's police service for your filthy vendetta?"

Bheriya growled like the animal he was named after. "I can lead you to their hideout and you can arrest them. Tie them like little pigs and bring them back! Wouldn't you like that, Inspector Sahib?" he inquired.

Indeed, Applegarth would, for he remembered the hills of Seonee where he had battled much of the local thuggee. What terrifying days and nights those had been! Swift, sure-footed men clad in loincloths and black rags covering their faces had flitted in and out of caverns, dragging good men who were screaming and writhing in pain to their deaths. The muzzle flashes of pistols and rifles. The crack of gunfire rolling like thunder across the Satpuras; he remembered plunging his sabre into the body of a man who screamed a battle cry in Hindi and clawed at him while he was disembowelling the wretch.

He would have to take care. These people were utter fanatics. Sleeman fought them across India, but Seonee remained firmly outside his sphere of operations for now. Applegarth felt the faint thrill of knowing he was about to embark upon another dangerous crusade alone.

"These friends of yours...how do you know where they are?" he asked.

"It is the night of the new moon," Bheriya replied. "At dusk, they will go to our temple in the Chuha Gufa<sup>10</sup> to prepare the offering to the Mother. Before midnight, they will begin the rites."

"They almost slew their Jemadar and stole his share of the plunder. Won't they forsake the ritual and flee?" Applegarth narrowed his eyes. "How can you be so sure of their whereabouts?"

Bheriya grunted and replied, "No thug worthy of his rumaal<sup>11</sup> would ever stoop so low as to neglect an offering to the Mother on the night of a new moon. It would sully his name forever. The others would know at once he had broken his oath, and never again would he be welcomed at any fire, nor allowed to strangle prey along the great highways of Hindustan<sup>12</sup>. It is too grave a risk."

The crowd, which had listened to the exchange between Applegarth and his foe with rapt attention, uttered exclamations of awe. The Englishman knew he had to avoid letting Bheriya cast the religious line too deep. Strange things happened in this godforsaken heathen country in the name of the gods.

"Very well. Vishnu," he snapped his fingers at the station moonshee, who had been hovering in the background and now stepped forward eagerly. "Send a despatch to Jubbulpore informing them that we have captured the thug leader, Bheriya. We march at dusk for this Chuha Gufa, where he believes the last two members of his gang will assemble tonight. We shall, of course, attempt to capture them alive. But if they resist, we shall have no choice but to use lethal force."

Ramoo Chowdhry volunteered to stay behind and watch the prisoner while the other

constables gathered men for the operation. Abel Pennyworth, a local historian fascinated by Hindoo rites, arrived at the thanah not long afterwards and promptly begged Applegarth's indulgence.

"Let me accompany you. Think of it as a service to anthropology," Pennyworth pleaded. The inspector, who did not usually permit civilians on such expeditions, could hardly spare men to keep an eye on them in the field. Moreover, he had grown fond of Pennyworth's stoic nature and good humour over the years, and decided that, just this once, he would make an exception.

**"We march at dusk for this Chuha Gufa, where he believes the last two members of his gang will assemble tonight. We shall, of course, attempt to capture them alive."**

Right when the preparations were nearing completion, a breathless messenger rode in from the district magistrate's office with orders for two constables to escort an important government despatch to Chhindwara without delay. The roads had lately become unsafe, and the courier had already lost one horse on the journey. Applegarth cursed the interruption, but there was no gainsaying official orders.

"Ramoo! Pooran! You two will go," he said. "I'll make do with the others."

The pair saluted reluctantly. Ramoo paused before mounting his horse and glanced towards the two constables from Jubbulpore.

"They are still new to this thanah, Sahib," he said quietly, gesturing to the two men. "And they handle their rifles like men who have not long carried them."

Applegarth frowned at the men. "Your names elude my mind," he said.

One of the newcomers stepped forward and said with a slight bow, "My name is Ganga Dass, Sahib. This is Bhala Singh. Do not let our handling of Company muskets trouble you, Sahib. Before we entered the service, we hunted in the jungles."

"Hunted? What? Game?" Applegarth asked.

A curious smile crossed Ganga Dass's scarred face. "More than my fair share of humans."

The yard fell silent for a heartbeat before the constable chuckled and said softly, "Dacoits, Sahib," he added. "The forests around Jubbulpore breed plenty of them."

Applegarth studied the man for a moment before nodding. "Very well. You two will come with us. Everybody else stays back; I don't want much of a ruckus."

As dusk settled over Seonee, a party of five assembled in the thanah drill yard. Applegarth checked the men's arms while Pennyworth stood ready with his journal, quill, and a bottle of ink. Bheriya, his wrists securely bound, waited under guard.

Applegarth sighed. He had hoped for more men. Somewhere in the hills he smelled a trap, but this would have to suffice. "Gentlemen," he addressed them loudly, "we are about to head

**"I would have you know, Kali is no demon-witch. She is one of the principal goddesses of the Hindoo pantheon. The mistress of time and death!"**

into extremely dangerous terrain. Do not, under any circumstances, stray from the path to inspect something on your own! Remain alert at all times. There are more than serpents and tigers crawling around Seonee these days."

The last embers of daylight had faded by the time Applegarth clambered onto the saddle of his bay and flicked the reins. Bheriya was placed upon a dirty mule with its halter tied to Applegarth's saddle horn. Pennyworth and the two constables, Ganga Dass and Bhala Singh, followed close behind, each carrying a hooded lantern whose yellow glow flickered raggedly through the gathering dark. A wreath of mist rolled in through the open gates as they departed.

Seonee drifted past in pools of amber light and deep shadow. Most shutters had long since been barred for the night, though thin ribbons of

smoke still curled from mud chimneys into the cold air. A padre from the church paused with his lantern to watch the little procession pass. Fifty paces from the postern wall, Applegarth nodded to his taciturn superior, Barnaby, who was finishing a quiet conversation with a fruit seller packing away the last of her Kashmiri apples. Before the officer could call out to him, they had already ridden beyond the town.

Towering Sal and Teak blotted out what ambient light remained, their branches weaving intricately into a black canopy overhead. Creepers hung like coils of rope, and now and then, the lanterns caught the brief glimmer of unseen eyes before they vanished into the undergrowth. Pennyworth squinted, blindly scribbling in his journal in the last light, while Ganga Dass and Bhala Singh rode in silence, their eyes forever looking ahead, beyond the glow of lanterns.

Applegarth had spent enough years in Seonee to know that the forest possessed a deceptive stillness. It appeared asleep, yet every thicket was capable of concealing something lying in ambush.

"Say, Mr Applegarth," Pennyworth began speaking aloud, "do you think we shall witness one of these much-vaunted sacrifices?"

Applegarth snorted. "They waylay travellers in lonely places, choke the life from them, then offer the corpses to that demon-witch Kali. Ghastly business, if I may add," he replied.

Pennyworth tapped the pen against his temple.

"I would have you know, Kali is no demon-witch. She is one of the principal goddesses of the Hindoo pantheon. The mistress of time and death!"

"Seems you are half in love with her, Pennyworth," the inspector remarked and laughed, flicking the reins.

Bheriya slowly raised his head and glanced at Pennyworth. The professor smiled benignly at the thug, who nodded in return while his mule scrambled after Applegarth.

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The posse had been riding for about an hour when the jungle fell abruptly silent. Not a nightjar called, nor a jackal cried. Even the insects seemed to have abandoned the forest. The lanterns cast wavering pools of light across faces and tree trunks as the horses pushed deeper beneath the knitted branches overhead. It was not only Applegarth who sensed the sudden absence of sound. Bhala

Singh rested a hand upon the butt of his rifle. Ganga Dass slowly touched the amulet hanging around his neck. Something pressed upon them from every side of the jungle: cold and swollen and ancient, a timeless fear of dark places where nameless creatures lurked beyond the firelight.

The foreboding silence settling over the little party was broken by the rattle of stirrups, the clink of canteens, and the occasional snort of a horse. They, eventually, cleared the jungle without mishap and emerged upon an open meadow.

Here, Bheriya paused to collect sticks and scattered them upon the breeze. He stood tall, sniffed the air, jerked his head in both directions; then sank down upon his haunches and peered towards the dark foothills of the Satpura.

Finally, he turned to Applegarth and said, "The shrine is not far, sahib. Come."

Across the meadow they went, hands resting upon hilts and rifle stocks. Above them, the cloud cover had begun to split, revealing a sky strewn with cold stars. The horses moved uneasily through the meadow, their ears twitching at sounds hidden beyond the reach of the lanterns. Bheriya alone appeared in genial spirits. The thug had suddenly begun humming some manner of mantra.

Applegarth felt his hackles rise. He turned again with deliberate slowness, searching for the cause. Only the silent line of trees stared back in sombre gloom.

After half a mile, the company ascended a slope of red loam and stopped. Before them stretched the hills—pockmarked with caverns

and fissures—that looked awfully like the country where Applegarth had battled the thugs four years ago. He fought the sudden, growing discomfort that beat in his chest and peered into the darkness. He was prepared to fire the moment the first dark, ugly face appeared from a cave.

But nothing happened.

"Here, you child of misbelief," he said, giving Bheriya a sharp knock upon the head with his rifle. "Show us the shrine."

The thug endured the blow and slipped off the mule. He trudged forward, leading his captors over misshapen boulders and gurgling streams. At one point they passed between two ancient monoliths, carved like an arch.

**Bheriya did not reply. Instead, he touched the congealed blood upon his face. A droplet coated his fingertip. Slowly, he smeared it across the idol's toe.**

Ten paces later, the path bent sharply to the right. The gaping mouth of a cavern loomed before them, its entrance strewn with lit oil lamps, flowers, fruits and the bones of creatures, possibly fowl and sheep.

Applegarth placed one hand on his pistol, yanked Bheriya along, and walked inside. He was confronted at once by a ten-foot idol of Kali in grim splendour. Black as obsidian, crowned with a mass of dishevelled hair, she wore a garland of skulls and held a severed head in one of her four hands. A scarlet tongue jutted from her mouth.

The men stood before her in uneasy silence. Bheriya bowed, touched the stone feet, and murmured his prayers.

"Enough," the inspector snapped with impatience. "Where are your friends?"

Bheriya did not reply. Instead, he touched the congealed blood upon his face. A droplet coated his fingertip. Slowly, he smeared it across the idol's toe. He crouched down at the feet and began rocking himself upon his heels.

Pennyworth, standing nearby, picked up a

strange green fruit and frowned. "Datura," he said. "Someone has bitten into it."

"Hist!" Bhala Singh barked at the same instant.

As a confused Applegarth fumbled for his pistol and spun around, two enormous shapes came lumbering into the shrine. The first thing that struck him was how stark naked they were. How utterly slimed in human filth and mud! Both creatures emitted ferocious growls and hurled themselves at the group, their claw-like hands outstretched to kill.

One of the lanterns was struck from someone's grasp and shattered against the rock wall. Oil splashed across the stone as the flame guttered out, plunging half the cavern into darkness.

For one instant there came only confusion. Men shouted. Boots scraped upon wet rock. Something heavy crashed to the floor while unseen hands grappled with the party, tearing them apart.

**How utterly slimed in human filth and mud! Both creatures emitted ferocious growls and hurled themselves at the group, their claw-like hands outstretched to kill.**

Applegarth caught only fleeting glimpses of flailing limbs whenever the surviving lantern swung wildly through the gloom. When his eyes adjusted, he saw utter pandemonium in which a few of his men were trying to retain their wits.

With surprising speed, Bhala Singh met the first attacker head-on, locking both arms around its waist as it clawed and bit at him. The creature drove him backwards, snarling like a rabid beast. Then Ganga Dass stepped in. Calmly, almost leisurely, he drew his talwar and struck a single diagonal blow that sheared the creature's head from its shoulders.

The second assailant bounded towards Pennyworth. The historian stumbled aside at the last instant and thrust out a boot. The creature lost its footing and crashed heavily upon the

cave floor. Before it could scramble to its feet, Applegarth stepped forward, levelled his pistol, and pulled the trigger without hesitation. The deafening blast nearly ruptured every eardrum in the cavern. Blood exploded from the creature's chest, showering the walls and the goddess.

The attack was over in less than three minutes. The stench of black powder and blood hung heavy in the air, and the men who had ridden out of Seonee looked visibly shaken. Bhala Singh wiped blood from his beard while Ganga Dass silently cleaned his blade before returning it to its scabbard. Pennyworth, pale and dazed, stood still while Applegarth sprang towards Bheriya, and seized a fistful of his greasy locks.

"I should slit your throat and leave you to die here, you scoundrel!" he cried. "You led us straight into an ambush!"

The thug did not wince or cry, or even look surprised in the least.

"Hardly an ambush, Inspector," Pennyworth called from behind. "Both these men were gripped by religious frenzy. I can see they consumed pieces of thorn apple, a potent hallucinogen, and scarred their faces with vitriol. We were attacked by utter madmen scarcely capable of comprehending reality."

"He may have placed them here," Applegarth yelled, grabbing Bheriya by the shoulders and shaking him like a terrier does a rat.

Bhala Singh stood a few paces away from Applegarth, one hand resting upon the butt of his rifle. "Sir, let the man go, or you shall have one less villain to try in Jubbulpore," he said calmly. "He is wounded and near delirious with shame and pain. Hungry for revenge."

Applegarth was in the mood to scold his own men as well, but he sullenly admitted that Bhala Singh had the right of it. Bheriya remained his greatest catch in Seonee to date. If he killed the man in a fit of rage, it would only diminish the police force's triumph. So, he released the thug and took stock of the situation.

Two corpses. One headless.

Essuree and Kamran.

The last of the Seonee thuggee.

Mr Pennyworth, would you be so kind as to lend us your horse for the transportation of these cadavers?" Applegarth asked.

The professor nodded. Being a man of science, he hardly found blood and bodily fluids detestable. While the constables relit the fallen lantern, Applegarth decided he would take the other corpse upon his own bay. It was well past midnight by the time they began the journey back towards Seonee.

This time Ganga Dass rode in the lead, a spare lantern bobbing from his saddle to illuminate the path ahead, while Bhala Singh brought up the rear with the other. Bheriya, his hands still bound, swayed atop the mule between them as Applegarth and Pennyworth walked beside the horses. The two savage, naked bodies were mounted like dead animals across the saddles as the little column trudged onward. They wrinkled their noses at the odour wafting through the air but marched in silence. Enough had been witnessed for one night.

The wall of green-black trees welcomed them once more. Applegarth steeled himself for the unnatural shift in the air. A feather of chill brushed down his spine. What was going to happen next?

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Back in the thanah, the horses were led away to be watered while the constables summoned the keeper of the local morgue. Applegarth thanked Pennyworth, who promised to return later to examine the bodies in greater detail. Bheriya, still bound, was taken to a cell while a police doctor dressed his wounds. The thug settled upon a cot and stared blankly at the floor. His vengeance complete, he had nothing left to do but answer for his own crimes.

By sunrise, word of the night's expedition had spread through Seonee. Townsfolk gathered outside the thanah to gape at the stranglers who had terrorised the district for so long. Some spat

upon the naked corpses. Others muttered prayers. When the crowd began to create a racket, the constables dispersed it with batons while the bodies were carried away to the morgue.

Inspector Barnaby arrived shortly afterwards to congratulate Applegarth. He praised the expedition, observed that the Commissioner's office would be delighted with the district's triumph, and then gently reminded everyone how well the success reflected upon the station's administration. Having secured his share of the glory, he excused himself before any paperwork could find its way into his hands.

Applegarth scarcely minded, as he was too pleased with himself to quarrel. "Bhala Singh, Ganga Dass," he called out to them. "Take some money from the office. Buy a few trays of laddoos<sup>13</sup> and see that every man in the thanah is given one."

**Townsfolk gathered outside the thanah to gape at the stranglers who had terrorised the district for so long. Some spat upon the naked corpses.**

The two men saluted and departed upon the errand. Meanwhile, the dispatch had been sent, and a response awaited, but there were no ferries willing to cross the Waingunga that day. Some winter fair was drawing the rivermen downstream, and the prisoner would have to remain in Seonee for one more night before being transferred to Jubbulpore. Applegarth found the situation troublesome, though he accepted it. He had pursued the dreaded strangler for years. It was only fitting he be granted one final night to torment the man, as the latter had tormented him.

A curtain of Stygian darkness fell across Seonee. One by one, the oil lamps flickered to life as the beat constables went on patrol and the station settled into its nightly routine. A dinner of mutton stew and boiled rice was set before Applegarth, which he devoured with relish. The excitement of the day had given him

a considerable appetite. After several mouthfuls, he looked up to find Bheriya staring at him.

Bheriya's eyes were two pools of limpid black, peering from the scant shadows of the cell. There was something profoundly wolfish about that stare.

"What is it?" Applegarth asked. "You hungry? Want a bite?"

Bheriya did not respond. He hugged his knees and gazed at the inspector as though the man were not human at all, but some object of immense fascination. A bottle of Burgundy to a drunkard. A painted tart to a lecher.

Applegarth felt distinctly uneasy beneath that placid, glazed gaze. "What are you looking at, eh?" he asked.

The thug tilted his head slowly to one side. Outside, crows cawed while faint sounds of revelry drifted down from the banquet house. Someone nearby was hosting a party.

"Would you like to see a magic trick, Sahib?"

**"Luring those fools away was the easy part. The vitriol was difficult to acquire," Bheriya continued, his eyes glimmering with madness.**

Applegarth blinked in surprise. What was the damned rogue getting at now? He leaned back in his chair. "Oh, aye? Go on then! Show me."

A grin split Bheriya's face, transforming his dour, saturnine features into something grotesque. The thug slowly raised a finger towards the parade yard beyond the office. "That constable there," he said, "watch him closely. He is about to fall asleep."

Applegarth frowned and looked out of the window. The fellow in question was leaning lazily against a pillar, and gradually, he slid to the ground.

"What?" The inspector's mouth fell open.

Bheriya smiled. His second finger pointing out and he said, "And now...him."

Across the yard, another constable yawned mightily, staggered a few paces, and collapsed upon a bench. Within moments, he was snoring

loudly. Applegarth felt something cold unfurl inside his chest.

"How—?"

"The laddoos were good, no?" Bheriya asked.

Applegarth half-rose from his chair, one hand instinctively drifting towards the pistol at his hip. His fingers found only empty leather. For one bewildered instant, he simply looked down at his vacant holster, unable to recall removing the weapon.

"A week ago," Bheriya, staring at the inspector, said, "a barge from Jubbulpore arrived at Seonee carrying fruit, incense, bales of cotton, pilgrims and livestock. Among the passengers were also two constables sent to strengthen your thanah." He leaned closer. "Did it never trouble you that the men reached the thanah a full day later than the barge? They mumbled something about stopping at a cousin's on the way, and you accepted the excuse with a simple reprimand."

Applegarth swallowed. How could this thug possibly know that? Unless he had been waiting...for?

"Luring those fools away was the easy part. The vitriol was difficult to acquire," Bheriya continued, his eyes glimmering with madness. "But there's a chemist in Ramtek who asks no questions of a paying customer. How they screamed when I marred their faces!"

Applegarth drew a deep breath. He had an absurd urge to retreat into his office and bar the door, but that would mean giving the rogue the satisfaction of seeing him afraid.

*No, no...Lawrence Applegarth has nerves of steel!*

"The goddess Kali desires a worthy sacrifice," Bheriya's tone turned reverential. "I have failed her for too long, so I intend to offer her the greatest sacrifice of all...a white man."

Applegarth had finally heard enough of this gobshite. "Now listen here, you bloody—,"

"Silence!" Bheriya snarled the word and pressed a gnarled forefinger to his lips. Then, just as suddenly, he relapsed into that terrible state of calm amusement. "Now for the magic trick."

He uncoiled like a cobra from the shadows. Viscous. Sinuous. A predator gliding through elephant grass before the charge. His arms slipped through the bars and cradled the heavy brass lock. Before Applegarth's disbelieving eyes, Bheriya produced a key and unlocked the cell. The lock struck the floor with a dull metallic thunk.

Alarmed, Applegarth reached for the sabre that usually leaned against his desk. His heart thundered like a galloping warhorse in his chest.

"Stop right there!" he bellowed. "Or I'll kill you!"

"With what, Burra Sahib?"

Applegarth spun around. Behind him stood Bhala Singh and Ganga Dass. Demons wearing the faces of men. He stared at them. The savage leers upon their faces were unlike anything he had seen before.

"Who...who are you?" he whispered.

The older man inclined his head. "My name is not Ganga Dass," he answered. "You never thought to verify your new arrivals from Jubbulpore, eh?"

"Leave the man be, Essuree," Bheriya called lazily from behind.

Applegarth looked from one face to the other. The realisation struck him with the force of a charging elephant. Too late. The man called Essuree raised his lathi with deceptive ease and smashed it into the side of Applegarth's skull.

The world dissolved into a kaleidoscope of white flashes and spinning colours. Agony engulfed him as he crashed sideways onto the floor.

Bheriya.

The master deceiver, the serpent in the thicket, crouched beside his fallen adversary and gently caressed the man's face. Applegarth still lived, though barely conscious.

"Jemadar," Essuree said. "We did as you asked."

"Bearded the lion in his own lair," Kamran said, who had posed as Bhala Singh.

"Bind him," Bheriya said.

They tied the semi-conscious inspector hand

**"The goddess Kali desires a worthy sacrifice," Bheriya's tone turned reverential. "I have failed her for too long, so I intend to offer her the greatest sacrifice of all...a white man."**

and foot with the very rope that had restrained Bheriya earlier that day.

"You killed a fellow policeman today, Lawrence. I want you to know that," Bheriya whispered. "I broke him with Datura and pain until there was nothing human left in him. Then I set him in your path, and you did the rest."

Applegarth groaned weakly.

"Eh?" Bheriya hissed, bringing his ear close.

"What's that?"

"Bastard...why did you...not...kill me...in the cave?"

The jemadar sat back on his haunches and smiled. It was a pitiful smile, and it wounded Applegarth more deeply than any blade.

"A goat dragged to the altar is only meat.

But a man who believes himself victorious...a man who mistakes pride for providence... he ripens. Every lie he tells himself, every certainty, every triumph...they steep the soul until it is fit for the Mother. You were never chasing me, Lawrence. All your life, every road you took has led you here. You were always walking towards Her."

The three thugs carried the hogtied inspector outside and dumped him across the saddle of his bay charger. The remaining constables lay fast asleep, overcome by the laudanum hidden in the celebratory laddoos. Not a leaf stirred as they stole the horses and rode silently out of the thanah.

Bouncing like a rag doll across the horse's back, Applegarth's final vision was of a terrible four-armed apparition stretching infinitely across the land.

Kali encompassed the cosmos.

Her children raced towards her temple in frenzied ecstasy as she beckoned them onward. She thirsted for his blood.

Applegarth fainted.

**Glossary:**

paan<sup>1</sup> – betel leaf

Burra Sahib<sup>2</sup> – Inspector

Anna<sup>3</sup> – 6.25 paise equivalent

thuggee<sup>4</sup> – frauds

pucca<sup>5</sup> – tarred

thanah<sup>6</sup> – police station

chuprassi<sup>7</sup> – errand runner

moonshee<sup>8</sup> – clerk

Jemadar<sup>9</sup> – Head Constable or Assistant Sub-Inspector (of modern times)

Chuha Gufa<sup>10</sup> – Rat Cave

rumaal<sup>11</sup> – handkerchief

Hindustan<sup>12</sup> – handkerchief

laddoos<sup>13</sup> – Indian sweet

**About the author:**

Shreyas Adhikari is a 27-year-old English teacher hailing from Kolkata, West Bengal. When he is not busy explaining the intricacies of Shakespeare and Gothic Horror to his students, he is busy crafting vivid worlds for his quirky and menacing characters. His published works include *The Scarlet Turban* (Notionpress) and *The Age of Carnage* (Ukiyoto). Apart from that, he has also been published in the British horror ezine *Schlock*.



# DAKHMA

BY FATIR ANSARI

As I descended into our basement, I could smell rot. I could smell flesh. I could smell blood. I was scared that Mummy would get mad if she found the flooring and the walls stained. This house meant everything to her. We feel emotional about our houses, not realising that one day we will leave. But what would happen if our house doesn't want to leave us?

Not many know that there is a hidden jungle in the heart of Bombay. In Malabar Hill, right next to Walkeshwar, is a hundred acres of private jungle. Dongerwadi, as it is commonly known, is owned by the Parsis of Bombay. It is a place where we lay our dead to rest, as it houses the Dakhma, the Tower of Silence, a stone tower where our ancestors would leave our deceased for vultures and scavenging birds. But this modern world takes its toll. Just like the Parsis, the vultures are going extinct, and now we must

rely on modern methods to deal dutifully with our dearly departed. But the Dakhma still stands, like an old guard of a world gone by. Less than a kilometre from the Dakhma was a small lake, and on its shore was an old colonial bungalow, known as *The Hannibal House*, named after John Hannibal, the man who built it. Surrounded by forest on all sides, Hannibal House, like a yesteryear starlet, thrived in its ugliness. Everyone talked about what a great structure it must have been in its era. Oh, the beautiful arches, the high ceiling, the veranda, the crescent stairways and the vintage furniture. They brag about its old-world charm rather than the caved-in ceiling. Alas, it is my family and I who had to make it resemble a home in this detritus of time.

Thirty years ago, I, Mina, and my twin brother Minoo were born to Fardad and Putli Kerawala. Being birthed in poverty was my parents' greatest sin. Poverty, most of us don't realise, is akin to a genetic disorder with no cure or vaccine. Minoo and I got an education because a charitable trust paid for it. The new clothes we got for Navroze, were thanks to a

Parsi *Seth* who felt generous. *Sudreh*, the sacred vestment we received for our initiation ceremony, was paid for by some distant relative. Except for our exotic looks, nothing about us resembled a Parsi. But nothing reminded us of our lot in life, like the Hannibal House.

It was like a ghost ship at whose helm were two phantasms. First, my Pappa, tall, malnourished, an avid drinker. He became the groundskeeper of Dakhma when I was ten. Ever since then, the Hannibal House has been our home.

It is said, "God protects fools, children and drunkards." So he sent my mother to protect him. All her life she recovered him from his haunts and the company of miscreants he kept. She took in the Hannibal House twenty years ago and gave birth to a home. The house may be named after Hannibal, but it would be Putliben's home till the end of time.

**First, my Pappa, tall, malnourished, an avid drinker. He became the groundskeeper of Dakhma when I was ten. Ever since then, the Hannibal House has been our home.**

One Sunday morning, Pappa woke up early, not smelling of alcohol. We realised something out of the ordinary was about to happen as he nervously paced the veranda.

"What's wrong with him?" Minoo asked.

"I don't know," Mummy answered.

"Are we getting another surprise visit, Mummy?" Minoo said, trying to control his laughter. Mummy shot him an angry look.

"Shut up, idiot," I said.

We heard a car approaching. It sounded familiar, and I immediately knew who was coming. The Dukkar Fiat came to a halt, and an old, short man waved at us. Pappa ran and opened the car door.

"Sahebji Dinyar bhai," Pappa greeted him.

"Sahebji Fardad."

"Khudaye! This bastard is never good news," Mummy said a little loudly as we stepped out.

"Putliben, Sahebji."

"Sahebji Dinyar bhai. *Kem tame?*"

"All good, sister, all good."

Pappa and Dinyar settled in the lawn chairs. Mummy brought out two glasses of cold Roohafza.

"Minoo *dikra*, how's the job hunting going?" Dinyar asked, wiping the sweat from his bald head.

"Good, uncle."

"You're still trying in that cloth business."

Minoo nodded. I could see he had no intention of talking about it.

"Learn from your sister, *dikra*. Putliben, believe you me, everyone says only good things about your daughter. She manages work well. Soon she'll go from receptionist to manager. You just watch."

"She's a blessing, Dinyar *bhai*, I tell you," Mummy beamed at me.

"We are happy at least one child is doing well," Pappa said with an apologetic laugh. I held Minoo's hand.

"Come on, kids, let's go. Let Pappa and uncle talk."

"Wait, Putliben. Kids, come sit down."

Suddenly, the four of us exchanged looks. We somehow knew the following conversation would not bode well.

"Kids," Dinyar said very calmly. "Your father is an old man now. He has worked very hard all his life, and now the time has come for him to rest."

My heart sank as soon as I heard those words. I could feel emotions swelling inside Pappa.

"He is stronger than many young men," Mummy chimed in. "You see him work for a day!"

"Nobody doubts the work he has done, least of all me. I was the one who got him here."

"And I'll always be indebted to you."

"You don't have to be Fardad. But now it's time for you to retire," Dinyar said, staring into his glass. "It's time for you to leave the Hannibal House."

I saw Mummy's hand shiver. Her eyes swelled up with tears.

"Uncle, where will we go?" I screamed.

Pappa immediately motioned for me to calm down.

"We can't afford to live in the city."

"I understand, *bacha*. That's why your father will receive a tidy sum. I have discussed this with the trust, yes. Don't think that I will forget my own people," Dinyar held Pappa's hand. "Fardad, you'll have nothing to complain, trust me."

"But the house," Mummy spoke, trying to keep her emotions in check. "Please don't take it away. I beg you."

"Putliben, I am begging you. I am not some heartless landlord throwing you all out. You are family to me. I am going out of my way to make this as easy as I can. I hope you understand."

In a moment of awkward silence, Dinyar kept drinking Roohafza to avoid looking at us. We knew this day was coming. We never knew it would sneak up like that.

"I need one favour," Dinyar said. "A young couple will come and live here before you all leave. Their names are...let me think...Urvaan and Perin Patel. Urvaan will take over duties from Fardad, so I want you to explain everything, get them settled in on the first floor," he said, looking at a frazzled Pappa.

Meekly, Pappa nodded.

\*

It felt like somebody had just died. Nobody said a word after Dinyar left. Pappa started drinking. Mummy drowned herself in quiet sobs as she cooked and cleaned. Minoo, I felt, was relieved. I, on the other hand, was confused. I wanted to leave, but now there was a melancholy in me. Everywhere I looked, the place reeked of memories. When I saw the banyan tree, I saw us on a swing, Minoo and me taking turns. I saw Pappa singing as he pushed us. Inside the lake, I saw my friends swimming. Lazing around in tyres, trying to beat the heat. In

the tall trees, I saw myself with the love of my life. Sneaking him into the forest, holding hands and stealing kisses. All I had left of him were his memories, and with Hannibal House, I was leaving him behind. Unbeknownst to me, tears started to flow. I would have given anything to keep our home, but I never thought the cost would be my family.

Early the next morning we were woken by two large trucks. They stood outside our gates, honking as loudly as they could. One loaded with an army of workers, the other with construction materials. Pappa opened the gates, and they barged in as if we didn't exist. They started repairing the first floor. Replacing broken floorboards and polishing old balusters, they began repairing the old ceiling. By the afternoon, another group came in and started painting the walls as they brought in a new bed and furniture. They even installed a ceramic toilet.

**It felt like somebody had just died. Nobody said a word after Dinyar left. Pappa started drinking. Mummy drowned herself in quiet sobs as she cooked and cleaned.**

When the day was done, so was the construction. The ground floor, where we lived, looked worlds apart from the first floor; each an impression of a building before and after a fire.

"I begged for twenty years to that man, to make my house liveable," Mummy was furious.

"Not a word, not a *takka* spent on making our lives better. And now look at this."

She went quiet as if something inside her had died. She stopped eating, and with every passing day, appeared more fragile. It all culminated in something unthinkable.

\*

It was a particularly hot night as I kept tossing and turning. It did not help that Minoo was playing volleyball right outside my window.

"Minoo!" I opened the window and screamed. He and his friends were startled.

"Let me sleep. I have work tomorrow. All of you, shut it!"

They were drunk, so they giggled and ran towards the lake.

"Don't drown, you morons!"

I crashed into my bed, and it gave me a head rush. Seeing Minoo and his friends reminded me of him, of the many nights I had spent with him and his friends. There were guitars playing and bonfires crackling. How he used to cover me with blankets and himself. I could see him smiling, I could see his body intertwined with mine, I could feel Saheb inside.

**Everything inside me was telling me not to descend, but I did. As I stepped in, I was drowned in a foul stench. It felt like someone was chanting right next to me.**

My reveries were broken by faint whispers. As I came back to my senses, I realised somebody in the house was chanting. A muffled voice of a woman made the hair on my neck stand. Cautiously, I opened the door and walked outside. I peeped into other rooms; they were empty.

"Ey Druj-e Naasu..."

The chant was getting louder, and the voice was turning hoarse.

"...shahbānu tabāhi..."

The voice was reverberating in the house.

"Ey Druj-e Naasu, shahbānu tabāhi va mordār."

The voice had seeped into the walls; it had permeated into the floor. With fearful steps, I moved towards the only room left unchecked.

The basement.

The door creaked open, and a visceral smell filled my nose. Everything inside me was telling me not to descend, but I did. As I stepped in, I was drowned in a foul stench. It felt like someone was chanting right next to me.

I turned right and fell on my back in shock.

In the corner of the basement, a woman was standing, facing the wall.

"Ey Druj-e Naasu, shahbānu tabāhi va mordār..."

I recognised the woman. I did not recognise the voice coming from her.

"Mummy?" I called out.

She kept chanting. Her voice was getting louder, more hoarse. I got on my feet and felt there was a resistance in her voice that was pushing me away. A force wanted her to remain undisturbed. I pushed hard against it, reached out and turned her around.

Her face was cracking. Her eyes had turned grey. Her jaw was moving involuntarily.

"Ey Druj-e Naasu..."

"Mummy!" I screamed.

She remained unfazed.

"Mummy, wake up!"

I pushed her hard.

She hit the wall and fell. The chants died in an instant.

"Are you okay?"

Her face was hers again as she looked around, confused.

"They won't take the house, Mina," she said.

"They can't take my home."

She blacked out.

I was shaking when I put her in bed. I sat on the floor, holding my knees, trying to stop myself from shivering. I didn't know when the night passed. I heard a noise outside, and I rushed out.

"Pappa!"

"Mina. What happened?"

I don't know if it was catharsis or a breakdown, but I started to tell him everything amidst sobs.

\*

Over the next few days, Pappa and I debated whether to see a doctor or a priest in Udva. He was in denial, insisting that she was only sleepwalking. We decided not to tell Minoo, as Mummy had no recollection of what had

happened. I tried talking to her in vague words, but she was clueless. It was a relief when the next few nights were uneventful. I felt sanity coming back.

The telephone rang. Pappa picked up.

"Hello? Yes, Sahebji bhai...yes...when?... Tomorrow...I'll be here."

"Who was that?"

"Dinyar. They'll be here tomorrow, Mina," he said, eyebrows furrowed. "They cannot know. Dinyar can never find out."

I nodded.

The next morning they arrived. Urvaan looked a little older than me, but Perin was my age.

"She's gorgeous," Minoo whispered in my ear.

Perin was beautiful. She was tall and looked svelte in her saree.

"Sahebji!"

In her sweetest voice, Perin wished us all. As soon as pleasantries were exchanged, we heard barking coming from their car.

"Oh, excuse me."

Perin ran towards the vehicle. She opened the door, and a puppy jumped out. It was the cutest little beagle I had ever seen. He was completely black with a tuft of white hair on his head. It brought a smile to all our faces.

"Who is this now?" I picked him up and started smooshing him.

"This is Deano," Perin answered.

"Deano is a handsome boy, aren't you, Deano?" I gave him kisses and scratched his belly. He liked it.

"Minoo *dikra*, get their luggage."

"Arey no, uncle, I'll get it."

"It's fine. Just come inside."

Urvaan was mesmerised by the house, but Perin was not; I was watching her with interest. When she saw the differences in the living conditions, I could see guilt washing over her face. When our eyes met, she masked her empathy with a smile.

But the one who was absolutely unhappy with his new home was Deano. He kept barking

and preventing us from having any conversation. When Urvaan tried to hold him, he ran out as if his life depended on it.

"Uru, maybe he wants to go," Perin said quietly, and Urvaan went after him.

"He is not used to new places," Perin said.

"He is still a baby," I answered.

"You like dogs?"

"Umm...a close friend of mine had a little dog. I grew very fond of him."

"The friend or the dog?"

She laughed, and I chuckled with her. Minoo entered with their luggage, unable to handle all of it.

Pappa got the perfect opportunity to excuse himself from our conversation and reached for the luggage.

**But the one who was absolutely unhappy with his new home was Deano. He kept barking, denying us any conversation.**

"Uncle, please let Urvaan come."

"It's fine. You both sit and talk." Pappa said, and carried the luggage upstairs with Minoo.

"It's a great house," Perin said, looking nervous.

"Thank you, I mean, yes, it is."

"I see they only painted the first floor."

I shrugged.

"Well, if I knew that...this is how things will be...I would have spoken to Dinyar uncle."

"Dinyar is never interested in the well-being of others. You're getting oil paint, you should be grateful. All we got was chuna, that too some ten years ago."

A look of disbelief came upon her face. I tried to control my giggles, but I burst out laughing.

"I'm joking!"

Perin sighed with relief and then joined me.

As our laughter died down, Perin seemed to have remembered something.

"Where's your mother, Mina?" she asked.

"Uhh...She's, she's unwell."

"Khudaye, I hope it's nothing serious."

"Just old age. It takes longer to recover."

"Where is she?"

"She's resting."

Perin stood up.

"I think she'd like to rest, Perin."

"Let me just..." she said as she entered the kitchen. "Have you guys eaten anything?"

"No."

"Why didn't you tell me, Mina?"

"It's not a problem."

"Of course it is. Everyone must be hungry."

"Perin, you must rest."

She opened the cabinets and the refrigerator, looking for food to cook. She started heating some ghee and washing the rice. She tucked in her saree and started to cook. Even Pappa protested, but she was adamant.

Surely enough, after half an hour of whistling cooker and grinding mixie, the house was filled with the aroma of daal, rice and bhindi.

**Only gibberish came out of her mouth. She got into an argument with herself, and it was like I wasn't even there.**

"It's lunchtime!" she announced.

The men, like happy soldiers, began setting up the table.

"Mina, this is for your mother."

Perin handed me a bowl of a potato dish.

"Oh! That's really kind of you. What is this?"

"Aloo Posto. This is a Bengali dish, specially made when someone's unwell."

"I hope all of this was not too much."

"Are you mad? Don't think like that," she said as she smiled brightly. "You take this to her. I'll feed the boys till then."

Perin's presence made me forget about Mummy. I entered her room and saw her sleeping with her face away from me.

"Ma," I softly called out to her, but she did not respond. "Mummy, are you awake?"

I almost screamed and noticed some movement. She slowly pushed the blanket away

and tried to sit up. It was difficult for her to move; she was trying to hold on to something. I wanted to help, but what if—

"Mina," Mummy called out, and it was her voice. I rushed to help.

"Ma, slowly," I said as I stared into her brown eyes. "How are you feeling?"

She nodded, but it was evident she was unwell.

"We must see a doctor, Mummy."

A bout of coughing overtook her as she kept motioning 'no' with her hands.

"I am fine, don't worry," she said as she took a sip of water. "What is this?" She asked, curiously eyeing the aloo posto. I gave her some, and she slowly started to eat.

"It's good, Mina. I like it."

After every spoonful, her hand shivered. I tried to help, but she insisted she'd eat it herself.

"I keep hearing a dog...barking loudly...it woke me up from a nice dream I was having."

"It's a little puppy, Ma."

"A what?"

"A little dog! It's Perin's dog."

"Who?"

"Perin and Urvaan. The new tenants."

"Tenants! They are here?"

"Yes. You were asleep when they came. So I thought of not waking you."

She sighed with weariness.

"They are not as bad as you thought. She's nice."

"They'll still throw us out, Mina."

"Maybe not. Maybe we can—"

"Don't hope," she said abruptly as she finished the last of the aloo posto. "But I must say, she cooks well."

"How do you know she made this?"

"You told me."

"No, I did not."

She looked at me, confused. "You did not?"

I shook my head 'no'.

"Then how can I..."

Mummy started talking to herself. She started calculating something on her fingers. Only gibberish came out of her mouth. She got into an argument with herself and it was like I wasn't

even there. Feeling uneasy, I stepped out of the room, and Pappa was standing right in front of me. We shared a concerned look.

"She is not well!" I whispered.

"Is it happening again?"

"I don't know."

\*

The next morning I woke up sweaty and gasping for air. I had dreamt that the Hannibal House was sinking in quicksand, taking us all down with it. I pushed open the window and took some deep breaths. Deano was digging for something outside my window. He was startled by me and started barking. It felt like his barking hadn't stopped since he arrived.

"Deano, stop!"

Perin's voice calmed him down.

"Come here, Deano!"

She was sitting by the lake, and someone else was sitting next to her. I rubbed my eyes to get a better look. My heart skipped a beat when I saw Mummy was with her.

"God, no!"

I put on my pants and jumped out of the window. They seemed engrossed in conversation. I walked as quickly as I could to control the narrative.

"Ma! Why are you not in your bed?"

"I can't come out now?"

"No. You must be resting."

"I am good. No need for rest."

She looked fine. She looked absolutely normal. But something was off; I could feel it in my bones.

"Come and sit. Eat some of Perin's pohā. She was telling me about her first night in the house."

"How was it?" I asked.

"I slept well. Everything was great. Except this one fly that kept buzzing around. It was unusually large and —"

"She's so pretty, isn't she, Mina?" Mummy interjected as she caressed her cheek. "Look at the colours she wears. Yellow looks so good..."

*Bau saras che.* Perin, you must teach Mina how to do all this. Mina is just black this and black that. You are the best person to take care of my house, I tell you."

Was it a charade? Did she mean it? I wasn't sure. Mummy's behaviour towards Perin made me feel scared for her.

"Perin, when are you having kids? Tell me."

"Mummy, please! Stop it." I said angrily.

I had to force her away and, like a child, take her inside.

The rest of the day was spent trying to keep Mummy in her room. It was exhausting trying to handle my mother. One moment she was throwing a tantrum like a child, the next she was being a mother. It took a lot not to break down. As soon as she fell asleep, I sneaked out.

**We would sit for hours, sharing silences and dreaming of a life together. I allowed myself to think of him, even though I knew it would be like daggers in my heart.**

Feeling frustrated, I walked out of the Hannibal House and had no intention of coming back. But this was my home, and she was my mother. Irrespective of their state of decay, I could not abandon either. I wanted to be alone, and there was only one place in Dongerwadi for that.

It was a spot up on a small hill, the highest point in this jungle. From here I could see the canopy of the entire forest. I could see the top of the Dakhma, the lake, and the Hannibal House. Far away, I could make out cars moving about, sounding like waves from a distance. It was our spot, mine and Saheb's. We would sit for hours, sharing silences and dreaming of a life together. I allowed myself to think of him, even though I knew it would be like daggers in my heart.

"Deano," Perin's voice echoed. "Where are you?"

"Perin!" I called out.

She waved back, surprised to see me.

"Are you lost?"

"Deano has run away somewhere. Cannot find him."

"Come up and look from here."

"How did you get up there?"

"Walk ahead. You'll find a way."

She was mesmerised by the view when she reached the top.

"Dongerwadi is so much bigger," Perin said with wide eyes. "Is that the Dakhma?"

"Yes, it is."

"O, *khudaye*. It looks...you know what I mean."

"Scary, you can say it."

"Can we go inside?"

"No, Perin! Of course not. No one's allowed to go except the priests, you know that."

"You have never gone inside?"

"No!"

"You have never been inside the Dakhma?"

"I have never been inside the Dakhma."

She squinted at me. "You are a bad liar, Mina."

"I went inside like twice, okay."

She smirked.

"Maybe more than that, but I'll never go again."

She started to laugh. "What's in there?"

"What do you think?"

Her eyes went wide. "Corpses," she mouthed the word.

I nodded slowly.

"They're still there."

"Yes."

"Uff!"

She shuddered, visibly creeped out.

"You still want to go?"

"Mina, if you take me there once, I will find you the best husband in this world."

She was scared and yet curious in equal measure. It made me laugh.

"I won't promise anything, but we'll see. And you can keep the husband. Don't need one."

"Don't need a husband? Is that a broken heart I hear?"

She was expecting one, but I did not give any answer. As her laughter receded, she noticed

the quiet look on my face.

"Mina, I didn't mean to pry. I am sorry."

"No, don't worry, it's nothing. It's just that... I've never really... forgotten about it."

I started to walk away.

"I am so sorry, I really didn't mean—"

"You have apologised enough, Perin. Please don't anymore."

"What happened to him?"

Her question stopped me in my tracks. I stared into her eyes, trying to assess what her intentions were. I was feeling angry at her audacity to ask me that question. I felt rage at how obnoxious she was being. But in her eyes, I only saw concern for me; I saw compassion. Something inside me shifted, and I broke down.

"He disappeared, Perin," I said as I started to weep. "On the night we were supposed to run away, he disappeared."

We sat there and talked about Saheb for hours. How we wanted to get married but my mother disapproved since he was not a Parsi. I decided to elope but the night we were supposed to leave, he simply disappeared from the face of the earth.

**I locked my mother in her room before dinner. My head buzzed, and every inch of me felt jittery. The food tasted rotten in my mouth. After dinner, I saw Pappa sneak out.**

I finally opened up and talked about every bittersweet moment of our lives. She laughed and cried with me. She held my hand and wiped my tears. I had never spoken to anyone about him, so it was all bottled up. I was glad it was Perin I finally spoke to.

Later, we searched for Deano, but he was nowhere to be found.

\*

It was a relief going back to work. I was desperate for a reason to leave Hannibal House. After work, I went to Marine Drive to avoid going home. I buried my feet in the sand at

at Chowpatty and wished I could stay there all night. But I couldn't escape Hannibal House for long.

Urvaan had put in street lights along the path that led to Hannibal House. He had hung little lanterns on the branches to beautify the place. But putting silk on a pig doesn't make the pork taste better.

"Deano!"

Voices echoed in the night.

"Come, Deano!"

It sounded like Perin and Urvaan, screaming.

"Deano, where are you?"

This time it was Pappa and Minoo's voice.

I found Mummy sitting in her rocking chair in the veranda, flies were buzzing all around her.

"They still haven't found him?" I asked.

She shook her head absentmindedly.

"You think he ran away, Ma?"

**I could smell blood. My eyes darted everywhere, looking for the corpse of the puppy. But it was nowhere to be seen. Instead, I saw something dark on the floor, a black furry rectangle.**

"Stupid dog. Kept barking and barking all day."

"He's just a little puppy."

"Nuisance! That's what that animal is. Just this morning he woke me up. Kept scratching my door, barking the whole time."

I heard them walking towards the house, the four of them loudly discussing something.

"I was dreaming, Mina; she visited me."

"What?"

"She said this house is mine now. It is ours forever."

"Who said what!"

"Naasu!" she said with anger in her eyes.

"The demon?"

"Yes!" she screamed. "She came to me, riding a thousand corpses. She stood here, in this very garden and said, 'This house is bound to me; it is bound to my blood.'"

I could now see them walking towards the house.

"She wanted to tell me more, but this stupid dog," she growled as she kicked something from under her. "Woke me up!"

It was black and furry and it took me a moment to see the little paws, the protruding tongue, the lifeless eyes. The sharp stone that was smeared in blood and still embedded in Deano's head.

"What...What... have you...?"

Words refused to escape me; I was gasping for air. The gate creaked open, and I saw them enter. In haste, I picked up Deano and ran inside. I was panting, feeling like my heart would explode.

"Mina. Is it you?" Perin called out.

I opened the dustbin, but it was too small to hide the puppy. I opened the kitchen cabinets; they felt too exposed. I could hear footsteps. Someone was about to enter the house. I rushed towards the basement, kicked open the door and threw Deano down the stairs.

"You just came?" Perin asked as she was entering the house. My blood ran cold.

"Yes...Yes, Perin," I said as I locked the basement.

"Is there something in the basement?"

"No...no...I was just closing the door."

She stared at me with wide eyes, and suddenly a tear escaped.

"What happened?"

"Deano....he...he ran away."

She broke down.

I hugged her and caressed her back.

"He'll come back. Don't you worry."

I had to lie. I locked my mother in her room before dinner.

My head buzzed, and every inch of me felt jittery. The food tasted rotten in my mouth. After dinner, I saw Pappa sneak out. I followed him, and when we were a little away from home, I confronted him.

"She killed him," I screamed in his face. "She killed the bloody dog!"

"Keep your voice down. Someone—"

"You will take her away. Take her anywhere, just get her out of here."

"Where will we—

"That woman is not my mother."

I rushed towards the house with Pappa in tow. When we entered Mummy's room, we saw her sitting by herself, humming a tune. I started to pack their clothes in haste.

"Mina, calm down," Pappa said, trying to pacify me, but I kept throwing their things into the luggage.

"What will you tell Minoo?"

"I'll think of something."

"Where do you think we'll go?"

"Anywhere, but here! Go to Valsad, Pappa. You'll catch the first train."

"Silly girl," Mummy said, and we froze. She was watching us the entire time with a big smile on her face.

"You can't stay here, Mina," Pappa whispered. "None of you can."

"Mina is my blood. She is bound to this house."

"I don't want this. I don't want any of it!" I pushed her out.

"Mina, you need to know something," Pappa said.

"I don't need to know anything."

"It is important that you must."

"It is important that she leaves."

All this while, Mummy was watching us as if we were little kids. I pushed them both out of the house and closed the door.

I rushed towards the basement and, with jittery fingers, unlocked it. As I descended into our basement, I could smell rot; I could smell flesh; I could smell blood. My eyes darted everywhere, looking for the corpse of the puppy. But it was nowhere to be seen. Instead, I saw something dark on the floor, a black furry rectangle. Cautiously, I touched it. It felt like Deano. I immediately started pulling it out, for some reason hoping that the puppy would still be alive. The fur was stuck to the floor. Despite all my effort, I wasn't able to move it an inch. It was as if the house was sucking on it.

"Let go!" I screamed. My hands shaking, I pulled on it with unreal strength. It broke free, I

fell. The underside was covered in fat, tissue and bone. It looked like the whole thing was melting or...digesting.

An animalistic bellow reverberated in the house. It was loud and guttural. Scared, I rushed upstairs. Minoo was in the living room, looking around.

"What was that sound?"

"You heard it too?"

"Of course I did."

Urvaan and Perin came running down the stairs.

"We heard a sound," Urvaan said, panting. "It sounded like an animal."

"We must leave, Perin," I said. "We must leave this house as soon as we can."

"What's in your hand, Mina?"

I didn't realise the fur was still in my hand. I threw it. Immediately, it got stuck to the floor. We started to hear a low rumbling; we felt vibrations beneath our feet.

"What is happening? Where is this smell coming from?" Perin said as she held on to Urvaan.

The house started to smell rotten. It felt as if the putrid smell had pierced into my brain.

"We must go!" I screamed, and they were looking at me as if I was mad. "You'll should move—"

The telephone rang, startling all of us.

**I immediately started pulling it out, for some reason, hoping that the puppy would still be alive. The fur was stuck to the floor. Despite all my effort, I wasn't able to move it an inch.**

"Hello."

"Mina...Mina...Good you picked up. Get out of the house."

It was Pappa. He was out of breath and sounded petrified.

"Pappa, where are you?"

"Get Perin and Urvaan...out...immediately!"

"What is happening?"

"I am calling from the first PCO I found. Your

mother, Mina...she never left Dongerwadi."

I felt paralyzed.

"She tried to strangle me and then ran into the Dakhma. Get out of there. Please meet me outside Dongerwadi. Something about Saheb you must know. Your mother wanted him—"

An axe skewered the telephone in two. I recoiled. We were all shocked. I was stunned to see my mother, wielding an axe. She was naked, covered from head to toe in blood and guts and rotting flesh.

"Ma!" Minoo screamed in anguish.

Mummy's eyes were stuck on Perin. She raised her axe towards her. "*Man Naasu hastam,*" she hissed. "*In khooneh-me.*"

"My feet...! —" Perin screamed, her voice soaked in pain. Her sole started to bleed as she shivered. Her legs looked as if they were nailed to the floor.

A moment later, Urvaan started screaming as well. "Something...something is eating my—"

Amidst their painful beseeching, their attempts to free themselves failed. We tried pulling them out; nothing helped. I pleaded with my mother, but she kept watching with pleasure. First, their legs were gone. They fell on their hands and remained stuck in that position, wailing. After some time, they fell on their faces, and their screams were now muffled. Perin tried a last-ditch effort to free herself. She ended up with her facial skin ripped. We watched helplessly as the house digested them, alive.

\*

### THIRTY YEARS LATER

It was dark. Dongerwadi was asleep. Two men were out wandering.

"There's no network here, Parvez kaka," Feroz said with frustration as he raised his mobile phone.

"There are no towers *dikra,*" said the old groundskeeper.

"Really!"

"O, *Khudaye!*"

Parvez stopped abruptly, and Feroz bumped into him. In front of them was the Hannibal House, whatever was left of it.

"I took the wrong turn again!"

Feroz could see panic in Parvez's eyes.

"Let us go back. We'll look for him in the morning."

"Is this that bungalow? Those people disappe —"

"Yes!"

Feroz wasn't able to look away. He was transfixed. "What an ugly thing," he said absentmindedly. "Why don't they burn it?"

"They tried. They couldn't."

"Really? Why!"

"Because it is occupied." Old Dinyar stepped out of the shadows. He was bent with age, and a madness was upon him.

"Daadu!" said Feroz as he held his grandfather. "You ran away again."

Dinyar's eyes were fixed on the Hannibal House.

"Let us go," said Parvez. "This is no time to be here."

Just then they heard footsteps. A pair of them were rummaging about inside the Hannibal House. Feroz looked fascinated. The house was calling him.

"What is this place!"

"It is no place; it is nobody's home," said old Dinyar. "Hannibal House is a Dakhma."

\*

"They're gone, Mina," Minoo said, peeking through the windows.

"Mummy won't like it," Mina answered.

"The boy looked interested."

"But it'll be a while before he comes back."

"Let us go now. She's waiting."

They walked towards their mother's room, where they'll stay until the next time the house is disturbed. They walked slowly because of their age and also because they wanted to keep the living room carpet intact. The fragile carpet that was made of human hides.

**About the author:**

Fatir Ansari is a Mumbai-based video editor with a Degree in Mass Media. His love for stories began at a young age, when he fell in love with cinema and soon turned to books for his fix.

Harbouring secret dreams of becoming a filmmaker, he did the next best thing: he started writing. This led to the self-publication of his debut novel, *The God-King of Bambain*, a high-fantasy epic with a fast-paced thriller at its heart. Writing has become more than a hobby as he wrestles with words every day, learning the chops and weaving tales of gore, one page at a time.



## AFTERWORD

**BY RITIKA BALI**  
**EDITOR**

**It is an especially exciting time for horror, gothic, speculative fiction, magical realism and other genre-bending forms, which are no longer treated as separate from “serious” literature. They are increasingly being read and appreciated on their own terms.**

Stories find their shape in many forms. Some let time slow down, take a detour through an alleyway, and allow a character to change their mind twice before the end. Others offer an image, a moment or a small crack in a life, trusting the readers to understand without being told. Whether expansive or compressed, what matters is a story’s ability to pique curiosity.

It is an especially exciting time for horror, gothic, speculative fiction, magical realism and other genre-bending forms, which are no longer treated as separate from “serious” literature. They are increasingly being read and appreciated on their own terms. We have always had restless spirits, bizarre legends, impossible futures, and magical worlds woven into our stories. What has changed is the confidence with which writers embrace them, mixing the strange with the ordinary so both can exist in the same space.

This is the second edition of Indian Gothic Literary Magazine, and the first to include flash fiction, a bite-sized format that slips easily into a bus ride or a few minutes to spare and unwind. Across the works in this issue, you may find the answer you were looking for or leave wondering in the best possible way. Either way, we hope you take your time with these stories, even though they won’t take much of yours. Some of the best ones don’t need to.

See you next time in the Halloween issue!

\*

## NO THEMES, BUT JUST IN CASE YOU NEED SOME INSPIRATION FOR THE HALLOWEEN SUBMISSION!

Submit your stories, plays, flash and craft articles before September 1.



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

Visit our Halloween webpage on the Indian Gothic website for suggested themes to inspire your writing.

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

For general submission guidelines, please visit our website:

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

If you have a question, email us:

[submission@indiangothic.com](mailto:submission@indiangothic.com)



## WE ARE LOOKING TO GROW OUR INDIAN GOTHIC TEAM IN 2027.

We are looking for proactive VOLUNTEERS (who are not literally or metaphorically invisible, though we love that in our stories).

But this isn't technically a hiring call, as we won't pay you a salary (though we'd like to buy you a coffee sometime). We are seeking mad-hatters like ourselves who love Gothic fiction and all its sub-genres (we have exciting plans in 2027!).

If you are not looking for a paycheck but you love reading, writing, editing, designing, managing, organising, and putting something out there in the world for the pure love of the cause: words, stories, plays, articles, events, podcasts, book readings, retreats, festivals... all things related to books... a literary magazine, in our case for now, then this could be highly rewarding for you.

### Roles open for Indian Gothic from January 2027:

- Editor (1)
- Sub-editors (3)
- Readers (2)
- Illustrators/Artists (2)
- Canva design creators with publishing experience (1)
- Digital marketing manager (1)
- Social media manager (1)
- Administrative manager (1)
- Submission manager (1)

### What we expect:

- **Pure skill in your field**, and some experience (you can't learn on the job, trust us!)
- **12-14 hours of volunteering every quarter for each issue** (during each submission period), apart from specific events for which you may want to be involved
- **Proactiveness and high accountability**

**So, in short, we need only those who are the COMMITTED type.**

If you are excited, please drop us a note with some details at:  
[arpita@indiangothic.com](mailto:arpita@indiangothic.com) or [lee@indiangothic.com](mailto:lee@indiangothic.com)





**“EVERYBODY IS A BOOK OF BLOOD;  
WHEREVER WE'RE OPENED, WE'RE RED.”**

**— CLIVE BAKER  
(BOOKS OF BLOOD)**

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