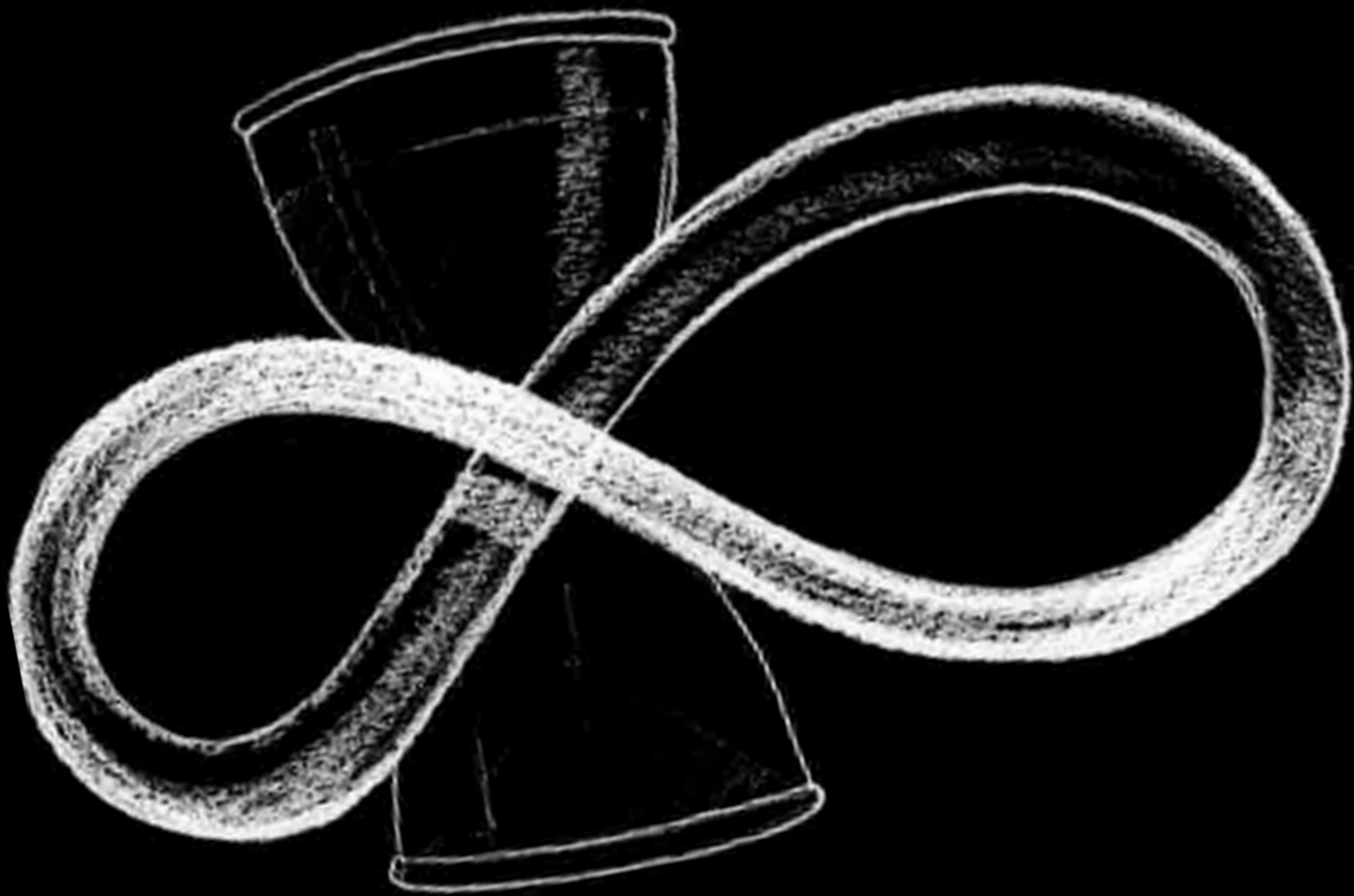


THE

FREEWHEELER

VOL 1 ISSUE 4

2016-17



SNU's Literary Annual

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
SHIV NADAR UNIVERSITY

CONTENTS



Faculty Advisor's Letter Dr. Vikram Kapur	01	The Wailing Monk Madhav Mehrotra	25
Editor's Note Neha Mishra	02	Out of Stock Shubhangi Verma	28
The Freewheeler Team	04	Safed Sagar Ishan Gupta	31
Contributors	05	The Bartender's Smile Harsha Vytla	35
Verbatim Sameer Abraham Thomas	11	The Long Fuse Nimisha Upadhyay	38
Minutes to the 26 th Shubhangi Verma	14	The Whitechapel Vampire Madhav Mehrotra	43
The Devil You Know Madhav Mehrotra	16	Death in a Family of Clowns Gokulnath Govindan	47
Companions Shruti Shhreyasi	19		
Lakshman-Rekha Ishan Gupta	22		

FACULTY ADVISOR'S LETTER



Dr. Vikram Kapur

Each year *The Freewheeler* marks the culmination of the journey of several greenhorn creative writing students from the classroom to publication. For many of them it is their first creative publication and the result of long and hard work that involves producing several drafts of their stories before arriving at the definitive draft that makes it to the pages of *The Freewheeler*. To paraphrase Thomas Edison: Creative writing is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration. That is the lesson that students writing for *The Freewheeler* take with them into the future. That said, it is not all blood, sweat and tears. There is also the joy of seeing your work in print and having it appreciated, which makes all the effort worth it.



Writers are not the only heroes at *The Freewheeler*. Once the stories come in, they are worked on painstakingly by editors and copyeditors in a bid to make them as good as they can possibly be. In the first three issues, there were teams of editors. This year the onus has fallen squarely on Neha Mishra who deserves kudos for the stellar work she has done in helming the ship on her own. Like the past three issues, this issue has also been enhanced by the efforts of illustrators and presented attractively on the page through the toil of designers. *The Freewheeler* is the result of their collaborative efforts.

The fourth issue of *The Freewheeler* represents as much diversity in style and content as the three issues that preceded it. There are stories that are sombre in nature, stories that veer towards the fantastical, stories about family and relationships, stories about vampires and lives thrown asunder by mindless violence, and even a story about life on the homefront during one of India's recent wars.

The Freewheeler began four years ago as a platform for students to flex their creative muscle and, in the process, discover the writer within themselves. Since then, it has grown into a respected publication that is read not only by people on campus but off it as well. As the person who dreamed it up, it is gratifying to see it going from strength to strength. None of that would have been possible without the support of several people. My colleagues at the Department of English, who have been behind this endeavour from the start, and the Director of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Dr Ajay Dandekar, without whose unstinting support this magazine would not have been possible.

I thank you all.

EDITOR'S NOTE



Neha Mishra



Editing *The Freewheeler* has been incredibly rewarding and challenging in equal measures. As my first experience as an editor of a magazine, I have learnt that it is a multi-faceted project. Co-ordinating all these seemingly disparate elements can be overwhelming and it produces moments ridden with anxiety and, sometimes, despair. At the same time, it is uniquely rewarding to see all these elements come together finally and to be able to look back and realise that I had a part to play in all of this too. Of course, I cannot emphasise enough that an undertaking of this nature is never a solitary one; it is a completely collaborative effort. In editing *The Freewheeler*, I have had the good fortune of working with many extremely talented and splendid people in the past few months. To all of them, I am truly grateful.

I would like to begin by expressing my immense gratitude and appreciation for all the writers for their invaluable contributions. Without their punctilious dedication, this edition would not have been possible. Many of these stories have emerged out of the creative writing course taught by Dr. Kapur and for which I was his teaching assistant. Hence, these stories hold very special places in our hearts as we all have nurtured them together. To be able to see them in print is immensely gratifying for us all.

I must convey my deepest gratitude and admiration for the illustrators of this edition who have worked with inspirational dedication, sincerity and innovation in producing illustrations which have brought all the stories to life in many ways. Their distinctive styles have produced interesting conversations between various stories and illustrations, and have enriched this edition deeply. To my wonderful friends in the MFA department of SNU, I am deeply indebted. Priyesh, Raj, Santanu, Divya and Ankit – I thank you all for your commendable efforts and for your friendship.

Our design team deserves a special vote of thanks as it is their fine skills which have brought our cumulative efforts to its final fruition. Soumya and Lakshmi graciously agreed to help us out and they were always amenable to our many demands. I am also deeply grateful to our copy editors, Isha and Keerthana, whose contributions were instrumental in helping us produce a magazine worthy of the English department of Shiv Nadar University.



Finally, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to Dr. Vikram Kapur who gave me this valuable opportunity to be part of something as remarkable as *The Freewheeler*. This journey has been wonderfully educational for me just like every other aspect of my assistantship. To him, I owe many thanks for being such a brilliant teacher and guide. Without his unending support, I would have been completely lost.

I hope this issue of *The Freewheeler* brings as much joy to our readers as it has to our entire team.

THE FREEWHEELER TEAM



Editor

Neha Mishra

Writers

Sameer Abraham Thomas

Shubhangi Verma

Madhav Mehrotra

Shruti Shhreyasi

Ishan Gupta

Harsha Vytla

Nimisha Upadhyay

Gokulnath Govindan

Artists

Raj Jariwala

Priyesh Gothwal

Ankit Ravani

Divya Singh

Santanu Chatterjee

Designers

Soumya Rampal

Lakshmi Ravi

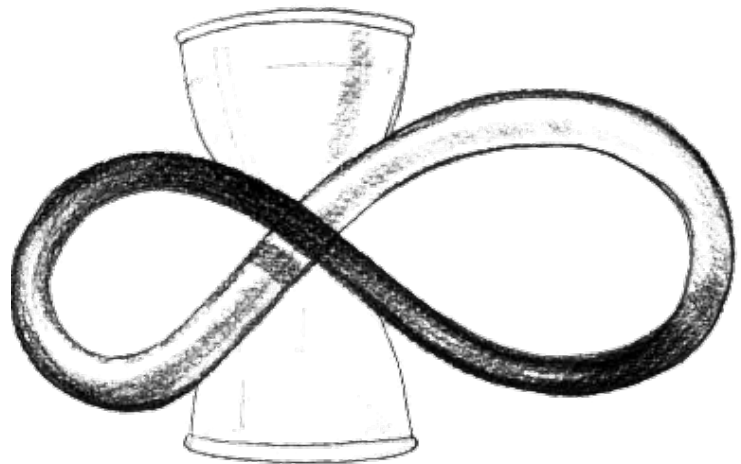
Proofreaders

Keerthana A K

Isha R. Vedantam

Faculty Advisor

Dr. Vikram Kapur



Cover Illustration

Raj Jariwala

CONTRIBUTORS



Sameer Abraham Thomas is a final year MA student of English Literature at Shiv Nadar University. His muse when it comes to writing is far too often the dread of an impending deadline.

SAMEER ABRAHAM THOMAS
Writer

Shruti Shhreyasi can be found in her bed, or eating at various spots around the campus. She likes to create stories in her head, and (usually) avoids jotting them down.

SHRUTI SHHREYASI
Writer



A nomad, hunting for the path that leads to what he wants to do in life without disappointing the ones important to him.

ISHAN GUPTA
Writer

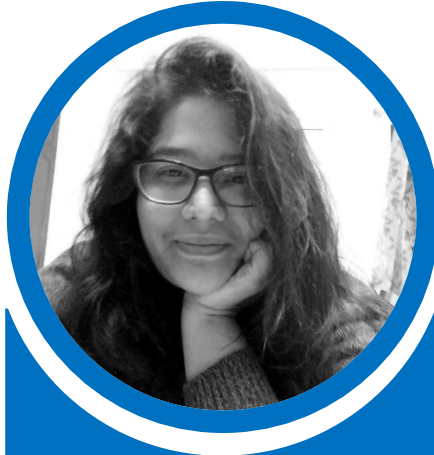
CONTRIBUTORS



Good Samaritan, washed up student and a gifted napper. He also prefers his puns intended.

GOKULNATH GOVINDAN

Writer



Shubhangi Verma is a second-year undergraduate student of English at Shiv Nadar University. She is an avid reader and writer of poetry and writes short stories as well. Her stories are about unusual and exceptional events in what are supposed to be commonplace, domesticated, even unremarkable scenarios. In her free time, Shubhangi is found reading, doing Sudoku or cooking.

SHUBHANGI VERMA

Writer

Because reality is boring, Madhav's imagination is constantly roaring, in the worlds of Gods and monsters, where new stories he's exploring.

MADHAV MEHROTRA

Writer



CONTRIBUTORS



Bookaholic. Travel Freak. Self-professed Master of Puns and Sarcasm. You can find her running full-tilt into embarrassing situations all the time. Champion at making awkward circumstances even more awkward. Her sanity left one day to find itself and hasn't returned yet.

**NIMISHA
UPADHYAY**

Writer

Fragment of a
memory.

HARSHA VYTLA

Writer



Priyesh Gothwal, Masters of Fine Arts, Shiv Nadar University. Assembled on a spongy, red and green patched, four legged, initiated support – posted over a uniform background.

**PRIYESH
GOTHWAL**

Artist

CONTRIBUTORS



Ankit Ravani is from Mumbai, studying in MFA - Visual Art. He prefers sleeping and scavenging to writing a bio, or anything that adds to his abundant confusion.

ANKIT RAVANI

Artist



Santanu Chatterjee is a student of MFA, Visual Art at SNU. He is an artist who lives not in an ivory tower, but walks amongst us.

**SANTANU
CHATTERJEE**

Artist

Visual Artist, Shiv Nadar University.

RAJ JARIWALA

Artist



CONTRIBUTORS



Divya is an art student from New Delhi. Likes the underground. And Jungles.

DIVYA SINGH

Artist

An OCD victim with a fetish for footwear, desiring to bake all kinds of desserts at least once. Just hopped on the jet plane to find her warm, fuzzy 'Sheldon Spot' in this freakishly big world.

**ISHA R.
VEDANTAM**
Proofreader



Proofreading is a guilty pleasure for her, so it's not surprising she's often described as a grammar nazi. Lately, she's taken a detour from reading fiction to explore books on science and non-fiction.

KEERTHANA A K
Proofreader

CONTRIBUTORS



Soumya Rampal has a dream that one day, Comic Sans won't exist and Helvetica will rule all.

**SOUMYA
RAMPAL**

Designer

Part-time film maker, part-time history major and all time storyteller. Constantly oscillates between the time gone by and the time yet to come.

LAKSHMI RAVI
Designer



VERBATIM



Sameer Abraham Thomas

Some words are like water – they flow through you every day and you take them for granted. Fittingly, Water is one of these words. Hello is another, although in an age of anonymity and smart phones, Hey is slowly taking its place. Hello, in the meantime, is slowly crystallizing into this delicate, brittle thing whose meaning trembles with the passing wind and threatens to crack if overused. It's heading the way of the Telegram and the Bicycle. One of those words was replaced by newer words for newer technology; the other splintered and left amputees - Cycle, Bike - for us to dribble and imbibe. Like water. But not like Water.

This process, this aging, this slow transformation of words has been happening since before I was born and will continue well after I die, when the only word I know will be Silence, though I will have forgotten how it sounds. No more words for me, but only because I won't have the energy to pay attention any more. The bulb will have fused and darkness will reign.

Before the bulb, there was the candle. It was dim, it flickered, it was unsteady, its gleam barely illuminated the one who lit it, let alone anything else. My childhood was the time of the candle. In the unsteady, wavering light of my mind, words barely had any shape, let alone texture. I had to feel for them in the dark to know what they were. Who knows how many fragile words I broke in my blind fumbling? When you are a child, you don't care about the things you break, about misused words, unless they belong to you, unless you grew up with them, unless you can't

function without them. Obviously, that isn't the case for a child who has survived just fine without language thus far, thank you very much. So we manhandled words before we were men, before the word even meant anything, before we learnt to use it with care. Meanwhile, the grown-ups laughed or cringed at our flailing, depending on how they loved us and how much.

My parents cringed in private, but laughed in public. The laughter spread among crowds of people and surrounded me, those shapeless Hahaha sounds, so loud and cruel. Unlike the other words, they shone with their own light. Even my little candle was enough to make out what they meant. Belittled, I stumbled back in search of a place to hide. That's when I found the words.

I touched them differently now, because they weren't toys any more. They were walls between me and the laughter, and you know what they say about people who live in glass houses. I learnt not to throw stones; I learnt to not even knock. I caressed those walls of words and let them whisper to me. I traced their contours with my fingertips and kissed them until my lips were numb. I discovered that words like Pressure contained their meanings within them: Pressure literally presses against the inside of your lips until they explode open. The teeth fall down like a shutter in order to stop the sound from escaping, but it seeps out from the spaces between them until finally and reluctantly, they part and the word sighs free.

Other words were made in ways that are a mystery to me. The word Eyes has a disappearing odour like a

“

This process, this aging, this slow transformation of words has been happening since before I was born and will continue well after I die, when the only word I know will be Silence, though I will have forgotten how it sounds.

”

doctor's office from the distant past. The word See does not exist; it has been replaced by its twin sister Sea who sighs and smells of salt like she should. The word Light pushes away all other words around it and stands on its own, begging for attention but not staying long. I don't use these words that much anymore because they confuse me.

I took the words that made sense, the words I liked, and I shaped them in the way a dent forms in a sofa you sit in day after day. Those words melted and bent for me and settled into the shape I wanted them to be in; others didn't. The ones that did, I used like building blocks to make my mansion. Its Gardens were Lush and Soft and Sweet. The Water in the Taps smelled like Glass and felt like Velvet. And most important was the Wall made of Bricks and Bars that were Smooth and Rigid and Bitter so that no one could tear them down and so that no one would be tempted to try. Words

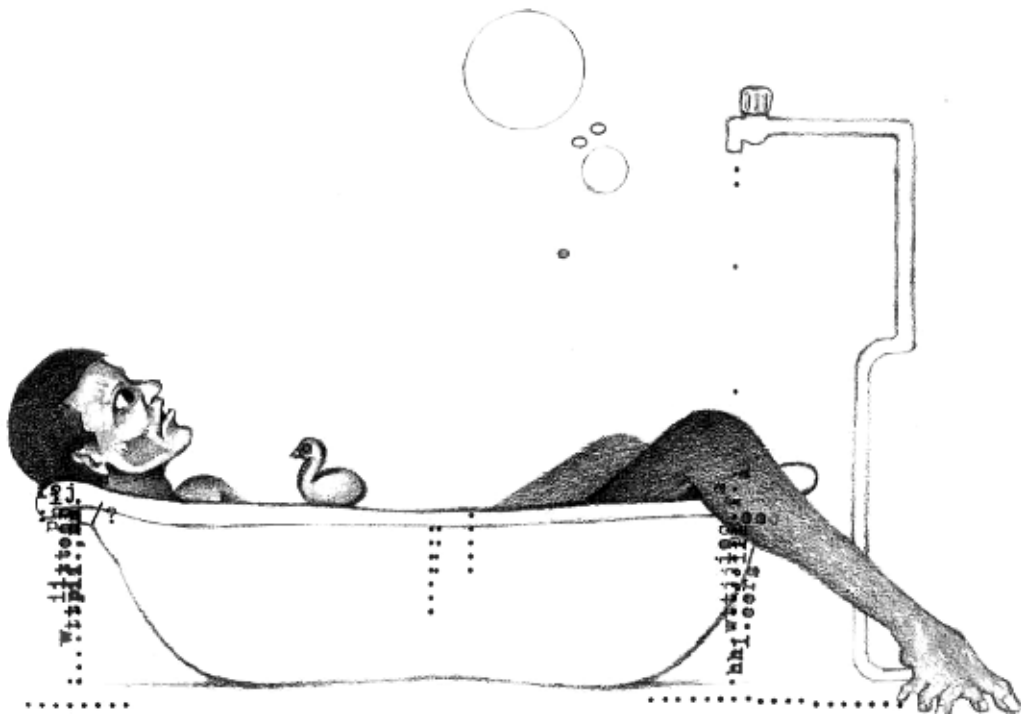


Illustration: Priyesh Gothwal

mated with other words and made huge interlocking fortifications that even I struggled to comprehend in their enormity and diversity of Sounds and Textures and Smells and Tastes. These hybrid words were like fine Wines made of compound sensations, all of which could be summoned up effortlessly with the Pop of a Cork, even if the way they assaulted my sense was baffling. The point is that they kept out the laughter, the Hahas. It became softer and dimmer until it stopped. Maybe it really did stop, or maybe my walls finally became Thick enough to block them out. I am not Tempted to find out which one is true.

Instead I stay inside and experiment with words. There used to be a time when I introduced words into my mansion like Gatsby throwing a party. Anyone and everyone was invited; even if they weren't, they came anyway. I'm too old for all that now, so the party's over and any guests left in the house are too hung-over to leave. They're like family now, become familiar with use, often forgotten, part of the great family of Water. I leave them alone to tinker with the Pianos and Sleep.

But like I said, my mansion has become vast and labyrinthine. Within its bowels are many words long forgotten, dragged in by cats unknown, slumbering and unfamiliar. I've grown to dislike the Unfamiliar. They are bestial and unruly and they hide among us. There weren't so many of them around earlier, but now it seems like I'm always finding one under the Carpet or in the Closet or crawling around in the Sink. It's Disgusting. Like Cockroaches. And like Cockroaches, they're notoriously difficult to Kill.

How does one Kill a word? No idea. I've told you how they grow old and Brittle, and I've told you how to break a word, but words are Resilient things. They put themselves back together when you're not looking, or someone else Sneaks in and Repairs them. I suspect that it takes a village to Kill a word. In this mansion though, I am Alone. This means that I cannot Kill words, but it also means they cannot be Repaired. Sometimes I find words that have Decayed and Decomposed, spilling out their Warm, Moist suffixes and prefixes all over the Tiles in the bathroom. Eventually, all that is left is a Putrid, Sludge-like

substance that smells strongly like the word Forgotten.

The problem with the Unfamiliar is that they are made of a substance very similar to the Forgotten. The only difference is that they move around, leaving a glistening trail of Slime wherever they go. They are the Zombies of my mansion. How does one Kill that which is already Dead?

The answer is that one doesn't. Instead, I have learnt to Tame the Unfamiliar, to Domesticate them. I search for them in my Cavernous Realm and once I've found one, I turn it over and over in my hands, sniffing it, tasting it, listening to it carefully until finally all the Sludge drips away revealing a new Member of the Family. At first, the word is Brittle and Delicate. It needs care and attention, a tap here, a scratch there, until finally it gives. The word becomes Fluid and Familiar with Use and joins the Family of Water.

Not all words end up like this. There are some Stubborn Creatures which Refuse to be Tamed. If after all the Painstaking Effort I put in, the word still remains Unfamiliar, I Recognize it



for what it is: a word from another Language. There was a time when I let many Languages into my mansion and Made Love to them slowly, softly. But now the party's over and Unfamiliar Languages are no longer welcome. They are Trespassers whose Bastards still Dwell in my home, unnamed and unrecognized. I leave them be; they tend to Die faster than other words. As a result of my Civilizing Mission, my house is now Bursting at the Seams with words. It becomes difficult to Navigate one's way through the Clutter. Words Die all the time, but not fast enough. For the longest time, I was Bamboozled by this Conundrum. Until one day, an Answer presented itself.

It happened Serendipitously, Inadvertently, Unpredictably. And it happened because of Music. I loved listening to Music with words. It was like watching one's Children put up a Pageant in the house. So many Children and, I must admit, such a Stern, Unmoveable Father. But Eminently Enjoyable. Instrumental Music was far more Threatening. The sounds were Beautiful, but without words, they lacked Structure. I don't like things that are Amorphous. Words are my Stormtroopers; they must Ferret out those Pesky Amorphous Experiences and Concentrate them into Patterns of Meaning. Words and words alone, that is the Final Solution. Alas, my words were Insufficient to give Form to this new Adversary. It was then that I found, in a long-forgotten Chamber, words that I had Tamed in my Youth. They were Unfamiliar words that had been made Permanently Familiar. Some were even Foreign words Converted into this Language. Ennui. Zeitgeist. Melody. Harmonics. Capacious words that like Tanks could contain my Weaker words, Tanks that could be filled to the brim with Water and made into a New Weapon that won for me the War on Music. Now, in Peacetime, I Appropriated these Tanks and Converted them into

Reservoirs to store all my Surplus words. Nostalgia was so much easier to organize than Joy, Pain, Memory, Bittersweet, Poignant and Loss. My house became more Economical – yet another Tank turned Reservoir.

Perhaps it was because I was so Absorbed in my Wars and my Archiving that I didn't notice that my Walls were becoming Weaker. Words from the outside were Battering them, Undermining them, Destroying them until finally, the first Pioneers reached my ears. They were Nasty things, words that were Not Mine, Water that tasted Brackish, Tanks of a Different Design, Someone Else's Words, Not Mine, Not Mine. Worst of all, they brought with them some of those Words that I had Purged, that I had Banished from my house from the very Beginning and now here they were, part of a Strange Army that Assaulted me all at once, a Chaotic Horde, Destroying All in its Path:

please please you have to come home with us the doctor said he could help you're losing your mind can you even remember me I know you can't see me but we could try the surgery the eye transplant or the cornea or whatever it is just please stop keeping us out we don't even know if you can still hear us anymore and it's killing us please the doctor said you can still make out light and shadow that's something sometimes I don't even understand the things you mumble it scares me you weren't always like this try and remember there were more things than words there were colours and light and shadows and sunshine and bulbs and candles and faces and family and the world not just the mansion not just the words not just the mansion not just words please pleasepleaseplease you weren't always-

And there! Last of all that one word, that Minotaur I thought I'd chained inside my Labyrinth, so Colossal I can't even see it. See? I Banished you, See! Do you think these Walls will not

rise again, will not be rebuilt? Be gone, See! Be gone, Colours! But they have that Beast on their side, so big I can only feel its Letters as it Pummels me and Batters my Walls.

B for Blood, smelling of Iron, tasting of Pain

L for Lies, words that have turned Traitor on their own kind

I, not Eye, that word is Forbidden

N for No, no more, I Refuse, I refuse, I won't spell it, I won't, stop it, go away, STOP.

...

Silence.

But my words are here too.

The walls are back. The army has disappeared.

Everything is in shambles. My words are scattered, nameless, masterless. Let me remember, remembering can put my house back together. What was it like? What were the words like?

What do I remember? I remember, I remember...

I remember that just before the walls returned, I saw that I was on an island surrounded by sludge. Nothing but sludge as far as the eye could see. Only the walls could keep them out. What was that sludge? What were the walls? Remember, remember, not what you saw, forget what you saw, forget the word. I remember that once the world wasn't an ocean of sludge. Once, it was, it was...

Ah! I remember!

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was Water.

MINUTES TO THE 26TH



Shubhangi Verma

Nayantara and Daivik

Nayantara and Daivik sat opposite each other at the corner table they always took in Leopold Café. On the table between them, there lay a diamond ring. Daivik smiled gently and looked at Nayantara. Her eyes were as wide as saucers and her body unnaturally stiff. He could see a little sparkle in the corners of her eyes and could sense she was taken completely by surprise, but was trying not to let him know. Four years together, and he could catch all her lies.

A little later, Daivik's smile had turned into a frown. She'd been quiet for too long. Daivik knew she didn't have a habit of shutting up, but just when he needed her to talk, she'd frozen up. Nothing. Not even a peep. She'd been switching her eyes between the ring and him every 10 seconds.

'Nayantara, will you please say something? I'm getting really worried here.'

Radio silence across the table.

He reached for her hand and she looked up.

'Huh? Oh yeah, say something. Um, I don't know Daivik. This is just so...,' her voice trailed off.

'So good?' He looked into her eyes. 'Bad?'

'Give me a minute,' and off she went.

Oh good. Now when she should say something, she storms off into the bathroom. Probably calling her best friend. The whole time she complains

that I'm not romantic enough and when I propose in the place where we first met, she turns into a pod version of herself. Perfect!

The ring was still sitting in the middle of the table, staring at him, as if trying to say something. Daivik shut the box and set it aside.

Finally, Nayantara emerged from the mysterious place of girls' talk and troubles. He could see her walking confidently across the room.

'Um, so I thought about it.'

'And?' Daivik's heart was ready to take a leap as a fresh tear rolled down her cheek.

'And yes,' she whispered.

Daivik took a deep breath and they smiled at each other.

Standing at the door of the café, are 4 men with guns who start firing.

Rajesh

The clock told him it was 10:07. He was already late. It was his daughter's third birthday. Though she wasn't old enough to know that it was her birthday yet, he and his wife Rohini insisted on making a big deal out of it.

Another 53 minutes before I can head home, thought Rajesh as he sat behind the counter at Leopold Café, where he served as the manager, and doubled as the cashier.

This night was similar to every other. The place was crowded and readily served as a watering hole and a

restaurant for the people of Colaba. Rajesh saw two customers come in. Yes, he knew them. Daivik and Nayantara. They were one of his regulars. He smiled and waved towards them and they came to say their hellos. As soon as Nayantara turned around, Daivik looked at him questioningly. Rajesh nodded. Everything was ready- the food, the wine, and the champagne for later. As a waiter took them to their table, Rajesh smiled to himself. He was really happy for the two of them.

Rajesh's phone rang. It was Rohini. 'Haan Rohini, bolo... nahin abhi bas thodi der mein... haan theek hai,' he said. Rohini was obsessed with

“

Well, there goes my night, thought Rajesh, now suddenly longing for Rohini. The night was getting tougher and tougher for him. He glanced over at Daivik and Nayantara's table. At least someone was going home to a family tonight.

”

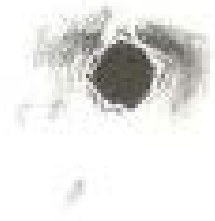
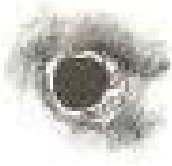


Illustration: Ankit Ravani

everything being perfect tonight, including his punctuality. He knew how much Rohini hated that his job took so much of his time. At his earlier job, he came home on time, back in the arms of his loving wife and infant daughter. But as Akanksha grew up, so did the expenses. In his heart, he knew that they needed the money that came from an upscale restaurant, even though it meant that he could only hear his daughter's laughter on the phone when his wife called, and get home to just see her sleeping figure.

Rajesh went back to his work. He needed to talk to the chef. With the amount of wastage in the restaurant and the prices of the new, exotic ingredients that he was insistent on, they had to work out a new system. As he thought of the easiest way to approach this topic with his headstrong chef, his phone rang. It was the boss. Mr. Rehman was not an easy man to work for. Dreading the conversation that would follow, he picked up the phone. After a hefty talk about the finances, Mr. Rehman said he was on his way to the restaurant. Well, there goes my night, thought Rajesh, now suddenly longing for Rohini. The night was getting

tougher and tougher for him. He glanced over at Daivik and Nayantara's table. At least someone was going home to a family tonight.

As he thought of calling his wife, he heard a crash from the kitchen. He rushed back and saw a stack of broken white plates on the floor and a panic-stricken waiter standing amidst them. 'Clean this up. Now!' growled Rajesh. 'Raja, this is the second time you're breaking cutlery in the restaurant. Get your act together.'

He signalled to the other waiters to help clean the mess and went with a couple more to the back to get more plates. The boss was not going to like this. He and the waiters found the plates and headed to the kitchen.

Standing at the door of the café, are 4 men with guns who start firing.

1 day later

Leopold Café, Colaba,

South Mumbai

The police come in with a big team.

Time for the dirty work, thought Inspector Mehta. He had gotten almost zero sleep in the last two days and had been functioning on half-eaten food and copious amounts of coffee.

The team spread around the café, collecting evidence and trying to identify the bodies.

Mehta walked around the café, supervising the work. He turned into a corner and saw something shiny. He went and picked it up. It was a ring. It seemed to have fallen out of a little black box next to it. Right behind the box was an upturned table, which served to hide two seemingly young people. A man and a woman. Both were surrounded by a pool of dried, caked blood.

'Rajesh ji? I need you and the other staff to identify as many of the bodies as you can. Please come in,' said Mehta. Rajesh came in with a few waiters and saw Daivik and Nayantara's limp figures on the floor. That's when Rajesh Khatri, manager of Leopold Café, husband of Rohini, and father of Akanksha, realized that Leopold Café would turn into a martyr.

THE DEVIL YOU KNOW



Madhav Mehrotra

As you all know, everything began when Father said, 'Let there be Light.' First, Father created the cosmos. Then he made the first beings: the four of us. We were the first angels, eventually known as the archangels: Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and me, your narrator, Lucifer. Yes, yes. I'm the devil. Satan. I'm responsible for all the evil in the world, as that book of lies told you. Well, this is my version of events, my justification for what I did. I assure you, it's the truth.

I was Father's favourite archangel, His favourite in all of creation. I was revered by legions of angels, and I was His second – in – command. One day, Father summoned me to his private chambers. He was in his balcony, which overlooked the Earth in all its beautiful glory: the ever expansive blue seas, snow-capped mountains, magnificent green jungles and the dry, dusty deserts.

'Lucifer.' Father acknowledged me without turning around. Today, He had taken the form of a twenty foot tall titan, with a greying beard and curly hair. He was dressed in white robes.

'Greetings, Father,' I said, kneeling. 'How may I be of assistance?'

'Rise, my son,' He said. 'I have summoned you before me today to give you a task: assemble all the angels, for I plan to reveal my newest creation.'

'Of course, Father.'

I went and joined him in the balcony. 'If you don't mind my saying so, Father, you sound tired. Are you all right?'

'I am tired, my son. Creating new beings is an exhausting task.'

'I can only imagine the strain it must take on you,' I said sympathetically.

'Perhaps one day, you will create something of your own, Lucifer?'

'I am not a creator, Father. Besides, I thought it was an "exhausting task".'

'That it is.' His blue eyes twinkled. 'But it's worth it.'

'I suppose it must be. If there's anything I can do to help...'

'Very kind of you to offer, my son.'

'You can trust me with anything, Father.'

He smiled, and put his hand on my shoulder. 'I know I can.'

I went to my angel mate, Anna, and we enjoyed a nice evening roaming the cosmos. She was intrigued by what Father had planned to reveal to the assembly.

'What do you think it is, Lucy?' she asked, twirling her blonde hair. She had bright yellow eyes like the sun.

'You know I don't like that name.'

'Which is why I use it.'

I glared at her.

'Fine – Lucifer. What do you think Father has to say?'

'He didn't give me any details, apart from the fact that He's revealing His newest creation.'

'I hope it's something new and fun – maybe with wings. Or talons.' She grinned at me, stroking my long black hair.

When I was alone in my private chambers in Heaven, I thought back to Father's words. *Perhaps someday, you will create something of your own, Lucifer?* At the time, I had said I wasn't a creator. But now, after having thought it over a little, I realized I could be a creator. After all, I was Father's greatest creation so it stood to reason that I could create something magnificent myself. I looked around, and decided to go for a walk around Heaven. Maybe I could think of something to create while I was out.

“

It was long, and had no legs or ears. It hissed at me, revealing a forked tongue, and I smiled.

”

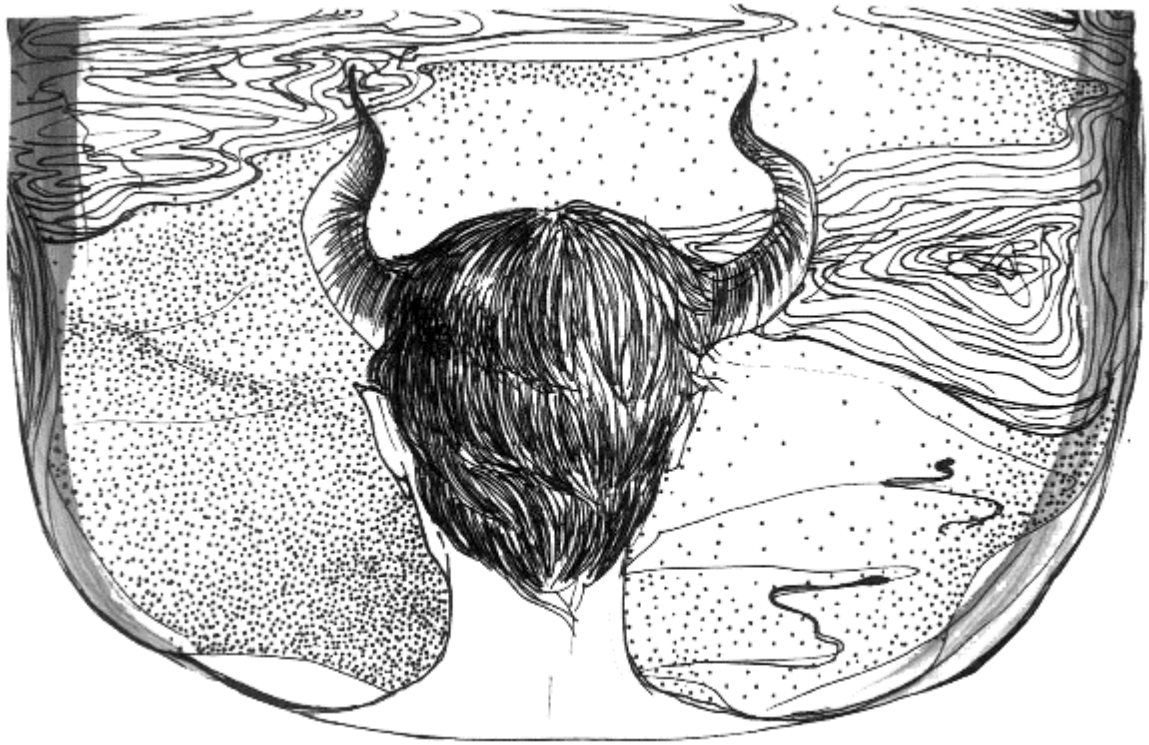


Illustration: Divya Singh

Heaven. . .how best to describe it? Look up, and you saw the sun, moon and stars. Look down, and you saw nature in all its magnificent glory. As an archangel, I was granted my own chambers, and they appeared however I wanted them to – my idea of Heaven. I had chosen a large room with tapestries of Father and Anna on the ceiling. Looking at them always brought joy to my heart.

I thought long and hard about what I wanted to create. I knew immediately that it would have to be something different, the likes of which had never been seen before. Something without legs. . .yes. I used my magic and made an animal materialize in front of me. It was long, and had no legs or ears. It hissed at me, revealing a forked tongue, and I smiled.

At long last, the day of the assembly arrived. Entire legions of angels had gathered to witness Father's newest creation. There was a flash of light, and Father appeared.

'Welcome, everyone,' Father began in a sonorous voice. 'Today is the day I shall unveil my latest creation, whom

I have decided to call humans.' He paused, and then he looked at me with sorrow in his eyes. 'They are my greatest creation. Bow to them, love them and serve them with the same dedication that you have served me, my children.'

His greatest creation? I was His greatest creation. I was His favourite. There was no way I would bow down to the...little hairless apes. What had He dubbed them? HUMANS. I voiced my concerns to Anna, who disagreed.

'Oh but look, they're so cute, Lucifer. You'll learn to love them.'

'Love them? They're broken, flawed, aberrations! They need to be destroyed.'

'Destroyed? What is the matter with you?' Anna asked me angrily.

'Look at them! Living in the Garden of Eden without a care. What makes them so special? Why should I bow down to them?'

'Because Father asked us to.'

'Father is mistaken,' I proclaimed.

'I will ask you again: what is the matter with you? Why do you hate them so much?'

'You're a fool for not seeing it, Anna.'

Her face turned red with anger. 'I'm no fool, Lucifer. You are.'

'You're really choosing mankind over me, Anna?'

She met my eyes, suddenly calm and cold. 'Yes. Yes, I am.'

'I'll prove it to you. I'll prove that mankind is everything that I say they are, and then you'll have me back, Anna.'

'You take too much pride in yourself, Lucy. And that is a sin.'

I spread my white wings wide, and started my descent from Heaven to the Garden of Eden, where two humans lived – Adam and Eve, they were called. I was shocked at Anna's betrayal, and couldn't begin to fathom why she would choose



mankind over me. What was so great about them? Nothing. Nothing at all. Despite my anger, I was a little sad that Anna and I were no longer together. Perhaps if I had done things differently . . . no. Regrets aren't for me.

I transformed into the creature that I had created what seemed like eons ago, but couldn't have been more than a few days: a serpent. I slithered towards the two humans, who were admiring the sunset, not even tempted to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

'Eat the fruits,' I whispered to them. They looked at me, not with alarm but curiosity.

'Who are you?' asked Eve.

'What's in a name? A rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.'

'Why are you here?' asked Adam.

'I asked you to eat the fruits, because He lied to you. Eating the fruit will give you all that you have ever desired.'

They looked at each other uncertainly. 'But we were told not to eat,' Adam said.

'That's only because He didn't want to share the knowledge with you. Eat, and you shall have all that you can ever ask for.'

At that moment, the sun set and a shadow crossed Adam and Eve's faces. They were now shrouded in darkness.

'We shall eat,' they said together. Outside, I showed an emotionless face, but inside, I was laughing.

After returning to Heaven, I went and told Anna all that had transpired. But instead of praising me and apologizing like I expected, she cursed me and flew away.



Illustration: Raj Jariwala

'Lucifer,' said a voice behind me. I turned around to see Father. His expression was deathly calm, rather than furious, and that unnerved me.

'What...what have you done?' was all He could say.

'Why, Father, I've proven that mankind is not worthy of our love. I've proven that mankind is not your greatest creation. That honour belongs to me, and me alone.'

'Oh, my son...' He began to tremble.

'Father!' I rushed forward to see if I could help Him, but He snapped His fingers and I froze.

'What are you doing?' I shouted at him.

'What needs to be done.' He faced me, His blue eyes looking right into my green eyes. 'Anna was right, Lucifer. You take too much pride in yourself. That pride led you to become envious of mankind, and commit a crime against Heaven itself. For your sins, even humans must suffer.'

'Good,' I spat. 'They deserve it.'

'For your crimes, the punishment must be severe: you shall henceforth be expelled from Heaven.'

'What?' I shouted. 'No! Father, please! Everything I did, I did out of love for you! I was concerned that mankind was leading you astray. All I did was prove that they're unworthy.'

'It is sad that you truly believe that, my son. Now, begone!' He waved his hand and turned away, but not before I saw a lone tear trace its way down His cheek.

I fell to Earth, then Hell, where I was doomed to rule over demons and punish sinners for the rest of eternity. But in my defence, I was right about you little hairless apes. Look at what you've done to each other. You kill, you lie, you steal. You're slowly destroying this once beautiful planet, and most of you either don't realize it or don't care. Here ends my story, where I've told you why I did what I did. With this, I hope you realize that I'm not the devil you know.

COMPANIONS



Shruti Shhreyasi

The cab comes to a halt at the restaurant. She double checks the address on her phone and gets out. The 'Four Queens Casino'. Not bad. She hands the driver his fare while he gives her the onceover she has come to expect in her line of work. His gaze rakes over her curves, put on ample display thanks to a skin-tight black dress, and then stops at her full lips – painted a classy mauve. She tucks a brown strand behind her ears and smiles coyly at him, 'Here's your tab and a card for Madames Salon', she winks at him and sashays towards the casino doors.

Las Vegas is another level of chaotic. Tourists want to milk as much as they can from the Sin City. Casino-dwellers give her knowing looks as she passes by. She smiles at the especially dapper looking ones.

'There'll be a reservation under Brad Carter', she tells the hostess standing outside the restaurant. She's especially nervous today; the client is mid-level but very essential to her. Her purse holds all the components that'll make this night easy for her.

The restaurant is fancy enough; they have one of those open kitchens-where you can see what the chef is preparing. People are laughing aloud, clinking wine glasses. Ah. Way better than last week. Greek inspired paintings decorate the walls. Before she can take in anything more, the hostess leads her to an elevator. Fuck. She hated elevators.

She's seven and the basement walls are closing in. She's trapped. She can't breathe. There's no one. Mum and Dad are long gone. She hears a door open and footsteps -

'Are you going to get in, Ma'am?' the hostess' face is showing signs of annoyance.

'Yeah. Sorry. Thought we had a ground floor reservation.'

She feels a lot like Alice about to enter Wonderland.

The elevator opens to reveal a dimly lit room. A chandelier hangs from the ceiling. The crowd consists mainly of old men and younger girls. There is a bar across the room, the walls are draped with velvet curtains. Ah. A secluded space for men and their "companions".

The table she is led to is at one corner of the room. Brad is pudgy; he has a balding head and brown eyes. 'Hello, my dear. Have a seat', his tone is something she's accustomed to. It's meant to put her at ease and make the man seem alluring. The latter doesn't happen, only happens with the best of them. She sits and is about to say a witty rejoinder but he cuts her off.

'Now, I prefer brunettes to blondes. You fit that. But I like longer hair. Not this,' he points at her head, 'blunt thing you kids like. Nothing personal', he takes a sip from the wine glass kept in front of him and says, 'Saw you with that oaf Paul last week. Wanted to treat you to something a little classy before we took it home.'

Paul? That foot fetish guy? He'd called her to a 'gentlemen's club' across town and fallen asleep in his own vomit, while referring to her as 'Madame's whore' rather vociferously.

She leans in to give him a good view, and says in her 'business' voice 'Mr. Benson is very good to me. But why waste time talking about him?' she smiles at him, 'You seem way more interesting to me anyway'. She holds up the wine glass as if to make a toast and takes a sip.

'You are enchanting, eh? And call me Brad. You look a little like Angelina yourself. We'd make a fine pair.'

'You looked more like the "sir" type. But oh, well. I guess not everyone is into that.'

He blushes a little.

'I haven't gotten what I want in a long time'. He takes a large sip from the glass of red wine kept in front of him. 'You won't satisfy me in some aspects but-'

“

She's especially nervous today; the client is mid-level but very essential to her. Her purse holds all the components that'll make this night easy for her.

”



'And what is it you want?' she refills his glass from the bottle kept in front of her.

'Excellent company', he smiles wryly and calls for the waiter.

She's ten and food is very scarce. She nibbles at the candy. Candy is a rarity. She found this thrown on the school ground one day. School is probably going to stop soon too. She gets a proper sandwich on her better-behaved days; usually she gets a piece of bread with mouldy cheese.

The restaurant specializes in steak and she swears on her brown hair dye that it is the best steak she has ever had.

'Let's-lets uh...get a bit of fresh air and bend-no-end the evening at my house?'

Brad's slurring intensifies as he calls for the check. She's been pouring him drinks consistently; somewhere along the way he stopped noticing that she wasn't pouring him wine, but whisky from her flask. Makes her work easier. She's careful not to empty the flask, she needs it for her own use later.

She holds back a yawn and says, 'Sure.'

He offers her the crook of his arm as they get up to leave. She takes a deep breath and takes it, she doesn't want to but he's swaying and she doesn't want them to look foolish.

'I-I probably b-bored you. But I haven't had any c-company in a while.'

She pats him on his arm, widens her hazel eyes at him and says – 'That's what I'm for.'

The elevator ride is worse than she'd imagined. She feels trapped, terrified and faint all at once. 'Any problem, my dear?' His grip on her arm has tightened.



Illustration: Ankit Ravani

She fakes a smile. 'Not really, slightly claustrophobic, that's all.'

She's twelve and wafer thin. The basement is gone. An apartment room with bare walls has taken its place. The elevators terrify her. The slutty neighbour looks at her suspiciously. One day, she hands her a ticket and tells her to be at the bus

station at twelve. She gets onto the bus and never looks back.

As the valet brings out his car, Brad continues to sway lightly on his feet. She steadies him. He is mumbling and slurring.

'My sister had long blonde hair. Her daughter cried so much as she



watched it fall off. The chemo was horrible. But that little bitch. She -'

She holds her purse closer to herself. She only had to endure this for a couple more minutes. Everything was in motion, Madame had procured a far-off house for her.

By the time Brad's car comes around, his head is lolling on her shoulder. She gets into the driver's seat, and tucks him in the passenger seat. She thanks the valet and drives away.

She used to have long blonde hair. It fell past her shoulders. Strangers said that she looked just like Alice from the Disney version of the book. She chops it off and dyes it brown when she's fourteen.

The basement is dingy, the only source of light is a bulb hanging directly over Brad's head. The basement has white tiles, white walls and no window. Brad sits on a lone chair in the middle, slowly awakening. His hands are tied behind his back. The girl sits opposite him, on the floor. A glass of water is kept to his right.

'What- where am I?'

She brings out a knife, gets up and presses it to his neck.

'How did you find me?'

'Is this a joke? I-'

She presses the knife harder. A trickle of blood flows down.

'How did you get to know of me?'

'I-I saw you last week with Paul. You caught my attention. I told you so. Please let me go. I'm-I'm a nice man.'

The slutty neighbour fashions herself as Madame. She enrolls her in school and promises her a place in her 'business'. She has nightmares. She's tied to a chair and he's running her hands through her hair. Calling her a nice, little girl.

'What's your type?'

'I know people in high places, you little whore.' Any semblance of helplessness is gone from his voice, 'You will regret this.'

She hits him on the side of his head with the blunt end of the knife. He doesn't flinch.

'Answer the question.'

'Skinny. Brunette.'

'Anything else? What have you wanted for a long time?'

There is a long pause. He looks at the girl closely.

'I think you know, Katy.'

The girl slashes the knife across his face.

She's eleven and asks him if he's a 'paedophile'. She heard it on the news. He strikes her so hard it leaves a mark. The TV and Disney movies are gone the next day. Only the couch in the basement remains.

He howls in pain and struggles. She takes the flask out of her bag and pours its contents on his face.

Tears stream out of his eyes. The cut runs across the left side of his face. His shirt is bloody.

'Why did you do it? The basement, the room', her voice is barely contained, 'Why?'

'You - you little *bitch*', he clutches his face. 'You wouldn't satisfy me without being restrained. Always crying out for mom. We all have our urges.'

'How many times have you used us to gain sympathy? Your dead cousin and her ungrateful daughter who ran away?'

'It has brought me more sympathy than you can imagine'. He smiles.

She picks up the glass of water in front of him and pours it on the floor.

She's eleven and hungry. So, so hungry. She eats all the food in the fridge. He comes home, looks at the mess and doesn't let her eat for a week.

She takes out her phone from her purse and texts Madame:

Thanks for all the help. Found the right place.

Madame had been more than willing to help once she told her whom she'd seen at the bar. His car will be taken care of by tomorrow.

She then smashes the glass on the floor and spreads the broken shards evenly around him.

Brad's shouts become increasingly desperate as she locks the basement door. Once outside the house, she uses the remaining whiskey and a lighter to set the key on fire.

A sense of calm prevails over her as she watches the flames engulf it. She keeps the remains in her purse.

The elevator at her apartment building doesn't seem to enclose her for once.

LAKSHMAN-REKHA



Ishan Gupta

I

‘Why do humans hate us Roachy?’

‘I am not sure if I can answer that question Bubbles. We don’t interfere in their activities. We only crawl on the floor to get our food, eat it and go back to sleep.’

‘Exactly! But these giants are full of hatred and inflict violence upon our kind. The page in their dictionary where the meaning of the word “peace” occurs was probably eaten up by the rat.’

‘Ha-ha! Also, the other day, as I was circling the vent in search of food, I overheard the Mother giving her children a lesson on moral values. She was telling them about bad habits accounting for sins in one’s life.’

‘Did she tell her children that it might lead up to the punishment of them living the life of a cockroach in the afterlife if the sins pile up? Humans do that all the time!’

‘Yes, she did! She told them that stealing food from the fridge is a sin. We do it rather frequently. Does it mean we will be cockroaches in the next life as well?’

‘Hahaha! I don’t know man. This theory is way over my antennas.’

It’s not easy being me. Every day, every minute, every second, my life is in danger. I have to walk in search of food the entire night for what seems like a short distance for humans, but for my tiny legs is strenuous. The probability of not sleeping on an empty stomach ranges from zero to

point one. My mother died of thirst. My brothers were crushed by the human foot. I’m still in a dilemma if I should say that I am lucky or unlucky to survive.

My kind does not hang around in groups. We prefer to work alone. However, we have friends all over the house. One of them is Bubbles. I call him Bubbles because he is fascinated by soap bubbles and prefers to live near the washroom. He is stupid, but he is an expert in stealing food from the fridge.

Humans hate our kind. They wish that we never existed. They look for various methods to terminate us. It varies from flattening us with the heavy thing they attach to their foot which we call the ‘Weight of Doom’; to poisoning us with things like a powder called ‘Lakshman-Rekha’.

Lakshman-Rekha is a very effective chalk against our species. It kills us in hours in case we happen to step on it. In early days of its use to destroy our kind, we were not aware of what was killing us. Soon we realized the reason for our mass destruction and began roaming around carefully. But I guess I was not careful enough this time.

II

It’s 7 o’clock in the evening. The kitchen of house number 203 in South Extension, New Delhi is filled with the aroma of baked veggies, mushroom in white sauce, sautéed bacon and cheese, and some sizzling appetizers. The dining room attached to the kitchen has a table decorated with jasmine petals floating in a bowl of water, kept on a circular mat of fine

linen. The room is dimly lit with yellow and orange lights from Chinese lanterns hanging on the corners of the room. Soft, old Hindi songs are being played. The sitting room has red curtains drawn. The floor is carpeted with Kashmiri prints, on which a black leather sofa set is placed. The room looks fairly cozy. The residents of house number 203 are getting dressed for a small gathering at their place. Somewhere in the crack of the cupboard at the bottom in the kitchen, Roachy wakes up from his sleep and comes out in the kitchen. The tempting fragrance compels him to climb on top of the counter.

‘Ah! Food, glorious food! Best breakfast ever! God bless the souls!’

Roachy stealthily crawls towards the food and starts eating. A few minutes later, his head feels heavy and his antennas start to shiver. His legs start

“

It’s not easy being me. Every day, every minute, every second, my life is in danger.

”



quivering and his throat starts to dry. He fearfully looks at his legs to find a white powder sticking on them.

‘Lakshman-Rekha! Lord, save me!’

Petrified as if the lightening had struck, Roachy frantically scans his surroundings to see if he can spot the packet of the chalk and look for something on it that can help him survive. The blurred vision makes the task difficult. Nevertheless, he locates the packet behind the tap of the sink. He swiftly crawls towards it. He is not able to crawl straight as his balance keeps breaking.

This is worse than the time I had liquorice.

Roachy reaches the packet and desperately starts to search for something that can help him.

The packet reads:

**Lakshman-Rehka: The new and the best way to get rid of cockroach
Kills roaches within an hour.**

For Rs 20 only.

Keep out of reach of children. If consumed accidentally, seek medical help immediately. If chalk is held in bare hands, wash hands immediately after use to avoid the poison percolating through the skin and to avoid skin damage. Soap washes off the poison from fingers before it can act.

Roachy’s eyes stick to the last line: ‘Soap washes off the poison from the fingers before it can act.’

Hope flashes in his eyes as well as epiphany.

‘I need to find Bubbles. Only he can help me out.’

The distance from the kitchen to the washroom is barely a hundred meter but it seems miles away to Roachy. The clock is ticking and with each second passing, the poison is



ANYONE TRYING TO CROSS OVER THIS
LINE WILL BE CHARRED TO DEATH



Illustration: Santanu Chatterjee

percolating his skin. It’s a race against time.

While climbing down the kitchen counter, he falls on the floor as his legs have become slippery. He drafts out a rough plan of the journey to the washroom.

Okay. I’ll go through the kitchen door into the dining hall, then the living room, then the master bedroom and then finally the washroom. I have 40 minutes.

He approaches the entrance to the dining room. The path going into the doorway is dimly lit with orange and

red lights, shouting the words ‘Doorway to Hell’, trying to make Roachy change his mind. He swallows his fear and takes baby steps into the treacherous lands.

The moment he crosses the doorway, his path is obstructed by a huge boulder. Roachy looks up and finds two giant eyes staring down at him. ‘AAAAAA!!! COCKROACH! MOMMY!’

The human kid starts thumping his foot to kill the cockroach. Roachy manages to dodge the attacks. But his efforts are nullified when the Mother comes and sprays the floor with Mortein Cockroach Spray. The white



poisonous cloud trots after Roachy, trying to engulf and choke him to death. But Roachy makes a quick move and hides himself behind the sideboard next to the entrance to the living room.

‘Thank God that cockroach is gone. Hate these creatures. Now go back to your room and play with your friends, Arjun.’

‘Okay, Mommy!’

Roachy finds himself running out of breath. He looks at the clock above to find that he has less than 20 minutes left. Not thinking twice now, Roachy enters the living room where he saw a lot of humans. The men were near the bar shooting whisky down their throats and discussing business. A bunch of ladies were sitting on the sofas: gossiping and hogging on food served by the host.

‘No, no Sunita! My stomach will burst if I have more; lovely food though.’

‘Ah! Thanks Aparna, you always appreciate my cooking. I wonder when my husband will. The only thing he appreciates is me going to my mother’s place.’

‘Ha-Ha! All men are the same.’

Roachy locates the entrance to the master bedroom. The path seems to be straight and clear. He takes advantage of this and runs for the next door. Midway, he is tempted to eat the food dropped on the floor.

It won’t hurt to stay for a few minutes and recharge myself with a bit of energy. The food looks so tasty.

But the big clock in the corner was in his face, with the hour hand in between seven and eight and the minute hand on ten. This made him change his decision. He dashes for the master bedroom and finds the washroom door open.

He enters and looks around for Bubbles and finds him crawling on the bottom of the sink. He calls for him.

‘BUBBLES!’

‘Yo! Roachy! I haven’t seen you in a long time. Came to see me or to see the bubbles?’

Hahahaha’

‘No time for jokes, Bubbles. You have to help me out. I need to be washed

with this thing called soap. Do you hear me? I need to...’

Roachy zones out.

A bright white light blinds Roachy as he tries to open his eyes.

‘Where am I?’

‘Oh Roachy, you are alive! You fainted and you said something about washing you with soap. I did that and then I waited for some response. And now you are talking. I am happy!’

‘You saved my life! Thank you so much! I owe you.’

‘Nah! It’s okay!’

Roachy smiles. They both shake antennas.

‘I need to go now Bubbles. I should let the others know I have found the antidote to the thing we feared the most.’

And this is how the Lakshman-Rekha chalk became obsolete. Humans think that it was due to people accidentally consuming the chalk and poisoning themselves because of which it had to be banned. But the truth is different.

THE WAILING MONK



Madhav Mehrotra

We stood at the fence, taking in the house. It looked like a typical suburban house: a triangular roof, rectangular windows and a couple of rocking chairs on the porch. Not the kind of house you would think was haunted, yet haunted was exactly what it was. A sane person would have run away screaming had they known that. But not us.

‘Let’s go, Sarah,’ said Drake, my partner. His voice oozed with confidence, and his bright blue eyes showed no signs of fear. I’d been partnered with him a few weeks back, as a Junior Exorcist in the Supernatural Crimes Department of Scotland Yard, London. He straightened his Grade I Exorcist badge on his purple robes so that it gleamed in the rapidly fading sunlight. I rolled my eyes and followed him as he rang the doorbell.

The door opened almost immediately, revealing a short, plump woman. She eyed us anxiously. ‘Who are you?’ she asked breathlessly.

‘Good evening, Mrs. Sanderson.’ Drake bowed, his hands behind his back. ‘We’re the Exorcists sent by the Supernatural Crimes Department.’

She continued to look at us with a strange look on her face. ‘But – but you’re just teenagers! Are you sure you’re up for this?’

‘Famous last words,’ I growled, reaching for the rapier at my side. But Drake’s index finger, still behind his back, glowed blue, and my body was unable to move.

‘We are young, certainly,’ said Drake, flashing Mrs. Sanderson his most

winning smile. ‘But we are more than qualified to take on the task. May we enter?’ She hesitantly moved aside to let Drake in. He snapped his fingers and I could move again.

Mrs. Sanderson went to the kitchen, and we made ourselves comfortable in the living room. Those familiar blue eyes settled on my face. ‘We’ve discussed this before, Sarah,’ he said seriously. Then, in a playful tone: ‘No maiming clients. It’s bad for business.’ He looked at his index finger, ‘I don’t like using my magic to restrain you.’

‘I know, I know,’ I said, swatting his arm. ‘It just bugs me that we’re not taken seriously because of our age.’

Drake chuckled. ‘Oh, it isn’t so bad, Sarah.’

‘Nothing ever is for you, Drake.’

Mrs. Sanderson entered with some tea and biscuits which were politely but promptly declined; we wanted to get down to business.

‘What all phenomena have you witnessed in the house, ma’am?’ I asked.

‘At – at night the lights flicker, there’s a chill in the house and...’ Her voice dropped to a whisper. ‘There’s wailing.’

Drake leaned forward. ‘Wailing, you say? Where is it loudest?’

Mrs. Sanderson shivered. ‘In here. If there’s nothing else...?’ It was nearly dark and she was anxious to leave.

‘That will be all, ma’am,’ I said. She left.

I decided to take a look around the living room while Drake readied our equipment. It was fairly standard – a sofa facing a large fireplace, a few family pictures, slightly mouldy walls.

But there was one painting that seemed out of place. It depicted an angel leaning on a rock, and he was clearly in agony. His wings weren’t the white I was used to, they were black

I sensed a movement behind me. Without turning around, I knew it was Drake trying to scare me. Well, I wasn’t going to fall for it. I let out a deep breath and it frosted. I shivered, rubbing my arms. It was cold. Cold...

Oh no.

I turned around in time to see something scurry off into the corridor, and grabbed the cross hanging around my neck. ‘DRAKE!’ He came running in from the kitchen.

“

She continued to look at us with a strange look on her face. ‘But – but you’re just teenagers! Are you sure you’re up for this?’

”



I told him what had happened. He stroked his smooth chin thoughtfully.

‘Hmm. Interesting. It had an opportunity to harm you, but it didn’t. Ghosts aren’t known for showing mercy to the living.’ He pointed to the chains he had laid out on the floor. ‘Let’s get behind those. Ghosts can’t cross silver, and keep your rapier ready.’

We stood inside a circle of chains, rapiers drawn, waiting for the ghost to reappear. Behind me, Drake was casually whistling some annoying song. Just as I was about to tell him off, the lights flickered and then went out. Suddenly, a piercing scream split through the air like a knife, and I was down on all fours. I was paralyzed with fear.

In front of me, thin coils of white mist gathered to form a vaguely human shape. He was dressed in brown, old fashioned robes tied at the waist with a white cord. His head was covered by a hood. He looked like a monk. I tried to scramble away from him, but I was barely able to move. The ghost reached out to me, his sleeve pulled back a little, revealing his skeletal hand...

There was a sudden flash of blue and I was pulled back – Drake’s magic. I hadn’t realized that I had been outside the silver chains. Drake waved his rapier to get the ghost to retreat, and sliced part of his hood. The ghost hissed and covered his face, but not before we got a look at its face. It flew through the wall with the angelic painting, even though it was the farthest from our location.

‘Are you all right, Sarah?’ Drake asked. He didn’t seem the least bit fazed.

‘Yeah,’ I rasped. ‘Did you see its face? Looked like a gunshot wound.’

‘Yes, it did.’

‘That makes it a murder victim. You

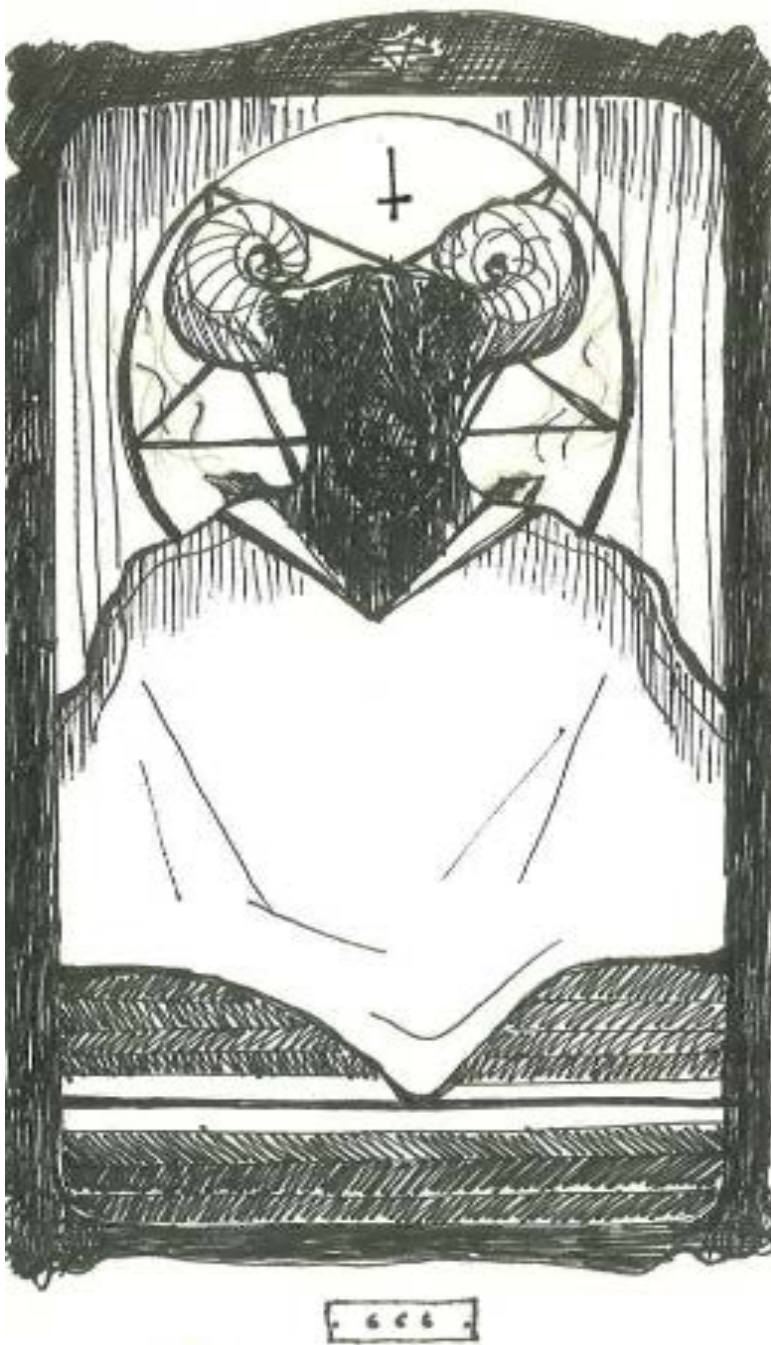


Illustration: Divya Singh

know what those are like.’

‘All too well, I’m afraid,’ Drake said grimly. ‘Don’t worry, Sarah. I also froze when I saw my first vengeful spirit.’

‘I don’t think it was a vengeful spirit.’

He looked at me blankly. ‘I’m confused.’

‘You said it yourself, it had an opportunity to kill me but didn’t. All it’s done since manifesting is wail, like it’s in pain. I think it’s a murder victim, but it’s not vengeful. And right now, it seemed like it wanted me to follow it.’

‘Follow you where?’

I walked to the painting with the angel. ‘Here.’



Drake saw the painting. 'Oh, dear...that's a painting of a fallen angel. The first one.' He fixed his eyes on me. 'Lucifer.'

'The monk was murdered here a long

time ago,' I continued.

'He must've been buried under the house, and when the Sandersons got that painting, the monk was angry. Being the spirit of a devout man, it couldn't bear to have its resting place

desecrated. He wanted me to get rid of the painting.'

The next morning, we got Mrs. Sanderson to dispose of the painting, and her house was never bothered by the wailing monk.

OUT OF STOCK



Shubhangi Verma

Mrs. Archana Ahuja sat in her spacious balcony, sitting near her Bougainvilleas. She looked back at the photograph of her family in her room. It was taken recently, on Anuj's last trip home. Despite her arthritis, her stance was steady as she stood with her son and his family. She was smiling broadly into the camera and the wrinkles on her face were prominent. 'I told you, Maa, they're laugh lines', Anuj had told her. But she had dismissed his flattery. 'I'm just getting old, Laddoo. I'm old and thin, just like my Akshat here', she had said and tickled her grandson till they were both laughing so hard that they couldn't breathe.

She smiled grimly at the memory. If someone had looked carefully at her right now, they could easily see the gloom clouding her otherwise tender face. Her cheeks seemed sullen and she had dark circles around her eyes. She had not been able to write for a few days now. She had been complaining that she couldn't think, as if all her creativity and talent had vanished in a 'poof'! Mrs. Ahuja tried a lot of things to get rid of the writer's block - she went on long walks, picked up other hobbies to distract herself. But to no avail. The next submission for *Click!* was coming up. She had promised her students a love story for the school magazine this time and she had to deliver it.

After a few highly recommended writing-free days, Mrs. Ahuja tried to write again. After numerous attempts, she tore the page in frustration. As soon as she threw it away, she saw something written on the next sheet. Nothing of this sort had ever happened before. She read the text. It was addressed to her.

*Dear Mrs. Archana Ahuja,
This is to inform you that we, The Agency of Imaginary Characters (in association with The Bureau of Creative Writing), have decided not to supply you with any more original characters. It has come to our notice that you have created too many unconventional characters. Consequently, our stock characters are unemployed. We request you to write some stories with conventional characters.*

We have also noticed that despite repeated warnings, you have failed to comply with our requests. This is your last warning. If you do not act in accordance with our orders, we will not supply any more stories or characters to you. Please expect a Character Commissioner to drop by to help you with your next story. The Commissioner will monitor your willingness to use the characters and your progress with those stories. We will make our recommendation accordingly and The Bureau will send you our final decision in a few weeks.

Please find attached a list of currently unemployed stock characters for you to utilize.

*Regards,
The Professor,
Head,
Agency of Imaginary Characters*

Mrs. Ahuja turned the paper around and sure enough, there was a list on it:

STOCK CHARACTERS COLLECTION

A
Absent-minded Professor
B
Bad boy

Boy Next Door

C
Cat Lady

D
Damsel in Distress

Dark Lord

...

And it ended with a single entry under W- 'Wise Old Man'.

Mrs. Ahuja was confused. She was almost certain someone had sneaked into her home. Must've been one of the older kids from school, she thought. They were always the most mischievous.

Triinngg. It was Mrs. Ahuja's doorbell. She got up to answer it, when-

'You don't need to answer that. We just do it as a formality. The doorbell ensures that we don't catch you off guard. The last few writers didn't take the shock of me showing up unannounced very well,' a thick voice behind her spoke.

“

This is to inform you that we, The Agency of Imaginary Characters (in association with The Bureau of Creative Writing), have decided not to supply you with any more original characters.

”

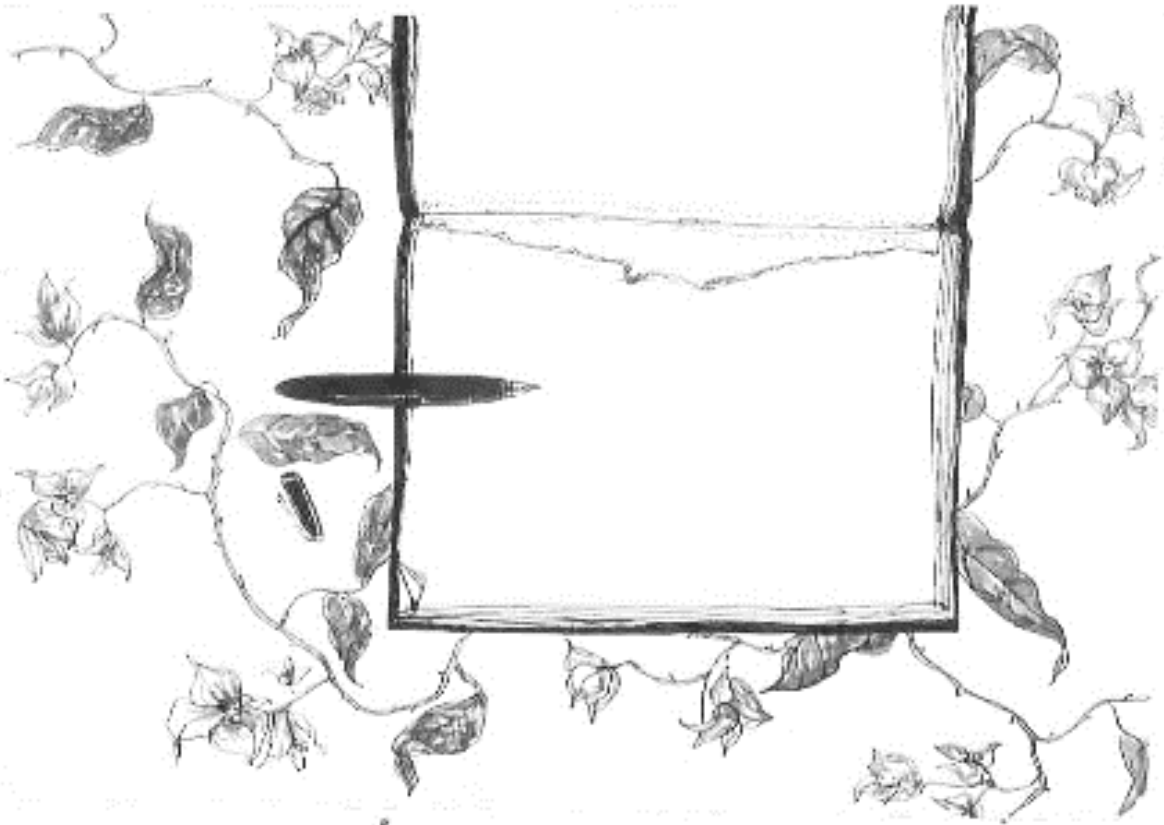


Illustration: Ankit Ravani

Mrs. Ahuja turned around in shock and looked at the man sitting on her previously empty desk.

'Who are you? What are you doing in my house?' she asked in a trembling voice, as she tried to edge towards her cell phone.

'Oh... Umm, you don't need to reach for your cell phone, Mrs. Ahuja,' he hesitated. 'I bear no harm.'

'Who are you? And how did you enter my home?' she spoke, as she tried to keep her voice steady.

'I am Professor Javed Ali. I am the Character Commissioner assigned to you. Surely you must have received the letter. I wouldn't be here if you hadn't read it.'

Mrs. Ahuja's eyes widened and she raised her eyebrows. 'You sneaked into my house and put that letter? Is this your idea of a sick joke? I'm calling the police.'

'Don't bother, Mrs. Ahuja. The police

won't see me. Actually, nobody will see me, except you, of course.'

Mrs. Ahuja stopped and looked right at him. He was a middle-aged man, with a head full of unkempt, grey hair, wearing mismatched and rather shabby clothes. He wasn't solid and opaque like normal people. There was something hazy about him. He appeared translucent. His lower legs and feet tapered off into a mist.

'And why is that?'

'Because I'm a Character Commissioner. Nobody but the writers can see me. The writers who aren't as advanced enough go to the smaller departments, mostly the Department of Miscellaneous Writing. You, on the other hand, are one of our new found talents. We've been scouting, you see. And we thought we could put your talents to good use. Now, shall we get started? I have your file right here. Have a look at it.'

Mrs. Ahuja inched closer and pulled her glasses up to read. It said: Mrs

Archana Ahuja, 63, widow, Click! magazine and misc. writing for grandson, Imagination Category 'A'. Mrs. Ahuja stared at him with suspicion.

'We don't have much time. There are other cases that need my attention.'

'So, this is real? The Agency of Imaginary Characters?'

'Well, it's an agency of imaginary characters so I'm not sure how real it really is,' he smiled and rubbed his hands together, as if trying to warm them. 'Sorry, this fidgeting is just an old habit. Being imaginary means your writers don't always give you the right clothes for the right temperature. An author in Nainital forgot to provide me with warmer clothes.'

'Okay...'

'So let's get started on your story, shall we? We've wasted enough time as it is. I noticed that while reading



the list we provided you with, your eyes lingered over the characters of "Lovers".'

'Yes, as soon as I saw it, I got an idea, but I'm not sure about it.'

'Your ideas will tie up, don't worry. For now, I want you to make a warm cup of tea for yourself. You write your best work when you have tea with you, don't you?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Well, then let's hurry up', he said and sneezed loudly. 'Excuse me.'

'Umm... would you like to have anything?' she asked out of politeness.

'Just some air for me, thanks!' he said and burst out laughing.

As soon as she came back from the kitchen, she sat down to write. To her surprise, she had a brilliant idea for a love story. As soon as she started, there was no stopping her. Professor Ali floated over her all the time. He kept cleaning and re-cleaning his lopsided spectacles or muttering incomprehensible things to himself while offering her suggestions here and there. Within a few hours, the story was done.

Mrs. Ahuja put her pen down and looked up at Professor Ali.

'It's a good story,' he said.

'You think so?'

'I do. It has a good plot. Plus, these characters are happy to be in the story. The lovers have been out of commission for far too long. They've been wreaking havoc in the office with their grand romantic gestures for each other. At least now, they'll be out of the office for a little while. We can actually talk about stories without those fools interrupting every

conversation with how beautiful their love is and how they can't spend time apart,' he chuckled. 'You gave it a happy ending too. They like that. Makes for less drama in the office.'

'Okay,' she said, still unsure about the man.

'My work here is almost done ... No, wait. I have to send a letter back to the office, telling them your story is done.' He whistled and a golden Labrador came wagging his tail from her kitchen. He took out a piece of paper and a pen from his jacket and quickly wrote something on it. He attached it to the bone the dog had and threw it so far out her window, it vanished. The dog went chasing after it and disappeared too.

'He'll chase it to the office and bring it to the professor. Norbu is a happy pet, an ideal one for a home with small kids, just in case you wanted a pet for another story. Now, to the rest of the business. Please don't ignore your instincts when they tell you to use stereotypical characters. The Bureau does that sometimes. And I'm guessing you haven't received any letter prior to this one? I thought so. We're losing mail these days. I'll take care of it and I'll make sure you get your lost mail.'

'Thank you.'

'If there's nothing else you want to ask me, I'll take your leave, Mrs. Ahuja. I have a young writer to inspire.'

'If I ever need help again, will you show up?'

'I might. But I don't think you'll need any more help. Even if you do, write a story about the Bureau or the Agency and somebody will show up. Goodbye, Mrs. Ahuja. We expect many more wonderful stories from you!'

And with that, Professor Ali disappeared.

Mrs. Ahuja sat on her desk for a while, pondering over the day's events and then called up the magazine editor.

'I have the next story ready. I'm mailing it to you now.'

SAFED SAGAR



Ishan Gupta

Disclaimer:

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

I
Summers are supposed to be warm and relaxing, but the summer of 1999 was terribly icy and worrisome. It was the worst nightmare I've ever had. I remember those days as clearly as the alphabets and numbers taught to me in the nursery. The colours that were supposed to paint my life with happiness merged to result in black: a blot in my memory that will never wash off. The war of 1999 had hammered a nail in my memory that pricked us every time we remembered those gruesome moments.

II

May 3, 1999

9:00 PM

OMQ – 221/4, Air Force Station, Adampur

I was waiting for Prithvi to come back from office. I had made him French baked potatoes and garlic bread: his favourite. It was getting surprisingly late. I was restless and went to my neighbour's house to ask about her husband.

'Hi, Priya!'

'Heer! Come in, come in! Have a seat. Oh! I made chocolate muffins. I'll bring some for you. Would you like some coffee with it? By the way, I loved the French baked potatoes that you sent me in the evening. You have to give me your recipe.'

'Ha-ha! Thanks a lot! And no coffee, please. I just dropped by to ask if Aman is home yet.'

'No Heer, he isn't. Is Prithvi also not back from office?'

'No. There isn't any night flying today, so I was wondering what could be the matter. I have a bad feeling about this.'

'Oh, Heer! You need to calm down. You always worry so much. God, have I told you that you remind me of the time when I was newly married?'

'Almost a hundred times. And you are right, I should calm down.'

I tried to smile at Priya, but failed miserably.

'Oh my god, Heer! Wait, I'll get you some coffee. And then we will have our little chat.'

With that, she went into her kitchen for muffins and coffee.

Priya was one person in the station apart from my husband who I was close to. Coming from a small town, she had much more trouble adjusting to the 'fauji' life than I did. However, she managed to adapt smoothly within 4 years. Our families were posted to Adampur together. Her husband was one rank senior to Prithvi.

Initially, we both were allotted the temporary accommodation. I was surprised to find no kitchen there.

Since Priya had experience living in such conditions, she helped me set up a small kitchen in the balcony at the back of the house after covering it with curtains. Being the junior-most officer in the station, Prithvi was extremely busy getting used to the rigorous flying hours. Priya was here to help me adjust with the new customs and lifestyle. We would usually have a meal together and go for walks in the evening along with our husbands and then grab a bite at the AFWWA shop. Our families were neighbours even when we shifted to the non-status accommodation.

May 4, 1999

2:00 AM

OMQ – 221/4, Air Force Station, Adampur

“

I traced Prithvi's image with my fingers trying to get the feeling of touching his skin and his soft lips. Tears fogged up my vision and soon it rained on our happy faces in the photo album.

”



I was back home in an hour and had dozed off while watching TV. The doorbell woke me up. I ran to the door to find Prithvi in his overalls. His name tag was misplaced from its velcro. His hair was a complete mess and his eyes were puffy. However, there was something odd. His eyes screamed bad news. door to find Prithvi in his overalls.

'Prithvi, what's wrong?'

'I have to go to Pathankot in the morning. I need to pack.'

'What? Why? I mean all of a sudden? Is everything okay? I hope it's just another TD. Is that it?'

'HEER! I NEED TO PACK AND LEAVE! I DO NOT HAVE TIME TO ANSWER YOUR QUESTIONS.'

'Why are you shouting? I can sense that something is bothering you and I am concerned. If I'm not required, I'll leave. Goodnight.'

'Heer! No. I'm sorry. Come here. Please, Heer, listen to me.'

He held me tight and made me sit on the sofa.

'Look, Heer. I'll tell you everything. Just stay calm. Okay?'

He spoke in a velvety voice.

'We received some information about a Pakistani intrusion in Kargil last evening. An Army patrol has been sent up to evaluate the situation. There have been deduced possibilities of other intrusions as well. It's most likely a hoax. Nevertheless, all the pilots from Adampur, Halwara and Jodhpur are required to fly down to Pathankot, the nearest station to the border, as a precautionary measure. I need to go there and stay until further notice. As of now the situation is not that huge and it will be over soon. I will be back safe before you know it. I promise you that, Heer. I love you.'

I was speechless. It had been a year since I was with him and this was the first time I saw Prithvi this serious about a situation in the office. From his pacifying yet worried tone, I could sense that it was the start of something big, something that was not going to be resolved within days. It wasn't going to be over soon.

III

It has been 12 days since Prithvi left. My intuition was correct. The intrusion turned into a brawl between the two countries. The army men sent to Kargil were tortured to death by the Pakistanis and this exacerbated the state of affairs. There was also heavy shelling by the Pakistan Army which damaged the ammunition dump in Kargil. The war had officially been declared.

The last time I heard from Prithvi was on the 10th of May. He informed me that they were now being stationed at Kargil and there was a possibility of an air strike very soon. Due to the vast communication gap, unavailability of STD calls at homes and high prices for the landline calls, one call used to come from Kargil every night at 9 PM at the CO's residence where all the ladies used to assemble. The person on the line used to tell us about the situation there, and if someone was lucky, they got a chance to speak to their husband. I was never the lucky one.

My parents, Prithvi's parents, and my younger sister Nehal, had come to Adampur to support me. I had lost my appetite and around 6 kgs in two weeks and was admitted to the hospital once because my blood pressure had dropped considerably. My eyes had dark circles as I was not able to sleep at night. It was impossible for me to even try but nothing could stop my tears. The and pretend that everything may be alright in a few weeks. News

channels had hyped the scenario so much that my tension was incrementing by the minute. I would break into tears every now and then, and my mother and mother-in-law would try and console me, only thing I wanted was for him to be back, unharmed.

IV

May 16, 1999

12:00 PM

OMQ – 221/4, Air Force Station, Adampur

'Di! Where are you? Come here, quickly. It's a letter from Jiju!'

'What! Where!? Show it to me.'

My eyes lit up with indescribable happiness the moment I saw the post. I quickly opened the envelope to retrieve the letter.

Dear Heer,

How are you? It feels like ages since I have seen your face or heard your voice. I hope everything is okay at home. I got to know that Amma and Papa have come. My worries have subsided, now that I know that they are with you at the moment. Things here are under control as of now, except for the food. I wish I'd had the French baked potatoes and garlic bread that day. I was foolish to not have the lovely food that my gorgeous wife had made for me.

I miss you so much, Heer. I miss coming home to you scaring me by hiding behind the door, or sometimes peeping through the window, waiting for me when I used to get late. I miss the tenderness of your body and the smile that is on my face when I am around you. I miss everything. And I can't even begin to describe how much I want things to get back to how they were before.

I can't wait to be in your arms again. I hope this gets over soon.

*Your love,
Prithvi*

I quietly went back to my room and



sank into the chair. My fingers holding the letter were numb, so were my knees. I managed to pick up the photo album from the table and opened it.

The first page had a picture of us together. We both were smiling at the camera. It was our honeymoon photo. I traced Prithvi's image with my fingers trying to get the feeling of touching his skin and his soft lips. Tears fogged up my vision and soon it rained on our happy faces in the photo album.

I sat there sobbing with the letter in one hand and the album in the other with my prayers exhausted now.

V

May 27, 1999

4:00 AM

OMQ – 221/4, Air Force Station, Adampur

There was a crowd of people wearing white clothes. In the middle, there were men in uniform. They were carrying a trunk and behind them were four men carrying a coffin adorned with marigold flowers. The path was cleared and the procession approached me. They let the coffin down along with the trunk. One of them opened the trunk. The very first entity in the trunk was a sky blue shirt with the Flight Lieutenant rank. The name on the name tag read 'Prithvi'. The next group of people opened the coffin. I saw Prithvi's face: his eyes closed, his nostrils blocked with cotton, his face scarred, his skin pale white, and his body covered with the Indian National Flag. 21 gun shots followed the act and I fainted and hit my head on the ground.

I woke up and found myself on the floor. The pillow was wet from my tears. Someone was ringing the doorbell constantly. I ran to open the door and found Priya there. Her hair

was tangled, her clothes and her face shocked. Her eyes were red. She was crying.

'Heer! You need to come with me right now to the technical area. There is some very important news that they have to tell us.'

I was trying to process the images in my dream and Priya's words. I knew that lightning had struck and this time it was bad. I felt as if I had

turned to stone in a few seconds as I was finding it difficult to stand or walk.

May 27, 1999

5:00 AM

Technical area, Air Force Station, Adampur

We arrived at the designated spot and I was surprised to find all the ladies of the station there. All of them were in



Illustration: Santanu Chatterjee



tears. I was not sure what was happening. The CO's wife came running to me. She was in tears as well and spoke in a broken voice.

'Heer! There was an air strike yesterday evening and two of the Migs crashed. One was fatal and the other was captured by the Pakistanis, as after ejection the pilot landed in their territory. They haven't released the two names yet.'

I couldn't sense the ground beneath my feet. My eyes were locked on hers as I dropped to the floor. I couldn't believe my ears. I couldn't feel my fingers. The heart that was pumping in my body had probably stopped. The air around me felt like a vacuum. I was gasping for oxygen.

'... I have to go to Pathankot...'

No. He said he'll come back. He has to.

'... I will be back safe before you know it. I promise you that, Heer...'

He told me he'd come back. It can't be him. He promised me.

'... t will be over soon...'

No. It can't be over. He is not dead. He just can't be dead.

'... love you...'

The white shroud...the tricolour...the gun shots...Prithvi's pale skin...his body in the flag...his uniform in the trunk... Images flashed in my head and I didn't know what to think. I would have welcomed my own death at that point.

May 29, 1999

11:00 AM

Air Force Station, Adampur

There was a procession of men in sky blue uniform. They carried a coffin on

There was a procession of men in sky blue uniform. They carried a coffin on their shoulders covered with the tricolour and marigold, as they walked in the drizzle. It followed a slow moving group of twenty-one men, carrying rifles in their arms. The procession halted in front of us: a group of ladies dressed in white, facing the cremation place. The men let down the coffin and Priya ran towards it. Her husband Sqn. Ldr. Aman Sharma was no more. His ejection, after his aircraft got hit by a shoulder-fired FIM-92 Stinger, was fatal. He remained airborne over infiltrators-held positions to help coordinate rescue attempts to locate Flt. Lt. Avinash Sanghoi, who ejected due to engine flameout and was captured by the Pakistan military.

Priya's face was as lifeless as her husband's body: blank, pale, silent, motionless. I was standing next to her, holding her tight as they fired the guns. Her eyes went shut with every shot, yet her face remained blank. But I could sense the pain that was resonating in her shivering arms as the tears filled her eyes when they set the body on fire.

I stood motionless watching the body burn. The flames felt cold. The entire time I was thinking...

It could have been my husband. It could have been him. It could have been me standing in Priya's place. It could have been me.

I swear I saw Prithvi's face flash in the flames. I was startled and gasped for air as I fell down the platform that was behind me. A couple of people rushed to my aid and I was made to sit on the chair.

The uncertainty of life dawned upon me. No one was safe. And anything could happen. Praying was futile.

September 29, 1999
2:00 PM

OMQ - 221/4, Air Force Station, Adampur

Prithvi had returned safely as he promised me, but the war had tampered with his mind so much that it was unstable and vulnerable. It was difficult for him to stay still even when the softest of noise came. Once in the kitchen, I accidentally dropped a steel plate and he rushed to the kitchen with his face shocked and sweaty. He used to wake up in the middle of the night and check outside the window or under our bed to ensure if we were safe. This was not the case with him alone. Other officers were in a similar situation. The war left them with a scar that wasn't going to be healed anytime soon.

We had our lunch and were watching television while enjoying our dessert. Prithvi stopped on a news channel on which a reporter was talking about the war.

'Good afternoon everyone and we are back from our short break. It's been almost two months since the Kargil war that plagued the entire population of our country. Today, we have our Defence Minister with us on the line to talk about the massive armed clash—'

Prithvi changed the channel.

Glossary

1. OMQ: Officers' Married Quarters.
2. TD: Temporary Duty
3. Sqn. Ldr. : Squadron Leader (a rank in the Indian Air Force)
4. Flt. Lt. : Flight Lieutenant (a rank in the Indian Air Force, below Sqn. Ldr)
5. AFWWA: Air Force Wives Welfare Association (an organisation within the IAF that caters to the basic needs of the families inside the stations, for example: food, household materials, utensils, tailor, and other basic commodities)

THE BARTENDER'S SMILE



Harsha Vytla

I've never been heard, I live a life consumed by slow decay.

One more please! And I sipped my sixth glass of White Russian on that deadened and stinky summer night, staring at everyone else here through my glass, like an orphan staring outside the window in a Dickensian novel. It was the Goa Marriot where I was sipping this Lebowski drink, nobody here knew who I was but I knew everyone here, everyone except for her. Not just her, even this place was out of league for this trouser destroyer-cottage cheese thighs copywriter, but how can one not go to a place where he could become comfortably numb. This bar could turn a glossy day to a gloomy one; I guess these people at the Marriot knew how comforting the nights were to me. There was this game of cricket being telecast on the big screen between that bank fraud's team and another which I had no clue about, but the captain was in it and he was no longer in that ugly yellow jersey, but in a pinkish one. I've never found cricket much fun; scumbags who are a little less lazier than me play it, and scumbags who are a little more lazier than me watch it. I couldn't remember which day it was but I think it did fall on a weekend, as it was too much crowd for any weekday and too many drunks for it to be a Sunday; it had to be a Friday I guess, as many had got their stupid ID tags on them. Customers were hovering under the dim chandelier like moths under a dazzling street light. Almost all of them men, you know, all over this place, murmuring lifelessly about how crazy their week was or about how hardnosed their girlfriends or wives were. Amongst these moths, was the cockroach, the

jerk, the womanizer, sitting in a corner with a candle on his table, staring at the breasts of his Friday date, trying to get laid.

Waitresses slipped in between the tables carrying enough vodka to shut me up; they had their million dollar skill ON: keeping their drink trays still without spilling even a tiny drop from the glasses or, falling on some customer or, you know, just not breaking the glass bottles on those assholes' heads for their stupid smirking faces. I couldn't find her amongst the waitresses, so I knew where to find her; she got the Bar today. A post I could never take up - can't smile at all these assholes and pour them their tasteless drinks all the time, unlike her. Her smile could light up anyone's heart and it was a fake one. Wonder what power her bona fide smile possessed. It was last December when I was here with my family on New Year's Eve, when my eyes first caught sight of her and got lost in the splendour that she had aroused. She was sitting alone in the lounge outside the bar, crying through Tolstoy's catastrophic ending. It was the book actually, that caught my eyes before her, an almost torn Hardcover, some sixty years old, Война́ и миръ and not Война́ и мир, giving me a dozen more Soviet countries to pick her nationality from, thank you, Mr. Gorbachev. The last over was going on and that moron Kingfisher guy's team was going to lose, guess he deserved it for the terrible beer he brews.

It was dark and peaceful now, and the TV was not a pain-in-the-ass anymore. Led Zeppelin flowed in through the speakers and everyone was drunk enough to pick up their broomstick,

“

If you're in love with a bartender, the back is all you see sometimes, you know.

”

open their closet and fly down to the Middle Earth on a quest for their Precious, to let their emotions overcome their ego and of course, to laugh and then later . . . to cry. Page's solo had drowned almost the whole lot, passing down a cloud of chimera that made it impossible to think with logic.

Damn it! I've been talking for so long! The darkness has drowned me completely. Whatever, I don't care. So yeah, I had my lost-in-somewhere eyes at her at last, the bartender, a tall blonde woman dressed in a white t-shirt with the bar's logo on it and tight-fitting jeans, smiling as she took orders from the moths who surrounded her on this round Bar and with whom I had the unfortunate privilege of sharing the Bar. Her blonde hair was pinned up nicely, revealing her neck in a gorgeous manner, you know. Some of the moths sitting at the bar around me were staring at her too, some with barely concealed lust and others just waiting for their beer to be served; I don't know where I fell. Before I could



think of it, the cockroach came and sat across from me on the other side of the Bar, with her and a counter full of alcohol between us. I guess his Friday date's breasts were too small for him.

So as she was taking an order from the cockroach who was leering at her with no ignominy of being thrown out, she leaned in against him too so that she could hear him. He said something and then she laughed a fake one as usual, poured a mug full of beer and placed it on the Bar in front of him and started walking towards my direction, but the cockroach said something again and she had to lean in and fake a smile again. His eyes darted to her breasts before moving back to her eyes as he spoke. I wanted to stamp the cockroach but I couldn't as she indeed was so gorgeous that one could sit there at the bar all night and go broke by drinking all that was in there before dawn. She smiled again and said something in that matter-of-fact way that I was intimately familiar with from my time trying to pick up women in bars. A skill indeed I would say, you know. She had that 'that's so sweet of you, but I've got better things to do than go home with you' expression on her face all the way. I bet she hated her job but, then again, how many can say that they love what they do? I definitely can't. I regret it sometimes too but the money was like a gas, a fuel for my desires, and I had to grab that cash with both my hands to make some stash as it was a near-necessity.

I downed the rest of my glass in one gulp and stood up. I waved to her and she smiled, I think she did ... I couldn't see but I think she smiled and her startled smile had lit me up, you know, as the love in her eyes would have been evident enough when she smiled, even to this misguided man. I paid the bill, left some change and then put on my watch and walked out the door as I couldn't hang around in



Illustration: Divya Singh

quiet desperation any longer or for something or someone to show me the way.

I could imagine her pinned up hair all loose as I was walking down the street, the coconutty smell of her hair, her haunting yet illuminating eyes, and above all, her desirable back, all for me. If you're in love with a bartender, the back is all you see

sometimes, you know. You gotta live with it. That cockroach, why was he such a douche bag? Sometimes I take few outmoded conversations so hard on myself, climbing up a mountain with an unfurled flag, imagining a dreamed world at dizzy heights. Is he a jerk or is it my heart? Why there is so much sadness inside this heart is unknown, like a hunger still unsatisfied, as if it's been



encumbered with desire and lust, and why can't it smile back at her smile? Is it misguided too? This burden of overthinking should be lifted, as my weary eyes still stray towards the horizon and something should be done with me, as I've been down this road too many times. I'm just going to take my steps forward, towards home rather than sleepwalking back again, dragged by the force of some inner tide.

Home was a much better place to stay with my pioneer-of-paranoia face and to work on getting over this worthless jealousy than actually walking down this street on this night of wonder or sitting there in that gloomy bar and watching her before the dawn mist glows, as I could never look beyond the embers of my glowing wall, towards a glimpse of the brightness on the other side of the wall.

That smile had been all the evidence I ever needed.

In the three quarters of an hour at home, I've had a quarter of whisky too, in the hope that I'll be heard. She would be on her way home later at night and I'll be waiting for her... with a smile.

THE LONG FUSE



Nimisha Upadhyay

The shrill ring of the telephone on the Sheriff's desk echoing around the empty police station caused Deputy Walsh to jump out of the chair he was dozing in, giving him that first warning that today was going to be different. The police station wasn't usually this empty, but since the past week the entire task force except him had been deployed in the county headquarters to help with the State elections. The only person in the station besides him currently was the boss' daughter, Wesley, who, back from college, had taken to haunting the archive rooms, looking up past cases.

Trying to sound efficient and self assured, he picked up the receiver, 'Sheriff's office, Deputy Terry Walsh speaking.'

There was a jumble of noises in the background, a few screams and the sound of sirens, before they were cut off by a strong authoritative voice, 'Walsh, this is Hannigan from the Emergency First Responders. There has been a blast at the chemist shop in the town square. I suspect it is an IED. Get here now!' The call cut off and Walsh swore. Something had finally happened in the sleepy little town of Rossdale, but he was sure he wasn't going to like it.

Walsh silently fumed all the way to the patrol car. He hated losing arguments, and if he caught sight of the smug smirk on Wesley's face, he would probably end up throwing a totally humiliating hissy fit. He knew arguing was a lost cause when Wesley had announced her intentions of coming with him to the scene, and the way she laughed in his face when he had mumbled about jurisdictions and authorizations only cemented his

fears. Secretly, he was thankful for the backup, even though that pain in the ass lolled in the front seat, her sneakers upon the dashboard of the patrol car.

The little town of Rossdale was boring at its best and mind-numbingly dreary at its worst. For a newly-minted police academy graduate from New York, it tended to be the latter ninety percent of the time, rather unlike the adventure he had thought it would be when he had first signed up. He had been posted here three months ago and the most exciting thing that had happened since was when Mr. Schnitzel, the town librarian, had imbibed a rather generous amount of rum and had gone singing "Edelweiss" down the town square, flashing random people at will and sending the old ladies of the Knitting Club into paroxysms of hysteria. There was a local mob, but they focused mostly on outside deals and their nightclubs, and left the town alone.

His co-passenger, Wesley, was apparently something of a maverick genius. Having completed a dual degree in Criminology and Forensics from Berkeley in less than two years, she had worked with several agencies for a few months each as a specialist, and was now back in her home town, slinking around in black clothes, with dark circles under her eyes, continuously smelling of chemicals. Her piercings and her tattoos had all the devout Christian mammas rushing to hide away their kids whenever she deigned to take a stroll around town. 'Doesn't hurt that she is hot like burning too,' he mused, which was why he had risked being torn limb to limb by the sheriff and tried to chat her up the first day. It was a rather

bad decision as he had been left to gather the shattered pieces of his dignity after she told him rather unequivocally that he was barking up the wrong tree. Still, there was nothing wrong about entertaining the occasional inappropriate fantasy about her. Speaking of which, the subject of the aforementioned fantasies had noticed his rather fixed stare and was giving him a particularly toe curling glare. Flushing, he turned his face back towards the road and focused on getting to the crime scene.

It seemed as if the entire town had decided to camp around the scene, tongues wagging with gossip. Walsh snorted, while Wesley looked around with a dispassionate gaze, before striding right into the middle of the crowd, with it parting before her like the Red Sea. Grumbling, he followed her, patting his holster and fishing for his badge. The roof of the shop had slightly caved in and black smoke was

“

Something had finally happened in the sleepy little town of Rossdale, but he was sure he wasn't going to like it.

”



still billowing out of the front. The paramedics had already cleared a path and were bringing out bodies in black body bags.

‘Deputy Walsh?’ a burly man dressed in white coveralls tapped him on the shoulder. ‘I’m Lars Hannigan. We responded to the distress call made by the owner of the bakery across the street.’ Said owner was telling his story to a group of housewives rather importantly, no doubt exaggerating his own role.

Walsh nodded, ‘Good to meet you.’ He pointed towards Wesley, who was staring rather fixedly at the crooked shop sign, ‘That is my...uh, associate, Wesley Graemes.’ Hannigan squinted rather suspiciously at Wesley, but then shrugged and turned back towards Walsh. ‘The premises were still on fire when we reached here. We managed to put it out and cover all the chemicals with sand. There were four people in the shop, all in close proximity to the blast. We suspect it was foul play because there weren’t enough chemicals in the shop to warrant an explosion of this magnitude.’

‘Do we know the four dead?’

Hannigan nodded, ‘The crowd identified them for us. The first is a junior chemist, Lawrence Crawford, an apprentice to the actual chemist, Mr. Dalton, the second is Mrs. Macy Stepford, a teller at the local bank, the third is, well, you won’t like it, the mayor’s husband, Robert Arnold, and the fourth...’ here Hannigan hesitated, ‘is mob boss Trey Solankis’ eleven year old daughter, Gabrielle.’ At this point, the conversation took a sombre turn and even Wesley, who had ambled over to join them, turned a little stonier upon hearing the age of the last victim.

Accepting the gloves offered to him, Walsh nodded to Hannigan and motioning Wesley to follow, ducked into the remains of the shop. Inside was utter devastation, with the

shelves no more than blobby messes of plastic and metal, little sand piles over any hazardous chemicals, and white chalk outlines that denoted the position of the bodies. He crossed over to one of the outlines drawn half on the wall and half on the floor. The junior chemist probably. He had been thrown into the wall by the force of the blast. He picked up a small wired device.

‘Do you know that’s a part of a bomb you’re holding there, Walsh?’ Wesley’s deadpan voice reached him. He dropped the device like a hot coal, but then thought better of it, picking it up and placing it in an evidence bag. Turning around, he found Wesley cautiously sifting through the debris near what was left of the counter. He

kneeled down beside her. ‘What?’ ‘The bomb was in this drawer here, in a briefcase or a sturdy bag.’ She pointed to a tangle of wires on the floor. ‘It was a small bomb, yet very powerful, expertly handled. But the real kicker is, it was homemade.’

‘How do you know that?’ ‘The packing material in the bomb. The material used to cushion the explosives is usually organic pulp filler in industrial bombs, but in this case, the packing material used is newspaper. This means someone very skilled in handling explosives made this bomb at home.’

Walsh looked around. ‘What about all the paper money scattered around? It doesn’t seem like it came from the cash till.’

‘No. I don’t think so either. I think the



Illustration: Santanu Chatterjee



bomb was in a bag which contained a lot of loose cash.'

'Like a payoff or a bribe? It couldn't be related to the Mayor's husband, could it? Nobody even knew he was in town. His chances of stopping at this Chemist shop at this particular moment were close to nil. He was probably in the wrong place at the wrong time. That means that this is related to the mob.'

'Maybe.' But Wesley still looked back at the counter, frowning.

'Maybe is good enough for me. Let's get this baby back to headquarters and then we can head up to check on Solankis,' Walsh said, nodding at the remains of the bomb. His cell phone rang just then.

'Deputy Walsh speaking.'

'Deputy Walsh, this is the Mayor. How is the investigation proceeding?'

'We have a few leads that we're investigating, Ma'am. I am very sorry for your loss.'

'Good. Make sure you investigate well, because if this case is not solved by midnight tomorrow, I am calling up the county headquarters and firing the entire force working here. You are responsible for everybody's jobs now, Mr. Walsh.' The phone cut off. Walsh goggled at the phone for a whole minute before turning to Wesley.

'Shit. We are doomed, Wesley. We need to visit Solankis now. We have just under 36 hours to solve the case.'

'Or else what?'

'Or else everybody here joins the ranks of the unemployed - including your father.'

Trey Solankis was a large man, but today he seemed rather small and frail as he stood in the doorway. He had waved away their attempts at

condolences and was now regarding them with a cold glare. Finally, he spoke in a hoarse croak, 'Why should I help you?'

Walsh started to speak, ready to launch into a spiel of justice and revenge, but Wesley's hard to miss glare stopped him mid sentence. She turned to the mob boss, 'You owe me for Deucalion, Solankis.'

Walsh found it rather hard to understand what this Deucalion guy had to do with the matter, but to his great surprise, Solankis began to speak, his eyes fixed on Wesley.

'Gaby was my love child. Her mother, she had her but we ain't married. She was the sweetest girl, I tell you. She deserved none of what happened. I only do this for her. It ain't a mob hit, I tell you. Mob doesn't target kids, man. They're just kids. I tell you coz I owe you, lady. You look up Macy Stepford. Only she ain't Macy Stepford. You look her up under Macy Westwood. If you still can't figure it out, man, then it ain't my problem anymore. Now get out of my house.' Back in the car, Walsh turned to Wesley. 'Who the hell is Deucalion? And why does Solankis of all people owe you?'

'Deucalion was the big mob boss down west. I got Solankis here into Witness Protection after he bailed on Deucalion. He owes me big time for that.'

'You got him into Witness Protection? You?!'

'Yeah, I did. Try to keep up, wouldn't you?' Wesley sounded positively irritated now. 'You get to work on Macy Westwood. I'll analyze the bomb.'

Walsh nodded his assent and focused on driving, deciding not to test her patience anymore. She was getting a lot more frightening as he got to know her better.

It was almost poetic, watching slow connections build themselves before his very eyes. Macy Stepford, nee Westwood, had worked as a private secretary before she was a bank teller, and for none other than their friendly neighbourhood mobster, Trey Solankis. Like the start of every bad romance novel, the boss and the secretary had an affair, and the secretary got pregnant. Small town gossip got to her however, and the mother abandoned her baby to her father's care, getting married to a respectable construction worker named George Stepford. After this, it moved into the realm of guesswork. Apparently, Macy's motherly instincts awakened some months ago and she had reached out to her daughter, meeting her on the down low. According to the baker opposite the street from the chemist's, both mother and daughter had taken to meeting at the Chemist's every Thursday at twelve. This had been going on regularly since the past few weeks.

Feeling rather accomplished after all this sleuthing that had taken up most of the night, Walsh was watching Wesley disappear into various violently coloured fumes every few minutes as she tried to figure out what the bomb was made of.

'I got it! The explosive is almost entirely ANFO- that's Ammonium Nitrate and Fuel Oil, probably Diesel. The booster is PETN, which is nearly the same as Nitroglyceride but way more stable. The blasting cap is simple but oh- so effective! TATP, that's triacetone tetraperoxide, can be made at home using acetone and hydrogen peroxide. And finally, the trigger is a simple burner phone. Give it a ring and the entire thing goes boom!'

Walsh had never seen Wesley so excited over anything before and it was making him vaguely uneasy, watching her go into raptures over a bomb, of all things. So he was almost



glad that Macy Westwood's husband decided to drop in at that particular moment.

'Why is he here so early? It is five in the morning!'

'He is a construction worker, Walsh, he has morning shifts. Use your brain sometimes.' Wesley threw a glare at him. He glared back at her and turned towards the other man.

George Stepford was a tall and wiry man, with dark hair and a staid moustache. He seemed solid in the old school way and politely shook hands with both of them, even calling Wesley 'ma'am'. He was rather upset at the death of his wife and his hands shook as he recounted her last days in a wavering voice. Walsh almost felt like going easy on the interrogation.

Suddenly, Wesley, who till now had been staring out of the window with her back to them, turned and asked, 'Mr. Stepford, what could be a possible cause for sudden foaming in a cooling tower?'

Mr. Stepford, taken aback, replied, 'A leaking heat exchanger probably, why do you ask?'

'No reason. Just confirming something.' With that she turned around again, a slightly deranged smile on her face.

Her weirdness seemed to have affected Mr. Stepford adversely, as he soon excused himself and left, muttering under his breath. 'What the hell was that about?'

'There was something different about his hair.'

'No, I am asking about that question you asked him.'

'Just a hunch. If he is a construction worker, why was he able to answer that sudden question correctly? No one but a well-qualified chemical engineer could have known the

answer to that.'

'Do you think he is a suspect?'

'Maybe. I need proof though, damn it. His hair. What was different about his hair?'

She threw herself into a chair, muttering furiously, before getting up and stalking down to the archives, from where she picked up some of her stuff and left the station, without replying to any of his queries.

Hours passed by and she did not return. Walsh choked down some rather tasteless lunch as he ruminated over the fact that he was going to get his colleagues fired.

Finally, at around seven, Wesley blew in like a storm and thumped down two photographs before him on the table where he was sitting rather despondently.

'Look at these. Do you notice anything?' she pointed at the two photos, both of which were of George Stepford.

He started to shake his head no, but then stopped and considered the photos again. 'Why are the roots of his hair white in the second picture? And they don't seem natural.'

Wesley shot him a triumphant look. 'Exactly. That, Walsh, is white powder residue, something which I had unconsciously noticed yesterday, but could not make sense of till today.'

'What is it then?'

'Do you remember that the explosive substance in the bomb was PETN, similar to Nitroglyceride? PETN residues are easily detectable in the hair of people handling them, even after washing. That means he was around PETN somewhere in the past week. Coupled with that question that I asked him, Walsh, I think we have found our bomber!'

'Jesus Christ, you're probably right!

But this evidence will not be enough to convict him. We need more proof.'

'We'll get it. Tonight we're breaking into his house. I need to look into his medicine cabinet.' Wesley looked positively gleeful at the idea.

Walsh was starting to debate his own sanity now. 'But we need a search warrant! And why in the name of Jesus do you need to look into his medicine cabinet?'

'Extenuating circumstances, Deputy. And I'll tell you why the medicine cabinet when we get there. Be ready at eleven. I'll pick you up. He works the night shift on Thursdays so we're in luck.'

'Wait, how do you know that he works night shifts on Thursdays?'

'I might or might not have stolen his daily planner while I was out.'

'Jesus.'

It was twenty minutes to midnight. Walsh was currently creeping around a murder suspect's house after breaking in, trying not to jump at small noises while his accomplice was ruffling through his bathroom medicine cupboard.

'What are you even looking for in there?'

'Aspirin, Pentathol, Aidax, ointment. Found it! Lentonitrat, Lisinopril Beta-blocker, 95% Acetone and a nearly empty bottle of Hydrogen Peroxide. We got our evidence.'

'How is that evidence? I mean I get the significance of the last two but what about that Lento thingy?'

'Lentonitrat is heart medicine which is almost pure PETN, for it works as a vasodilator. And this bottle- is nearly empty. Also, the Beta Blocker is new. It is used to treat hypertension, whose sudden onset is a symptom of Ammonium Nitrate Poisoning, which as you would remember, was a key



component in our bomb. Bam! Proof.' Walsh stood awestruck. 'You are a genius.'

'I know. It is good to be acknowledged.'

'And very humble too.'

'Yes, well. Perks of the intellect. Let's get back to the station. We can ask for a search warrant tomorrow. I'm sure there is a lab hidden around here somewhere. Come.'

She walked out of the bathroom door. He was about to follow her when there was a loud thud and the sound of something crashing to the floor.

'Wesley!' he shouted and tried to run out of the door, but stopped when something cylindrical was jammed into his throat. He slowly walked back into the light, and George Stepford's maniacally grinning face came into view.

'Uh oh. You're not going anywhere, young master, not unless you want your brains to come leaking out of a

hole in your forehead.'

'How are you here? You were supposed to be at your night job.' Walsh tried to keep him engaged, reaching slowly for the pistol at his back.

'Ha, you cops, you think you are very smart and the rest of us are all idiots. Do you think I didn't realize what the young missy there was trying to do? I don't like people playing games with me!' he roared. 'My wife did that and I had to kill her! I loved her and she made me kill her!'

'Why did you have to kill her, George?' Walsh was trying desperately to keep him from noticing his efforts to reach for his gun.

'She was a lying whore, that's why. Suddenly she decides that this stupid, snivelling little girl who she had with that black son of a bitch was more important than me, her husband? She lies to me and sneaks out all the time, wasting all my money on that fucking rat! Of course she needs to die. And that little rat had to die with her. I built a brilliant bomb. It killed both of

them and that bastard of a chemist! Killed by his own supplies. Good riddance to the lot, I say!'

There was a noise behind George. It was Wesley, bleeding from the head but holding a gun steady in her hands, pointing at George. In that split second of surprise, Walsh knocked George's legs from beneath him and threw him into the wall. But before George could raise his own, two shots were fired simultaneously from the other two guns - opening two holes in his head, spattering the wall behind him in blood and viscera.

Walsh tottered towards the other wall for support. Wesley surveyed the scene critically, shrugged and said, 'Well, that wall needed a splash of colour anyway,' before turning away to look for something to staunch her bleeding with.

Walsh laughed a little hysterically, wondering if he was still going to have a job after all this.

THE WHITECHAPEL VAMPIRE



Madhav Mehrotra

The silver moon shone brightly in the night sky, illuminating the street. It had rained earlier, and the cobbled street reflected the pale moonlight. Being a dimly lit part of Whitechapel, it was a perfect hunting ground for creatures of the darkness. Knowing that, it wouldn't take a genius to know that it was wise to stay away from these areas, rather than entering them. Yet entering such a street was exactly what we were about to do.

'There's the guard we're supposed to talk to,' said Drake, my partner. He was pointing straight ahead, to a man squatting underneath a lamp post. Drake's Grade I Exorcist badge gleamed in the moonlight. He had short hair which was standing up straight as though an electric current had passed through it. His rapier was in the hanging at his side, with the green handle barely visible.

In the distance, I could hear Big Ben chiming, signalling that it was midnight. The hours of the monsters had begun. This was when they were at their most powerful, and we were at our weakest. 'We' being the Supernatural Crimes Department of Scotland Yard, London. As the name suggested, we hunted all creatures supernatural to keep the people safe. I was just a Junior Exorcist, still learning the tricks of the trade.

'Let's go interview him, Sarah,' Drake said.

'Right,' I said.

'Remember,' said Drake as we were walking, 'to keep an eye out for anything strange. Evidence indicates that there's a vampire in these parts.'

'Right,' I said again. A dark cloud passed over the moon, and a chill went down my spine. When I touched my brow, I felt cold beads of sweat, which I immediately wiped. I didn't want Drake to know I was scared.

'Also,' said Drake, 'don't tell him I'm a wizard who can use magic.'

'What?' I asked. 'Why not?'

Drake didn't respond as we had reached the guard, who stood up. 'Are you them, then?' he asked us in a thick Scottish accent. 'The blokes from Scotland Yard?'

'That would be us,' said Drake, smiling. He extended a gloved hand, which the guard didn't take.

'You're just wee teenagers,' he said, looking at us disdainfully. 'Kids, really.'

My hands balled into fists, and I stepped forward, not sure what I was about to do – hit him probably. I absolutely hated being called a kid.

But Drake knew me well enough, and stuck his foot out and I tripped over and fell, straight into a puddle. There was a soft splash, followed by the snickering of the guard.

'Just a kid,' the guard reiterated.

'My partner Sarah just lost her footing there,' said Drake, still smiling. 'Now, can we get down to business?'

'Oh, alright.'

'Can you tell us what happened?'

I ignored Drake's extended hand, and

stood up by myself. I turned to face the guard, who still had a ghost of a laugh on his face.

'I was taking me rounds as usual, when something came out of nowhere and bit me on me arm!' he said, showing us the bite marks on his right arm. 'It smacked its lips like me blood was the tastiest thing it ever tasted. Then it ran off into the darkness.'

'And you didn't follow it?' I asked, wanting to rile the guard up a little.

The guard looked at me angrily. 'Miss Sarah, was it? That thing attacked me, and I was bleeding!' He showed me the bite marks again. 'It was an evil, powerful thing. It would have killed me if I had followed it.'

'Yes, we understand,' said Drake, shooting me a warning look.

“

In the distance, I could hear Big Ben chiming, signalling that it was midnight. The hour of the monsters had begun.

”



‘Following it when you didn’t know what it was would have been far too dangerous.’

‘Yeah,’ said the guard.

‘Well, we’ll investigate the area now,’ Drake told the guard.

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ he said. He turned to leave, but Drake called out to him.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Grivens,’ the guard said, and left, but not before Drake shook his hand. Unfortunately, it was the same hand which he had injured, and a trace of his blood was left on Drake’s hand.

‘I got a bone to pick with you,’ I snarled at Drake. ‘Why did you trip me?’

‘You know perfectly well why, Sarah,’ Drake said. ‘Fun as it would undoubtedly be, you can’t beat up witnesses.’ He smiled. ‘They tend to be less cooperative that way.’

‘I guess you’re right,’ I growled. ‘Still, I hate it when we’re called kids.’

‘Technically speaking, you are a *kid*.’

‘Oh, shut up, Drake.’

We made our way to where the guard said he had been attacked, and found traces of his blood. I followed the trail in silence, while Drake started whistling some annoying song. I turned around to tell him to stop whistling, but something made me pause. The look on his face was so relaxed it suggested he was out for an evening walk rather than hunting monsters which were the making of nightmares. His emerald green eyes shone like an excited child’s. I wondered how I looked – probably more tensed, maybe a little scared. Although I shouldn’t have, I thought back to the last time I fought vampires, back in my training days. My entire squad had been slaughtered like cattle, and I was the

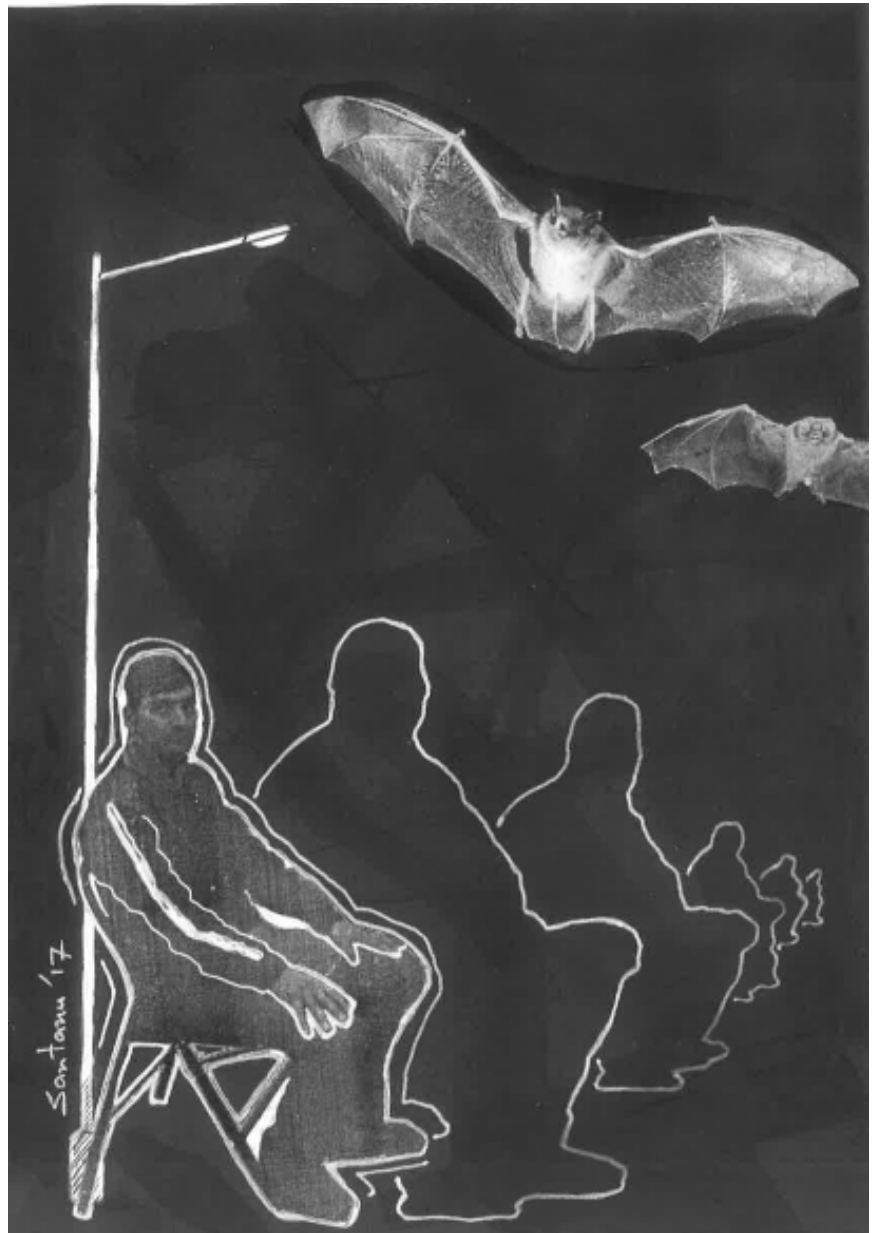


Illustration: Santanu Chatterjee

only survivor. I spent an entire night surrounded by their corpses and drenched in their blood. The vampires didn’t attack me, but the damage had been done. I now carried with me an immense fear of vampires.

All of a sudden, something touched my shoulder from behind. I drew my rapier and nearly stabbed a figure, which I then saw was Drake.

‘You idiot!’ I hissed at him. ‘I could have killed you!’

He chuckled. ‘Oh, lighten up.’

I sheathed my rapier. ‘What did you want?’

‘Ah, yes. Come with me. I think I found something.’

He led me over to the other edge of the street, where he had been investigating, and pointed to a dark alley. I squinted my eyes, and couldn’t see anything.

Drake muttered under his breath and snapped his fingers, which made a ball of blue light appear somewhere in the middle of the alley. It



illuminated a man bent over something. For a moment I thought it was just a homeless man scrounging through the garbage, but that couldn't have been why Drake called me here. I looked more closely, and found that the man was bending over something which definitely wasn't garbage ...it was a corpse.

The vampire which was crouching over the corpse looked up at me and smiled, revealing bloodstained teeth. I took an involuntary step backwards.

'That's a vampire,' said Drake, in an almost overjoyed tone.

The vampire shouted and made its way towards us. It was quite far from us, so we had about thirty seconds before it would be upon us. Drake used his magic in the meantime, drawing a strange symbol on the floor. He held his palm over it and said something I couldn't catch, and there was a flash of blue light, and I turned away to shield my eyes. When I looked back, the symbol was gone. In its place were two machetes.

'An inelegant weapon,' Drake remarked as he handed me one, 'but it'll do better than our rapiers for vampire hunting.'

The vampire had nearly reached us, and Drake and I assumed a battle stance. Now that it was closer, I could see it was dressed in medieval robes, something like what a priest would wear. The vampire came straight at me, perhaps because it sensed my fear. It slashed at me with its claw-like hands. I jumped back and parried its next strike with my blade, but if being cut by a machete hurt the vampire, it certainly didn't show it.

The only known way to kill a vampire was to cut off its head, which was what I thought I should try to do. So I took a swing at its head, but it ducked and slashed at me again, this time connecting with my stomach, opening up a big gash from which blood gushed out.

The vampire licked my blood off its fingers slowly, making a big show out of it. Gross.

'Drake!' I shouted. 'I'm bleeding! I need help!'

'A little busy here!' he called back. He had engaged the vampire since I'd been injured, and was doing a far better job than I had. The vampire was bleeding in several places, and his clothes were now in tatters.

I was beginning to get dizzy because of loss of blood, and I reached out to a wall to steady myself. I watched as Drake swung his machete in a great horizontal arc and cut the vampire's head straight off. The head flew up in the air and landed a few feet from the body.

Drake ran over to me and examined my wound.

'It's a deep wound,' he said in a casual tone, as though he was talking about the weather, 'but it won't kill you. A couple of day's rest and you should be good as new, Sarah.' He took out some first aid supplies and bandaged me up.

'Thanks, Drake.'

'Of course.'

I sensed a movement behind Drake, and just as I was about to call out, a hand grabbed Drake by the neck! It was pressing against him hard and I was sure he was suffocating. If I didn't do anything, Drake would die.

'Hey!' I shouted. 'Leave him alone!'

A figure stepped into the light of the streetlamp. It was dressed completely in black, again in medieval robes, and was wearing a white mask. I could now make out another figure which was strangling Drake, and a third which was flanking the man in white. They were wearing brown medieval robes.

The man in the white mask snapped his fingers and the one flanking him came and stood by his side. The one holding Drake tightened his grip on Drake's throat, and Drake stopped resisting. His arm went slack.

'No!' I shouted. 'Drake! Wake up!'

The man in the white mask turned to the one strangling Drake. 'Leave him, or he will die.' The man loosened his grip on Drake, and he fell to the ground. He did not move after that. The man who had been strangling him moved away from him and stood on the other side of the man in the white mask. Both the men not wearing masks smiled at me, revealing sharp, elongated teeth...vampires.

I had to reach Drake somehow, to help him, to make him regain consciousness. There was no way I could presume to take on so many vampires, at least not in my current state. I tried to move, but found that my body was paralyzed with fear. I couldn't even move a muscle.

Just then, there was the sound of sirens in the distance, which were growing louder every second – reinforcements from Scotland Yard. The man in the white mask turned to me and made a mock salute.

'Until next time, girl,' he said, and along with the other two, he ran off into the night.

Both Drake and I were taken to a hospital in Whitechapel, and were treated for our respective ailments. Drake seemed completely unconcerned with the fact that he had nearly been strangled to death, which made me marvel at him.

'How are you not scared right now?' I asked him.

'Because fear isn't an emotion which would help right now,' he replied.

'What do you mean?'



'I have a job to do: hunt down these vampires which are plaguing Whitechapel. And since fear isn't an emotion which will help me do that, I've put it to one side so that I can deal with it later.'

'How do you do that?' I asked him in awe.

'Do what?'

'Put your emotions to one side.' He began to speak, but I cut him off. 'It's not just fear, is it? You've put all your emotions to one side.'

'Yes,' Drake said quietly. 'I have.'

There was a long silence, which was broken by me.

'How do I control my fear, Drake?'

Drake didn't say anything immediately, and walked over to the window, with an uncharacteristically brooding look on his face. 'I too was once in a similar situation, Sarah. My fear lay in ghosts, and I couldn't even move in a haunted area, I was that scared. My mentor helped me realize that I was trying to run away from my fear. To answer your question, you have to face your fear. Accept that it's a part of you, accept your shortcomings. Remember, your fear doesn't control you, you control it. And some chocolate doesn't do any harm either.'

I blinked in confusion. 'Chocolate?'

Drake laughed at the expression on my face. 'Yes, chocolate. It helps make you happy, excited. I saw you noticed my eyes and the way I reacted when I saw the vampires – that was because of eating a little too much chocolate, and there being too much sugar in my body.' I couldn't tell if he was joking or not.

A couple of days later, we were back on the same street, the one where we had encountered the vampires. It was a moonless, chilly night, and I didn't

know why Drake had brought me with him. Maybe he wanted me to 'face my fears'.

'There,' said Drake, and took off. I looked in the direction he ran off to and saw the vampires feeding off another corpse. There were three of them, but only one of them wasn't feeding – the one in the white mask. He snapped his fingers, and the other two also started running towards us, ready to engage us in combat.

I took a deep breath, then a bite of chocolate, and started running towards them. I didn't reject my fear anymore, I accepted it. It was a part of me, just like all my other emotions. It didn't control me. I controlled it.

I drew my machete and slashed at one of the vampires. I opened up a deep wound in his chest, and he drew back, snarling. The other vampire came at me, but I swung my machete again and its head came clean off.

The first vampire roared in anger over his fallen comrade, and charged towards me again, as I expected. I sidestepped his attack and swung my machete in an arc and its head fell to the ground, followed by its body moments later.

'Drake, I've taken care of these two!' I called out to him.

'Brilliant, Sarah!' he called back, while fighting the vampire in the white mask. 'I knew you could do it!'

All of a sudden, Drake dropped his machete and pointed to the vampire with an open palm. There was a flash of blue light, and when it cleared, the vampire was bound in blue chains. Drake took off the mask, and I gasped.

'Sarah,' said Drake, 'may I present to you, once again, the guard Mr. Grivens.'

'What? How?'

'My suspicions were first aroused when we were first assigned to this case, and I read the report file. Why would a vampire attack a man but not kill him? After all, Grivens wasn't armed and would have been an easy target. Yet the vampire fled. Why was that, I wondered?' He paused. 'I then also sent over a sample of his blood to the forensics lab, and found that it wasn't human blood.' He looked at me. 'It was a vampire's blood.' He then turned to Grivens. 'I presume that the reason you wanted me unconscious rather than dead was that so you could turn me into a vampire later, and have me act as a spy for you in the Supernatural Crimes Department. Well, that plan won't work now.'

He looked at me. 'You didn't see it? Really? You're such a child, Sarah.'

'I'm going to hit you.'

Drake reached into his pocket, took out a bar of chocolate, and with his other hand, swiped Grivens's head straight off. He then took a bite of his chocolate, and Whitechapel was never bothered by vampires again.

DEATH IN THE FAMILY OF CLOWNS



Gokulnath Govindan

When you die, you don't go to heaven or hell like your grandma or grandpa told you, you go to the penis. There is no need for you to go back and read it again, you read me right, I said the penis. Heaven was nothing but ending up in your dream girl's P***Y, while hell would mean eternally masturbating to Savita Bhabhi. This is something I overheard at school. While I squished in the corners of the prestigious backseat of my school bus, the seniors of our learning centre discussed this with great gusto. They followed up the discussion with an intense debate about which heaven was hotter, Aishwarya Rai's or Kareena Kapoor's. Many points were brought forth and the backbenchers of our bus crowned Aishwarya as the winner. The band of disgusting perverts had fixed on her because she was in their words, a classic maal. If this was an awkward thing for you to read, wait till I tell you that this interaction is exactly what is running through my mind as I put my grandfather on fire.

But before we talk of my grandfather in flames, we must start this piece with my own ass that is very much on fire. This semester began with a rosy fairy tale beginning as I started working on my thesis, a thesis on a topic I was sure I would ace. After all, when your thesis is on humour and you belong to a family of clowns, you think that it would be what today's kids would call, easy peasy japanesy. You sit and enjoy the first month, making fun of every other thing you see, thinking to yourself, 'Look how funny I am. This is going to be the easiest thing I have ever done.' You waste another two weeks bragging about a half-baked idea that sounds intellectual to anyone who doesn't

give a shit about you or your work, which basically means everyone. You then panic a little and realise that writing funny and making fun are two different things. Then you panic a lot and waste one more week because you are lazy and scared. Finally, when you are completely dumbstruck and you look up to Indian sex comedies like *Mastizaade* for humour, you know that you are fucked.

I was desperate for advice, so I tried asking my only friend first, someone who I thought would never disappoint me. After all, we were buddies since the days when you had no internet. He told me to fuck off. Then I knocked on the doors of my colleagues, as in the English undergrads but as most working people would have guessed, that didn't go too well either. I was out of options and scared out of my wits. I had to calm myself down; so I took a few breaths and called up the people in SNU's PhD programme. People tell me that when you feel like you have problems in life, go look at the homeless and you will feel a lot better about your life. Well, my reply to them is that I prefer a bunch of PhD aspirants. A few minutes of chit chat on their work made me feel a lot better and boosted my confidence. Finally, when it looked like I was out of options, my dad called. My dad never calls me and I never call him. Hence, this call was a shock, but I thought why not ask him. After all, his is the worst sense of humour that I have ever seen. Don't get me wrong, it is not that he makes bad dad jokes. It is just that he absolutely finds nothing funny. In my lifetime, I have realised one thing. His kind of humour does not exist. So, if there is some book that he finds funny, it must be a gem of a research material for

someone working on humour. I picked up his call and before I could even ask something, he told me to pack my bags and leave the hostel for the airport. My thesis was in ruins, so it did not sound like a bad idea to pull a Vijay Mallya but then again, my father would never fund that flight.

'Your grandfather is really sick. His condition has worsened. I think you should come visit him before anything ... umm ... happens. I have already booked your flight. Check your mail, call a cab and call me when you reach the airport.'

My grandfather had cancer. It began with the liver and spread its wings like the colonial empires of Europe, massacring everything in its way to gain power. We realised it too late and by that time, there was no cure but death. Most of us, including me, had accepted this fact but it still felt weird and tingly inside. I was upset and awkward, but I was not depressed. You see that's a thing about sadness in real life. You rarely turn into Hamlet and brood over it so

“

When I was a kid, my grandfather and I ran for miles as he would tell me like Master Miyagi that this is what you do when you are stuck with an issue. The first thing I was taught was to run.

”



Illustration: Divya Singh

long that you question your existence. Most people are always distracted from their joys and woes. This, combined with a gene of clowns that ensures you never deal with your issues, is a masterpiece for staying happy. There was no point in being sad, and deep down under, our whole family knew that in some cases, death was still better than suffering.

'How could you leave us? How could you leave me alone in this hell to suffer on my own?' cried my grandfather's elder sister beating her chest. These were not the cries of my first visit. No, these were the cries of my second one. It is ironical how I was asked to rush back home to be there, in case something happens but I still managed to miss it. To those who are confused, I came on a Thursday, stayed there till Monday, to then head back to my hostel before leaving again on the same day. This was the cry of Monday.

B.K Nivas was not what it was a day

before. The front yard was no longer filled with the soothing odour of the multiple species of flowers that my grandmother fondled over all day long. Instead, it was filled with people. There were lines of people stretching from the front gates of the house to the back entrance that bordered a mini forest of sorts. In fact, these were people who you would call ghosts. There are ghosts in every funeral, wandering the house with no knowledge of what it is that has happened to our lives. They come to sympathise for a minute, drink tea for the next couple of minutes before finally fixating on a current debate, that they would shamelessly fight over.

As the ghosts set about to fight over the JNU issue, we, the family were waiting for the body. My grandfather's body was in the hospital and was waiting for my arrival to leave for home. The rituals of our funeral do not begin before the sons in the family arrive. My grandfather

only had daughters; so his grandsons were the only ones who were allowed to send him away. For anyone who finds this custom strange and difficult to comprehend, the rules are simple. It is not the ones who love you the most that get to send you away. Therefore, my divine grandma and her three loving daughters had no part in all this. Only idiots like me and my brother, who have finite memories with our grandfather, were allowed to attend the funeral. After all, the penis has always been more important. Don't get me wrong, this was no patriarchy. No one was telling the ladies of our house to go make sandwiches. We asked the neighbouring women to do that for us. So it was all fine.

When I entered the house, everyone was already there. All the sisters and their kids were there. The sisters were weeping as the other members of my family held them and sobbed with them. My cousin from Dubai had arrived with her two-year-old. She too



was crying and howling, while keeping an eye on her kid who barely understood what was going on. Neethu, my cousin sister, was also there. She was the child of our very own Bollywood movie. My mother, a treasured middle child, had been married off under the rules of arranged marriage. But it was a different story as far as her younger sister was concerned. I am not sure of the exact details but at some point after my parents' marriage, Binu Allema, my mother's younger sister, fell for Ravi Appapan, my father's younger brother. There were protests and all it seems, but finally both families gave in to their love story. So, in one way she is way more related to me than all of my other cousins since we share the problems of both households. We were together when my father's family would cook us something we despised and we were together when our mother's family failed to understand the concept of afternoon naps. Apparently, it is a crime in Karivellur, our ancestral village, to sleep in the afternoons. She was to be my silent partner in our woes and joys, but she too had betrayed me to join the dark side and weep like a little kid. They were all weeping and shouting my grandfather's name. It was disgusting to watch as they all broke what was so dear to our family values.

They were all failing in what our family does best. It was a simple trick that they had to follow. There is a reason why I call my family, a family of clowns. We rarely face our problems and it is even rarer that we cry about them. We joke about it or make fun of it or best of all, ignore it, but we never face it head-on, dealing with our emotions, in front of a crowd that we barely care for. When I was a kid, my grandfather and I ran for miles as he would tell me like Master Miyagi that this is what you do when you are stuck with an issue. The first thing I was taught was to run. What was even more hurting was that they were all talking about it. They were not only crying but also talking about

it, like a weakling who deals with his or her emotions. The sisters in our family's previous generation may have that unconditional love for each other, but they rarely talk or get depressed by their issues, always pushing them aside with words like, 'Adunnum oru Prashnam ella' (that is no issue). Why do they not get that a family is pillared on those values of ignoring. If they could do it so well with my cousin's education, keeping quiet when she wanted to study more and not get married, why is it that they could just not ignore this? All they had to do was think and talk of some other thing like politics or sports. But no, they had to talk about our grandfather and their dear memories with him. It is not like I don't have any memories but you don't see me crying about it, do you? In fact, I was not even there when he passed away. Well, they can go to hell because I won't fail those ideals that were so dear to my gramps. I won't think about my grandfather's demise. Instead, I would prefer writing. Yes, I think I will get back to writing my thesis. So I got up from my seat, grabbed my laptop bag and left for the solitude of the upstairs room where I finally began writing.

At first, the idea was to write a campus love story, mixed with your Bollywood perfected Gay characters and idiot best friend, who were as funny as they were real. Yes, I agree with you when you think why it is that this kind of humour exists. The setting was a campus, much like the IITs. After all, those are where the best stories are made. I could even title it 'Indian Institute Of Tales' and maybe later turn it into a 100-crore movie. It was all set, but someone pointed out that my story had to be more than the mere 100 words of this genre. Remember, when I told you how making fun is not writing funny. Well, I suppose it does work sometimes. Since that was a failed concept, I had to now come up with something funny. I tried looking for material online but before I could make any real progress, my older cousin from

my father's side walked in and told me that I should go down to wait for the rituals to begin.

'You should head back, go back to your college', whispered my grandfather as he constantly coughed in between those words. He was still terribly sick but he was speaking again, which was good. He was even eating oatmeal and complaining about it, which also meant that he was feeling good.

'Yes, there is nothing for you to do here. It's better that you go back', my grandmother joined in as the whole family soon began discussing my departure. They had a point though. I was there for the last four days and I had nothing to do really. I just sat there, taking in the village politics and gossip that was common in almost everyone's conversation. My thesis was at a standstill and I had nothing to look forward to in that context. We were fine and there seemed to be no need for me. Yes, we were fine. You would expect the environment to be gloomy, but you don't know my family like I do. We were a bunch of proud clowns who let nothing bring us down. At that point, I was sure of the fact that we had all, including my grandfather, accepted whatever fate would befall us. We were no Kapoor and sons. I was sure that we would deal with it like clowns, joking around and talking of all the problems in the world but our own. I was still unsure about leaving though, but Neethu made a point about free Wi-Fi and the luxury whore in me awakened to ask my dad to book my tickets. I hastily said my goodbyes, not knowing that I would regret this haste for the rest of my life, and left for the airport.

I won't lie when I say that I was irritated by this cousin of mine who seemed to be judging me for researching humour. He was not only judging but constantly pestering me to go back down and wait in the sobbing crowd for the funeral to begin. I almost wanted to judge him back on his Mangalorean engineering



pursuit, but my teachings in humanities held me back. He should not have been there. In fact, why was he there? He was not really related and his mid terms were underway. He should be busy studying mechanics instead of attending this funeral. Well, I suppose even I rarely needed an excuse to run away from engineering. For anyone who is not familiar with the story of Mangalore and Kerala, I shall make it clear. The farmer is as you all know, literally dead. No one wants their kids to have land anymore. Instead, they all want to bury their seeds in the field of engineering and there is no land as fertile for engineering as the land of Mangalore. The 185 km² land has close to 30 colleges that are jam packed with Mallu kids. It is ironic how the field might have changed, but the working is still the same. You still have to pay a lot of money to plant your seed in the land and even more to ensure its sale in the market. Every semester is marked with extra fees as rarely does a seed grow without some sort of fertiliser. There is one thing that all students learn in engineering. They might suck at their academics but by the end of four, five or six years, depending on their talent, they would all have turned into masters of pestering. They are well trained since the first semester to pester their faculty for marks, attendance or make-up exams. So, it only took a few minutes for my cousin to get me to feel nauseous.

I heard the news of his demise when I was back in Delhi, signing my hostel attendance. I had just come back when my dad called me up. He asked me about my flight and when I responded, he broke down as he told me to pack and come back on the next flight possible. I rushed back to the airport as I booked a flight to my grandfather's funeral.

It was a Tuesday and like all Tuesdays in Kerala, this too was a strike day. People and kids alike, were granted a holiday on account for some random issue. That random issue might be on

the grounds of unfair labour and caste problems, making me a dick for my sarcasm but well, you see, humour on half-baked information like this too exists. Either way, the strike worked out in our favour as it meant that everyone we knew could attend the grand dinner that is served at the end of the seven day funeral proceedings. Yes, the rituals were mostly done and I still had not shed a single tear, but everyone else had calmed down and they were back to being clowns. I should have been happy that their sob fest was over, but strangely I still felt odd and furious. None of them were talking about him or his memories anymore, and that for some strange reason pissed me off. I was still standing strong but it bothered me that the others too seemed to have moved on. You see, I never realised that I had never moved on. I was just running in different directions, never settling in that place where I could embrace what I had lost.

A month has passed since his demise and I am trying to finish this piece as my own throat croaks from infection and weak recollections. I no longer felt weird or angry. I was just scared, no, I was shit scared because in a day or two, I had to submit my first draft and I was still stuck with the 100 word campus story. There were no light bulbs in my closet that could shine bright, signalling the arrival of a great idea. At max, I had a crucible which could work out. I was planning on putting Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un in the same room, fighting over who is it that could make more people laugh. Kim was the king of deadpan humour with that face of his and his never used campaign notes. He was leading to victory the moment he brought forth kimchi. But this lead only lasted till someone told me that Trump was standing for elections. After that piece of news, Trump was the clear victor in my GOP debate. This was a good idea but the problem lay in the fact that there were no jokes left in this planet, when it came to these two characters. In fact, their

existence in this world might be to increase the world's sense of humour. Therefore, this too was a bust. I was de-motivated as hell but as the deadline grew closer, there grew a spark in my ass.

The spark in me was constantly growing and when all I had was one more day, it was a god damn forest fire. I had nothing in my mind but a few hathi cheeti jokes. It was then that it hit me that all I had to do was talk about myself and my own history with humour. Once I was directed to this thought process, it didn't take me long to come to a halt at the memories of my grandfather. He was the first one to tell me how it is that you make people laugh. The joke he told me was a bad one. It was not funny, but it had a tiger who farted. I, like most kids of my age, was sold at farts. Poop humour was the thing in those times and all I had to do to become the class clown was blame Nitish for farting. In retrospect though, I should probably apologise for that, but either way I was crowded by these memories of his when I realised that I might be a shitty grandson but I could be a little less shitty if I could write something about him. So, I switched on my laptop and began writing his favourite joke, a joke on Kerala strikes.

But before I began writing this tribute, I had to move on. The moving on took place when I left B.K Nivas for the airport to pick up a fight with the people at Jet Airways over a seating I probably didn't care for. The moving on happened after I cleared security to look at that cheesy ad from British airways with a grandmother who missed her son and her grandkids. It is only then that I would breakdown, creating an elaborate scene at the boarding gates of Mangalore Airport. I cried a lot, so much and so loud that it muzzled the roars of delayed Air India engines. I tried thinking of naked girls, dream pussy, foreign brands and what nots, but I could not. All I could think of were those nights when I would eagerly wait in the front aisle



of our house for my gramps to bring me some Parota and chicken curry. All I could think of was how he loved that Parota but would still give me his share as he saw me drooling; even when my stomach was full, he would still give me his share. All I could think

was that I could wait in that front aisle all I want but he would not come back. All I could think was how I should have stayed back and cried alongside those other idiots because it sucks to weep on your own, all alone. He would never come back.

Nothing, not a shitty thesis in his tribute or those cries at the airport could bring him back. My grandfather had left me and left me alone with those aspirations of memories and a story on humour that is so not funny.

“There is no greater
agony than bearing an
untold story inside you.”

- Maya Angelou