

## Renegade

I feel sorry for the Dead. Drove of them shuffle along the streets of the southern quarter, Yamapura, where the God of Death and Final Judgement reigns supreme. They smell scummy, sodden, sick-sweet. Even in their spirit remains, they carry the sad fragrance of the antyesti, the last sacrifice, mingled with the odour of things that have travelled long in water. (I dislike tuberose, funeral favourites.)

My fellow yamadoots and I materialize upon entry into the world. We are spirits with a thin casing of flesh and we appear as men – ugly men with splayed teeth and green skins, but human nonetheless. So, we have arms and legs and everything else. For instance, minds that can think. I have two features, in addition. Both disadvantages for a yamadoot – an appetite for the things of the human body, and a heart that feels. A senior messenger was outraged when I confided as such in him. His voice grated in the corridors of Yamraj's palace where silence and death come very close. No, not close. They are the same.

“To serve Yamraj, our God, is our highest calling!” he rasped.

Perhaps. But in every sublimation, there lies a central core of yearning. Usually for forbidden things.

Whenever I look into my bag where the souls of the newly deceased lie entangled, I always think how lonely it must be to be dead among strangers. I'm a spirit; I ought to be used to it. But I'm not. I'm a misfit. One day, I'll run away into the world of living beings. I'm awaiting the opportune moment. Every day I hope it will come.

Now my sack goes bumpety-bump as I walk along the uneven pavements of a small town. I think of the memorable Dead who, over the years, have been collected by me: the girl who

on her deathbed made her people promise that they wouldn't let her red toenail polish be ruined on her funeral pyre. (The dying can be unreasonable.) I think of the child-spirit who mewled for his mother even while he was being chaperoned by Yamraj's wives, all the way to Pitris, our Hindu Heaven.

Then, there was the young man who was returned to the world to be confined to a hollow of an old banyan tree on a branch of which he had taken his life. Yamraj pronounced, "You were reckless enough to throw away one of the greatest gifts of the Gods – life itself. All hatya, wanton killing, is a sin. So, too, is the slaying of the self – atma hatya." He dictated his judgement to Citragupta, the Keeper of Records, "Soul to be returned to the earth as an unhallowed spirit, dwelling on unhallowed ground."

I was to accompany the young-man-spirit back to the world. I remember asking him, "But why?"

"Betrayal."

I never talk to folks or they to me. When they sight me, they're craven, repentant or just plain poker-faced. Some cock their heads and look at me as though what's not really there has just called out to them. But *nobody*, dead or alive, has ever spoken to me as man to man. You can't possibly know what it means - to have someone just walk along with you and chat.

"Don't tell me. I know: she was beyond beautiful; the only home your heart ever knew; her approval, the measure of your worth. And it all began with trust. Every betrayal does. But the greater betrayal is by your own mind. It made you believe that death would end everything. In fact, it doesn't." I continued, as we wafted along the streets of Yamapura, "It

seems that you did not know what happens to the spirits of those who die before their time, and violently. That includes accident victims, the murdered - and suicides. To kill oneself would mean to turn into a shrieking bhoot-pret, an earth-bound spirit that lives in a tree. Unfulfilled and vengeful. Feared by all. Lonelier than you can ever imagine." I leant close to him, "Ask me about loneliness and unbelonging, or life in a timeless zone. Above all, about being dreaded."

Yamapura is a leaden place.

Of course, life in the world has its leaden moments too; its daily routine that acts like ballast, chaining you to existence.

Sunrise

Sunset

Sun

rise

and

set

In between, minute variations from day-to-day create the illusion of change, vitality, progress, whatever. But Yamapura, without clocks or calendars, doesn't even let you pretend.

There's a scuffling inside my sack. It brings me back to the here and now of my walk down a pavement. I'm curious. Most spirits are resigned, benumbed by death. I prop the gunny bag up against a disused postbox and peer inside. Two of the dead are carrying on a struggle for

supremacy. They're a pair of politicians, I can confirm. I take them out by the scruff of their souls and shake them up, "Listen here, scoundrels, it's *all over*: the muck-smearing and shit-stirring; the cheating of the voting public, bribing of the media and horse trading of perfectly useless Members of Parliament and the Legislative Assembly. Above all, you are finally DEAD, each of you laid cold and low by the other one's hired killers." (*"Political rivals simultaneously found dead, each in his own office! Foul play suspected!"* the headlines had hollered, sending hot, cheap excitement coursing through the town.)

They subside. I shove them back into the sack where they rightfully belong.

I hate killers. Presumptuous bastards, taking the protocol of Death out of the hands of the Gods; attempting to supersede Yamraj. Speaking of killers, there was that experience I had the last time I was on a round of collection.

The receptionist at the second-rate lodge in which I decided to spend the night, looked up curiously, accepted payment and handed me the key to a single non-airconditioned room. I had chosen a down-at-heel quarter where men are immersed in their own misery and one may dwell unrecognized.

The night was too young for such as me to retire to my room. I made for the lounge. The place was dimly lit and reeked of stale food and unwashed humanity. I seated myself in a high-backed sofa. From my vantage point I observed the only other men in the room.

Evidently, the two were at home in the establishment. Their speech was unfettered.

They spoke of a 'supari'. For the uninitiated, a supari refers to a gangland killing. This one was in the planning stages. On the table between them lay a silver salver with a scented supari, a betel nut, resting on a gleaming leaf. It's the time-honoured code of the contract to

kill. The fat man with be-ringed fingers indicated the betel. The man with the thin, clever face picked it up. His fingers had an eagerness all their own.

“Very fine”, he murmured as he savoured the supari.

The stout party said, “Just that one child. Goes on the school bus. But has quite a long walk to and from the bus stop to their home; much of it along lonely stretches. How do you propose to lure him away?”

“I have my methods. But I require time to observe and plan.”

“I will need proof of....”

“He will be parcelled out and conveyed to his parents and to you. Will that be suitable?”

“A small package will do. A lock of hair and an ear. I have a delicate stomach.”

Beneath my hood, my breath purred like steam.

The thin man got up. “We will talk further. Tomorrow, same place.” He bade his companion goodnight.

I sidled up and seated myself on the chair vacated by him. The stout man looked up from the evening newspaper. His expression changed, in quick succession, from surprise to annoyance. “How do you seek my company without my permission? I will complain to the manager,” he blustered.

I allowed my hood to slip and reveal skin the colour of slime. “Does this mean anything to you?” I took my lasso out of my pocket.

With a low strangulated cry, the fat man propelled himself out of his chair and made for the door.

He stumbled headlong down a corridor lit by low wattage bulbs, turned and blundered down another. He arrived at a door marked 'Deluxe Suite'. He fumbled with the lock and turned the knob. The door swung open. Reaching out for the light switch, his hand met my own.

I had already arrived.

"H...how did you get in here?" He was gibbering.

"Death travels quickly." I may have added that no door, barricade or fortress wall was proof against my entry. Mortals, of course, prefer not to think about this.

His eyes goggled. I smelt the pungency of aftershave and perspiration. It wasn't the first time I'd made a coward out of a pitiless man.

"Mercy!" he whispered and fell to his knees. That was the last word that escaped from his spittle-flecked lips.

I swung my lasso and extracted his soul.

They would find his body slumped in the doorway of his deluxe suite. His mortal remains did not concern me. His spirit alone was my business. It was committed to the charge of a junior yamadoot. (I am middle level). It would be conveyed to the netherworld and there it would remain on the mangle of suspense till summoned to Yamraj's throne.

No one in the lodge had the slightest suspicion that yamadoots were in their midst; that while they slept with their coverlets tucked up to their ears, my junior strode past their doors as he conveyed the new-dead to Yamapura.

I spent the night in my own cockroach-infested room, chuckling in satisfaction at a good night's work done; thinking an ordinary man's thoughts; expecting to sleep an ordinary man's sleep. I didn't. As the hours passed, loneliness and emptiness stacked up inside my heart. It was life I sought, not death. A living companion. Not a grim, grey wife chained to me like karma, ankle to ankle, for all eternity. (I'm still celibate, incidentally. Yamraj looks at me questioningly, from time to time. If I weren't a spirit, he might wonder at my orientation or whatever it's called today.)

"One day", I murmured, "I'll get myself a life."

As I lug my sack behind me now, I'm still looking for that life and love. I'm also looking out for an old acquaintance who goes by the quaint title of "The Grim Reaper."

It's funny how we met: in a church pew, during a funeral. You wouldn't think it likely, would you, to have two agents of death seated companionably together?

I'd never been inside a church before. Being Yamraj's emissary, I didn't barge into other people's places of worship. It wasn't seemly. But I was curious.

There was only one other individual in the same pew. He was in white and sparsely built.

The grey stone edifice swelled with sorrow. 'You neither know the day nor the hour', the priest said. "Little did our brother realize when he crossed the road that the Grim Reaper was shadowing him."

The individual whispered, "That's me." He performed a sleight of hand and produced a rusty scythe as proof of identity. I realized that his flapping robe was a kaffan, the winding sheet of corpses.

“I too harvest souls.” I dug into the pocket of my tunic and produced a lasso. “I draw out souls with this. By the way, why are you here? Didn’t you complete your job at the scene of the accident?”

“I like to do a follow up, sometimes. Besides, weary bones at my age. Need a bit of rest.” He really shouldn’t have grinned.

While the cortege of quivering mourners holding the coffin aloft wended its way out of the church door, Reaper whispered, “Got some business to attend to. In the government hospital next door. Several of them on the waiting list. Coming with me?”

I couldn’t help thinking that there was more camaraderie between agents of death than among the living. In some ways, it’s a sad, bad world. Yet here’s where I’d rather be. It’s the only place where you can be perfected by love.

We slipped into the rain-whipped dusk. “Race you to the gate!” Reaper hooted like a schoolboy and skimmed the surface of the ground. I took up the challenge. We were evenly matched.

We entered the hospital premises and stole along corridors that smelt of disinfectant and morbidity.

There was a steaming press of policemen, people and presswallas outside the Emergency Room. Reaper and I insinuated ourselves into the crowd, till we gained entry. We were glad of the general distraction. No one noticed, except one nurse who shivered and said, “A goose stepped over my grave”, as Reaper’s shroud brushed past her.

A youth and girl lay on one examination table, fused together; skins crisped by the kerosene with which they had ignited themselves.



A very short man in a very bright T-shirt, standing in the doorway of the Emergency Room, announced in a very loud voice. “You see before you the evil machinations of an enemy community! A communal conspiracy to abduct, convert, and outrage this young woman’s modesty! This here villain hatched this plan with other members of his faith! When he was cornered, he coerced her into a suicide pact!”

The crowd in the corridor began baying for blood. Anyone’s blood would do – provided they belonged to the *other side*. I predicted (rightly) that Reaper and I would be very busy for the next few weeks, floating in and out of the Emergency and Trauma Room as blood clotted the streets outside.

Grim Reaper attended to his task with single-minded attention, “Be quick now, with the harvesting of the souls. I’ll take his since he belongs on my side of the Hereafter; you take hers to Yamapura. Dematerialize and vamoose!”

“But why?” I asked, “Surely that’s up to the two of them to decide?”

He shrugged his bony shoulders, “Oh, I don’t know. I’m just doing a job.”

That’s what comes of being an empty numbskull.

We prised their spirits apart as they screamed silently and clung on to each other. Grim Reaper disappeared with his trophy, probably to the Judgement Seat of Yahweh. Or something like that. I placed mine in my sack and descended to the netherworld.

“You’ve got to be practical”, Reaper later said when we met outside Critical Care.

Well, too bloody bad that I’m not. I’m only ashamed of myself.

I will never forgive fate for denying me flesh and the thickness of life, its raw intimacy with its pleasure and pain.

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I stand at the foot of her surgical cot. It's in the ward for destitutes – free admissions. It's made worse by the fact that she is one of those labelled terminally ill. It really means that doctors with down-curling chins, pay token visits, barely concealing their surprise that she's still around when they blow in and out the following day.

“Water”, she says one afternoon, and looks in my direction.

I see my chance and pour out a tumblerful from the earthen jug by her bedside. I support her head with one hand and put the tumbler to her lips with the other. She studies my face as she takes bird-sips. There is neither fear nor revulsion. I am grateful.

I relegate all other responsibilities to junior yamadoots, so I can spend my time with her.

“My, my”, Grim Reaper quips when he drifts into her ward, in the breaks between his macabre errands, “aren't we devoted?”

Don't get me wrong. She isn't beautiful. Or to put it another way, she might have been if her eyes weren't so large and dark in a face as pale and thin as a slip of paper.

She and I begin to converse in a hesitant, tentative sort of way. Something prompts me to ask, “What did you do before I turned up?”

“I spoke”, she replies.

“Who to? The nurses? Other patients?”

“No. To myself. I talked. And I listened and replied. There was no one else to listen to me, you see.”

“Surely that’s the loneliest thing in the world.”

“I used to wish that I were a ghost so that I could slip easily in and out of the hearts of happy people. But I don’t feel the need for that anymore....”

While she sleeps under the effect of end-of-life sedatives, I sit at her bedside and think to myself that the best love story is not about two of the most beautiful people; it’s about two souls who need each other the most.

“You’ve never told me about yourself. Your family?”

She shakes her head, “None. Till...”

“Till?”

“Let’s say, I’ve come home at last.” She pauses, then, ‘And you?’”

“If I told you I were a yamadoot, an agent from the netherworld, would you still talk to me?”

She takes the longest breath I’ve ever heard. “No wonder. When I first saw you, I thought that I’d died and gone...to hell.”

“You mean I’m that ugly?”

She raises herself up in bed. She beckons me, takes my face in her hands and kisses me, ““I know now that you’re of the Dead; but you are human beneath the verdigris, and when I talk to you, I can see that you’re smiling and somehow, beautiful.”

She lies back exhausted, “Has my time come? It seems I’ve got used to the presence of death. You’ve grown on me. But please, make it quick and easy?”

"I'll do better than that." I lead her by the hand.

She smiles at me, "I always thought I'd be frightened. But now I see that death is something of an adventure, a romantic adventure."

I reply, "I'm not a yamadoot anymore. I'm a renegade, you may say. See, I have no sack or lasso."

We stand by a window which overlooks the town. The houses of different communities tilt away from each other, as do the people inside them. Insular, in-growing, like ugly toenails. Red, flickering tongues lick shop fronts and cars that are parked in the streets. The vestiges of recent communal rampages. The place is dying. Its people carry guilty secrets.

Only things not of human beings or made by them still thrive. They always had. Through history, these had outlived all the Dispensers of Crime - the Nazis, for instance. They will survive the Nazis' ideological successors who live even here and now and in this town.

Branches of trees quiver with birdsong. Happy leaves jollify the morning. And the air, the undivided, free air beckons us. We fly into its hospitality. We are buoyant - now soaring, now cruising on its currents.

In a world of separations, we are one. We journey into the distant reaches of the cosmos. Her flesh has melted away and so has my casing. We are pure and transparent. We look at each other with the eyes of our souls. We are slipping into each other's spirits.

I know one day they'll come for me and for her, truss us up and drag us back to Seats of Judgement on either side of a divide. I do not know what price a renegade yamadoot pays. But just now, we love dangerously and we don't care. Our spirits laugh out aloud. It's a pretty sound in a vast place.

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