

MONSOON DEVIL

by Armand Constantine

HERE AND NOW. The murderer sat in the café, a glass of beer before him. Wicker ceiling fans stirred the sweat-stinking air but brought no relief. It was a malignant place in a malignant part of Old Delhi, populated by flies and the sort of men who look for backroom deals. Beside the murderer sat his old friend Rajiv and a youngster. The tang of rain filled the air a heartbeat before the roar of a sudden downpour that sluiced over the throngs of pedestrians, auto-rickshaws, and motorcycles outside.

"Another bloody monsoon season," complained the youngster. He sat to the murderer's right, juvenile and full of bravado. He fancied himself a gangster. The murderer ignored him.

"So your devil's gone home," observed Rajiv.

The murderer nodded. He opened his coat. A tiny pin held a neatly folded lotus leaf against his lapel. The murderer plucked it off and studied it absently.

The youngster scoffed. "You don't believe all that monsoon devil rubbish?"

Rajiv chuckled and answered for him. "Every year before the monsoon season, he pays some holy man a bloody mountain of rupees so he can have this devil on his side. He's like an old woman with his superstitions. Just don't question them."

The youngster sniffed. "I question what I feel like questioning."

Presumptuousness, the murderer thought. He considered slapping the cocksure smirk off the youngster's face, but instead he looked at Rajiv and said, "It worked, and you know it. No trouble came from that business with the American woman."

"True enough," Rajiv agreed.

"What American woman?" the youngster asked. "Tell me." He raised his beer glass to his lips.

The murderer slammed his palm into the bottom of the youngster's glass, smashing it into his mouth. Teeth broke, and broken glass lacerated lip and gum. The youngster shrieked and clapped his hands over his bleeding mouth, his eyes wide and

frightened now. As they should be, the murderer thought. "None of your business what woman," he growled.

Rajiv laughed appreciatively. "I told you not to question him."

A few customers glanced over, but a fearful quiet reigned. For a time there was only the sound of the rain.

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BEFORE. Aaron picked his way timidly through the crowded streets of Old Delhi. The traffic roared, un-muffled and stinking of gasoline fumes. Buildings tangled with exterior wiring wept long streaks of sooty tears. The crowds pressed in like suffocating bedclothes on a hot, sleepless night and rumbled in many-voiced Hindi. As far as he could tell, there were no other white faces in the crowd.

The door to the basement was shouldered into a small alcove behind a shop selling wedding decorations. From outside he could see the shopkeeper drinking from an outsized bottle of beer, looking like a surly, drunken groom among the strings of marigolds and cheap tinfoil streamers in oranges, reds, and pinks.

He tried to concentrate on his surroundings. The neighborhood was not a safe one. Less than a year ago he and his wife had left Los Angeles for India, their hearts filled with idealistic intent, wanting to spread awareness of AIDS among the red light districts. But his last six months here had taught him more pragmatic lessons. Walking carelessly in a neighborhood like this was an invitation to pickpockets, robbers and worse. Try as he might, however, he could not focus. His mind was a runaway train, roaring through the litany that filled it night and day, unrelenting memories of his now-dead wife.

... soft skin, angelic blue eyes, loves crab but not lobster, loves narrative poetry but not lyrical, has blond curls that look like strands of warm sunlight...

Endless strings of minutiae. It was driving him mad. These lists filled his mind like a stubborn song that would not go away. For six months now, helpless in this strange city, he had felt a scream building in him.

A young man squatted beside the basement door on one hand and one foot. He held one leg canted upward at an impossible angle, and his head reclined on its side as he stared at Aaron. At first Aaron took him for a contortionist. As he drew near, however, he recognized the young man's twisted posture as the ravages of polio. He wore clean white linen, and his hair had been meticulously parted and slicked.

In a voice thickened by an ill-working jaw, he bid Aaron good morning in Hindi. He introduced himself as "the valet."

Aaron stammered something about not having an appointment, but the valet only studied him wordlessly, noting the lotus leaf on his lapel.

"I was told I could come here to meet a man. A holy man." When the valet still did not respond, he added, "I have money."

The valet's eyes narrowed, and Aaron wondered if he had made a mistake. In the wrong neighborhood -- and this one struck him as precisely that -- such an admission might earn him a knife in the ribs.

But the valet only nodded and turned away. He led Aaron down, negotiating the narrow stairs in his peculiar gait -- first foot, then hand; foot then hand. Below, in a cramped room lit only by two naked bulbs, Aaron met the man he'd come to see.

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THE HOLY MAN. The holy man looked like a salesman. Razor sharp creases lined neat khakis and a blue button-down shirt. Wavy black hair swept back from his brow, and a smile of porcelain and sunlight flashed from his handsome face. To Aaron he looked dangerous. Nothing was as it seemed in this city.

The holy man sat among a pile of colorful cushions that might have come from the wedding shop upstairs. Those bright oddments stood in stark contrast to the bare brick and dim light of the basement. It smelt powerfully of rain and urine.

"What brings you here today, friend?" the holy man asked pleasantly.

Suddenly Aaron did not know what to say.

The holy man nodded at the lotus leaf. "You know something of our customs, it seems."

"Not really," Aaron said. "A friend told me to put this on. He said..."

"Yes?" the holy man prompted with an easy smile.

"He said I could speak to a devil. The monsoon devil."

The holy man's smile didn't falter. He only asked, "Because there is something you want?"

"Yes."

"You have money?" It sounded like pillow talk.

"Yes," Aaron said again.

Again the smile.

"I want to forget," Aaron said.

"What would you like to forget?" the holy man asked. Then with a sly look, he guessed, "A woman?"

Aaron nodded. "I want to forget my wife."

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THE DEVIL HAD COME FROM AFAR. The devil came from the Nile among the lotuses, the holy man told him. Not recently, he explained with a friendly laugh, but over the generations as the world changed hands from one people to another. Wars were fought and won; priests went into hiding and kept their secrets. The holy man's devil spread into Persia, into the secret temples of ancient Herat and the homes of believers who defied their kings with their furtive prayers. From Persia he came, after a timeless time, to this land.

The holy man told Aaron these things as a father might tell his child the family history: with purpose, but with no real hope that he would understand the significance.

The devil's fee would be everything he had. Six months ago, after Isabelle's death, Aaron made a choice to stay in this country and find her killers. He was not a man of means. He ran out of hope and money. He took a job shaving beards and clipping hair for pennies at Mr. Gopal's barbershop. Finally he had saved enough to fly back home, but if he paid the devil, he would be destitute again.

"But you will forget," the holy man said. "My devil is a patron of things revealed and hidden. He is the serpent that sheds its skin."

"Where is this devil of yours?" Aaron asked.

"Inside." The holy man unbuttoned his neatly pressed cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. His brown forearms writhed with sinuous tattoos, serpents looping and twisting on themselves. They glided over his skin, alive, each one slithering independently in a way that made Aaron's eyes ache.

Aaron could hear the traffic of the street above, could smell the piss in the dank basement, could see the delight and cunning in the holy man's eyes. All was stark and real. But his mind rebelled at the living tattoos. Still, he told himself, things are not always as they seem.

"Things are not always as they seem," the holy man said with a smile.

Aaron stared at him, afraid. But he wanted to forget. He gave the holy man his money.

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THE DEVIL. The Holy Man smelled of cologne and laundry soap when he placed his hands on Aaron's temples. The sinuous serpents on his arms whipped into a frenzy. They crawled from his skin onto Aaron's, their electric bodies itching his cheeks and eyelids. With slippery ease, they slid into the aperture of his pupils. Itching and cold and tugging nausea from his gut.

To read the story in its entirety, watch for publication details and release dates at www.armandconstantine.com.