

He kept his eyes lowered to avoid bringing evil. All he saw were his own toes scuffling through a drizzle of tulsi-scented sawdust.

At the pandit's door he stopped, blew three times on the fingers of his right hand, and knocked.

Jagan's wife opened the door. She withdrew hastily, then disappeared into the house. Rajiv heard a whispered consultation.

"You'd better come in." Jagan sounded displeased, but he could not refuse a supplicant.

The room in which Jagan received his clients was large, the size of Rajiv's whole hut, and smelled of sandalwood. A gilt statue of Kemshi, wrapped in scarlet silk, smiled from the shrine.

"You know it's bad luck for you to leave your house before the month is out," Jagan said. "I'll have to purify my home and myself."

"I know." Rajiv looked up, knowing that Jagan had no need to fear evil. A pandit's strength lay in dealing with such things. "But I had to come. I must ask you to bring back my wife."

"That is not possible."

"You did it for Kiran." Rajiv thought of the fevered whispers, and how he had ignored them. When Kiran died, gutted by his own harvesting knife, Rajiv concluded the man must have been crazy. But lately, ever since Bela's funeral, those whispers had begun to return to his ears.

"Kiran was a fool," Jagan said. "He was too attached to his wife. We all know her death sent him mad. Whatever he told you, disregard it. Mere ravings."

Rajiv met Kemshi's gaze of promise.

"He said it was only a matter of price. I have savings. I can pay."

"You have nothing but a house full of daughters, who all need dowries soon. If I were you, I'd think of ways to please the gods, so they may bless you with more wealth than you have earned."

Rajiv dug out a pair of incense-bearded coins from the small woven pouch that hung at his waist.

"Two rupees," he said.

Jagan chuckled.

"That wouldn't buy me a meal. Go home."

"It's all I have."

"As I said, you have nothing."

"But I need her." Too many nights he had spent sweating alone on his rope bed, straining to hear her soft breath from the floor beside him. "Kiran said you knew how."

"Nonsense."

"Just once," Rajiv pleaded. If he could only hold her one more time, he would find ease.

Jagan studied him, as if weighing his soul on invisible scales.

"Even if it could be done, the task would be dangerous. Calling back the spirits of the dead takes great courage and meticulous preparation. And certain sacred offerings, which are expensive – or would be, if such a thing were possible."

Rajiv looked at the mildewed coins in his hand.

"I have her bangles," he said. "They were to be dowries for my daughters."

"Very sensible."

"They are worth six rupees."

"Each?" Jagan asked in surprise. Rajiv winced.

"All together."

"It is an insult," Jagan said, "to suggest that I would do this work for less than ten rupees."

Rajiv's muscles clenched.

"But you would?"

"I might consider the possibility."

Rajiv thought of his one remaining treasure.

"I have her beads," he said. "They are worth two."

She had come to him with twelve rupees in worth, and in fifteen years he only had to spend one. The remainder consisted of her clothes. She had burned in those as an offering to the goddess of death, in the hope of safe passage into the next life. He wished he had not squandered them that way.

"Ten," he said. "All together."

"You must pay in advance," Jagan said. "Else you may find an excuse not to. And if you want this work done, time is short. At the end of your month of mourning, your wife's soul will move on. There are only three days left. I cannot call it back after that. Even now, the links that hold it to earth are frail. There is no guarantee of success."

Rajiv began to wheeze, his habit when frightened.

"Tonight?" he suggested.

Jagan consulted the shrine.

"It would be wise. Meet me at the graveyard before midnight. Bring the payment in full, and also the following three things: blood, bark, and seed."

Rajiv stared.

"How?"

"That is for you to determine." Jagan rose, a signal that the interview was over. "Remember to purify your path as you leave."

When Rajiv got home, his mother had tidied the house and was waiting expectantly for midday prayers. Rajiv took his place on his straw mat, threw incense into the candle flame, and recited the verses his father had taught him.

The statue of Kemshi, fist-sized and badly carved, sneered at him from its net of cracking paint. He tried not to think of the opulence in Jagan's house.

According to sacred verse, the goddess brought prosperity to those she favoured. The way to gain her blessing was by prayer and hard work. Rajiv wondered, in a rebellious corner of his mind, whether rich men like Jagan told such stories in order to justify extortion.

Ten rupees!

Rajiv finished his prayers, and sat staring at the beads wrapped around the statue's neck. He had hoped they would bring him wealth, as marriage to Bela had never done. Five girls she gave him, and a son who did not live.

All Kemshi had done for him was persuade the goddess of death to carry off two of the girls with fever. At least now he had only three dowries to pay.

His eldest daughter set down the offering of rice and ghee. Rajiv scowled at her. She ought to have sense enough to die, too, if she could not have been born a boy.

"I'll be lucky to get you married," he said.

"I don't want to be married," she snapped back.

Rajiv lashed out. The punch sent her tumbling, and she thudded against the thin boards of the wall. Blood seeped from her nose and mingled with a dribble of tears.

His mother slapped her, more from reflex than malice, then gave her a clean rag to dab away the mess. Bright patches soaked through the cloth. Rajiv burst forward and snatched the rag from her grip, then stormed out of the house.

At least he had obtained the blood.

He rolled the rag into a tight ball, stain innermost, and tied it around his wrist.

Heat pressed down between the houses. From the stream came splashes and chatter, as women washed clothes while children played. His daughters should be down there, too, making themselves useful instead of littering the house.

Rajiv turned into the mango grove at the back of the village. The shade eased his temper. He scraped at the trunk of a tree, fingers working to rip away a strand of bark. Dirt and fragments packed under his nails, curving into leers.

Above him dangled ripe fruit, shining like festival lanterns. He plucked one and ate it, savoured the intense perfume. Sweet juice dripped from his chin.

When he was finished, he tied the damp stone and the strip of bark into the rag at his wrist.

His store of incense lasted just long enough to get him home. The girls scrambled away as he entered, and his mother gave him a disapproving look.

"You shouldn't keep going out," she said.

Rajiv shrugged, and retired to the privacy of his room. He lay on the bed, panting with heat. Sweat trickled over his skin.

The reality of what he was engaged in burrowed through his mind. Bela was dead, her body burned. Nothing remained of her but ash.

He still wanted to make the attempt, before his last chance of seeing her was gone.

Night hung thick around Rajiv as he stole down the street. The air, clogged with warmth, stuck in his lungs.

The graveyard lay well outside the village. It took him longer than he thought to get there. By the time he arrived, and saw Jagan's shape loosen from the black void of the palisade fence, the stars already told of midnight.

"Did you bring everything?" was Jagan's only greeting. Rajiv handed over the bundle. Jagan grunted acknowledgement, and led the way into the burial grounds.

"Understand two things," he said as they stood by the grave. "First, I can perform this calling only once, and your wife will be with you only until dawn. Second, you must not return here until I have concluded the final rite for your wife. The ceremony I am about to perform will draw the attention of evil spirits. I can hold them off, but if you were to come here without me, they could use you to gain access to our world."

The remnants of Bela's pyre felt like dust underfoot. Rajiv stood aside, his feet tickled by blades of grass, while Jagan placed each item in turn at the corners of the grave. A quiet murmur told of the ritual performed.

"Blood, for life. Bark, for growth. Seed, for renewal." Each utterance was followed by the recital of a sacred verse and the scent of melted ghee poured over the offering.

At the fourth corner, Jagan silently placed a secret item of his own. Then he seated himself by the foot of the grave, and began to chant.

A chill passed over Rajiv. The night closed in around him, as if fingers gripped his limbs. He began to shiver. Tales from childhood surfaced in his mind, stories of demons that crept into the homes of the living and gnawed all flesh from the bones of sleeping men.

He wanted to tell Jagan to stop, but could not utter a sound.

At the end of the recital, Jagan remained in a pose of meditation. Rajiv waited.

Jagan rose, and began to walk out of the graveyard. Rajiv hurried after him.

"It didn't work?"

Jagan said nothing, only walked on towards the village. From behind, Rajiv heard the padding of feet.

He swung around. A shape moved in the starlight. Eyes gleamed in a featureless face.

Rajiv swallowed. Fear cramped his limbs. He turned from the figure and hurried after Jagan. The footsteps followed, obediently keeping pace with the two men, never drawing closer.

At Jagan's door, the pandit stopped.

"Remember," he said. "Only this one time." He went inside, and Rajiv was left staring at blank wood.

The footsteps had stopped, but resumed as Rajiv continued. When he arrived at his own house, he dashed inside and slammed the door shut. He could not explain the sense of dread he felt, but he knew he did not want that creature in his home. Not even if it was Bela.

He heard the careful silence that meant his mother and daughters were awake and anxious not to appear so. Without speaking, he crossed to his own room and lay down on the bed. What the creature would do, alone out in the street, he did not know. Perhaps she would stand there, obedient as a woman should be, until the time came for her to return to the graveyard. Or perhaps she would vanish, now that he had no more need of her.

The regular tap of bare feet on dirt approached him. A body slumped to the floor beside his bed, and lay without breathing.

Sweat rushed to Rajiv's forehead. She was right there beside him. He could feel her presence, tangible as the ropes under his back. A faint smell of cinders prickled his nose.

"Bela?" he whispered.

No answer. But desire grew in him even as he waited. If it was indeed her, it did him no good to waste the hours that remained. And if the act could not bring pleasure, Jagan would have no need to warn him that it must end.

"Wife," he said instead, with a man's proper tone of command. "Join me."

She came. Her limbs were smooth and soft as he remembered them from the first night he possessed her, and her submission that of a long-married wife. The smell of ash surrounded him, and he burned on a pyre of lust until his flesh melted into hers.

By dawn, she was gone. Rajiv woke with a smile on his face, and stretched in the net of light that fell through the slivered gaps in the walls. She had been real and delightful: a woman, not a corpse.

He spent the day in a gush of fine spirits, going so far as to pat his eldest daughter on the head when she served him breakfast. He tended his field, spread goat-dung over hardened furrows and tore out the weeds that had rooted.

At times he would pause, scoop the sweat from his brow, and stand idle for a moment, gazing in the direction of the graveyard.

That night and the next he lay awake, pondering each village girl in turn. He refused to think of Bela's gentle compliance, her silence, the fire that burned him. But on occasion, he still fancied he heard the padding of feet through the room.

On the final night of the week he heard them clearly. He sat bolt upright and stared into the darkness.

No charred smell greeted him. Nothing moved. But Rajiv swung himself off the bed, pulled on his dhoti, and left the house.

A rough strip of bark he gathered from a mango tree. A barely-ripe fruit he tore from a branch, bit off the flesh and spat it out to leave only the kernel. Then he strode off to the graveyard.

He scratched at the palisade fence until a splinter dislodged. With its sharp point he scored his own skin, and scraped up the oozing blood.

What Jagan had added to the fourth corner, Rajiv could not guess. But he planted his offerings in the remaining three, muttering such snatches of verse as he could remember. Warm air plucked at his arms and legs, and the pile shifted slightly under his feet.

He knelt at the foot of the grave, and mumbled all the prayers he knew.

A flame shot from the grave. Rajiv flinched back, covered his face with his arms, heard a whimper issue from his numb lips.

When the blindness passed, he forced his eyes to open. Light cut them deep, but he managed to make out a figure in the centre of the flame. Featureless as the creature that had followed him home, but with the shape and size of a woman.

"Bela?"

She laughed, the most terrible sound he had ever heard.

"You wanted my soul." Her voice clawed at him. "Don't you like it? You prefer it trapped in a dead body, perhaps."

She leaned towards him, her face lit by a savage glow. Rajiv scrambled away.

"Who are you?" he whispered. "What have you done with my wife?"

"I am your wife – or rather, I'm the soul of the woman who was your wife. Did you think what you saw in her was all there was to see? A servant, a chattel, a cushion for your blows?"

Rajiv winced. He remembered her expression the first time he struck her, eyes dark with fear and reproach.

"You were a good wife," he protested.

"I learned to obey. To hide my feelings, to conceal who I truly was. You never wanted to know. Why do you call me now, if not to see the true nature of my soul, revealed without the mask of flesh?"

Rajiv sought for words. He wanted the old Bela, quiet, obedient; not this raging fire of spirit. Staring into its flaming eyes, he knew not how to speak his wish.

"Are you surprised?" Bela said. "You ought not to be. Did you not know that every woman has a soul that belongs to her alone?"

Rajiv swallowed.

"I thought you were happy," he said. "You never told me you weren't."

"You never asked. If I had spoken, what would you have done?"

He knew the answer, though he could not bear to speak it. Not here beside her grave. Not now, facing her spirit for the first time.

"What will you do?" he whispered.

"I will leave you," Bela said. "Because I can. The month is over, and you have no power to hold me back. But I wanted you to see the real me – just once."

The flame vanished, leaving a blue scar in the night. Rajiv struggled for breath. Gradually he became aware of the grass crushed under his knees, of the scent of dew.

"You are a foolish man," Jagan said from the darkness.

Rajiv started.

"How long have you been here?"

"I followed you. The calling is not safe without the fourth item, which I shall not tell you about. You tried to let loose an uncontained spirit into the world. That could have brought disaster on us all."

Rajiv scuffled back. His limbs trembled.

"But I called her," he said. "She came."

"What you saw," Jagan said, "was not Bela. It was a demon taking her shape in an attempt to trick you. Fortunately, I guessed you would act like this, and I prepared. Nothing can cross from the spirit world while my bars hold. But you must go now. Do not try this again. A man may call all sorts of evil to him when he is crazed with grief. As for the spirit of your wife, it has moved on. The time has passed."

Rajiv lifted his head, and saw that the stars had fallen from midnight.

"What came," he insisted, "was Bela's true self. Why didn't you show it to me before? Why did you give me a walking corpse?"

"What else did you want?"

Rajiv struggled for an answer.

"I gave you a compliant body," Jagan said. "That is all a man wants from his wife, and all a woman can offer her husband. The rest is your own imagination."

"I wanted more."

"There is nothing more."

Rajiv let himself be raised, and leaned on Jagan throughout the long stumble towards home.

"Keep to the rituals," Jagan said. "You have placed yourself and your family in danger, but I have contained it. The creature you saw will not trouble you again. But there are others, and worse. Do not persist in calling them, or I will be forced to contain you, too."

Rajiv stopped. They had almost reached Jagan's house.

"How could you do that?"

A sliver of starlight cut across Jagan's face, making it a grotesque mockery of his daytime self.

"I could take your soul," he said. "And lock it away securely. The next time a man comes to me, pleading for one last meeting with his wife, I would use it."

"How?"

Jagan patted his arm.

"Go home to your family. Observe the rituals, and look about for another girl to marry." He turned into his own house, and left Rajiv alone in the street.

When Rajiv entered the hut, his mother and daughters lay like the dead, but the silence of their waking hummed like crickets. He stood for a moment in the darkness, feeling their presence as a reassurance, a promise that he would not come to harm.

"Sleep," he said. "All is well."

He lay down on his own bed, and strained to hear the sound of breathing through the partition wall.

No footsteps came. He craved them now, not as a satisfaction to himself, but as a sign that there might still be time. He wanted to undo the past, and create something better.

In the silence, he grieved. Not for himself, but for a woman he wished he had known.