

The Tantric Exorcist

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Ashwin Mudigonda

 juggernaut

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*To my guru, Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev,
who showed me the path
To Sri M.,
who illuminated it when needed
and
To my parents*

1

‘Vikram!’ his mother yelled. ‘Last time I’m telling you. Get up!’ She beat his door. ‘You’re late for college!’ She rapped harder. ‘Dei Vikky! Get up! Sleeping late-late. Then not being able to get up.’

The doorbell rang and her muttering faded as she went to answer it.

Vikram squinted and then slowly opened his eyes. He didn’t want to get up this morning, for today was one of the more difficult exams, which he was sure he wasn’t going to pass. His heart sank at the thought of breaking the news to his parents when he’d receive his report card in a few weeks. How was he going to explain those abysmal marks to them? He wished the problem would just go away. He picked up his phone and checked the time. It was a quarter to seven.

‘I’ll sleep till seven,’ he told himself and flopped back into the bed. Part of him was excited that once the mock exams were over he’d have six weeks of study holidays before the university exams began. The burst of excitement fizzled out when he remembered all the cramming that lay ahead, leave alone working out complex sums for hours on end.

Vikram sat up in a huff, sweat beading his forehead. He pushed his hair back. He was trying to grow it out and it was in a phase where he could neither tie it nor would it mind itself atop his head. He exhaled in frustration. The maidservant had entered his room, switched off the ceiling fan and was sweeping the floor. Vikram glared at her. She smiled. She was, no doubt, in cahoots with his mother.

Shanta, the maid, had worked in their household since Vikram was a child. She came in each morning, swept the house, washed the porch, drew a simple geometric kolam and then did the dishes before earning a meal and a cup of tea from his mother. She had seen him grow up, knew his likes and dislikes almost as a mother. She knew he liked samia payasam, especially with pistachios in it. And she knew he hated it when the fan in his room was switched off while he was still sleep.

‘Get up, pa,’ she said. ‘You’ll be late for kalej. If you don’t, amma will come with a tumbler of water.’

Vikram irritably flung the bedsheet aside and leapt out of bed.

As he was about to head out of the house, his mother called out to him from the kitchen. A cooker whistled atonally to the background of sloka chants from a music player.

‘Dei Vikky,’ she said, walking out with one finger outstretched. Vikram noticed the sheen of ghee on her fingertip and bent his arm. Each time she cooked with the fat, she made sure to use every bit of it, and whatever remained she smeared and rubbed on to his elbow. ‘I’m going to sell off all that old comic books to the recycling fellow. Do you want to keep something?’

Vikram's brow wrinkled. 'But why, ma? They're my favourite . . .'

'Nothing doing,' his mother snapped, her brow furrowing even more. 'From when I have been saying I'll give I'll give and you say you'll sort them and donate to the library.' She waved her palm about. 'That library has got sold and now there are flats there. Enough! No space in this house only. I'll sell this afternoon when that paper fellow comes.'

She walked away and Vikram hurried to the storeroom where boxes of all sizes hibernated like reptiles in winter. It was dimly lit, the air laden with the odour of raw rice, sundried vadams and pickling mangoes.

As a child he had found the tiny room magical. Packed with snacks and sweets in tins, he'd steal in to pilfer a bite when hungry. On afternoons he was bored, he'd slip into the room and rummage through the cylindrical aluminium dabbas, hoping to find something interesting. Even the sun didn't fill this space up like the rest of the house, gently filtering in through a gauzy curtain, casting a golden glow on all the shiny metal repositories. A hoary metal trunk sat in one corner, filled with blankets, sweaters and other useless woollens along with old books.

He squatted and pulled out a few comics from it. They were musty, redolent of fading ink and the smells of nostalgia. He picked up a couple of issues of *Tinkle* and smiled. He flicked a few pages and chuckled at *Kalia the Crow*, *Suppandi* and other stories. They had kept him company during the long train rides in summer vacations past. But he had outgrown the comics now, preferring the adventures of *Asterix* and *Tintin* these days

and the occasional slice of American life through the world of *Archie*. A few issues of *Phantom*, *Tarzan* and a stack of *Amar Chitra Kathas* lay underneath. He rifled through those too. He stuck his hand further down, all the way to the bottom of the box, and fished out a pile of *Chandamama* periodicals. His eyes lit up. *Chandamama* had coddled him with intriguing folk tales and mythological stories along with titbits of trivia. He picked up a couple of issues, planning to read them on the train ride to his college. If he was going to fail the exam, he might as well not bother wasting time studying for it.

Before leaving the house he stopped by his grandfather who was sitting in an enormous wicker reclining chair with one leg over the other. An old transistor radio in his lap played a Carnatic violin solo to which he wagged his foot. He tapped his knee to the rhythm of the percussion with one hand, holding the daily newspaper in the other.

‘Thatha!’ Vikram said. ‘I’m going to college. I’ll be back later.’

‘Dei Vikram!’ his grandfather said, carefully folding the newspaper and clipping his ink pen on to it. His grandfather was the only person besides his friend Tony who could solve the daily cryptic crossword in the newspaper. The solutions were neatly penned into the boxes in crisp capital letters. ‘Come here,’ he beckoned, and cracked his favourite joke: ‘You are leaving the thathosphere and entering the atmosphere, is it?’

Vikram glanced at his watch and then approached the old man with a big grin. He squatted beside the chair and started pressing the old man’s calves. ‘Yes, thatha? How’s the weather in the thathosphere?’

‘Sunny with hundred per cent chance of crossword. Did you pray?’

‘I . . .’

His grandfather gestured eating with his right hand. ‘Did you pray to the one million gods? You know what I’m talking about?’

‘Yes, thatha. Rice.’

The old man slapped his thigh and guffawed. ‘Rice is the only true god – boiled, fried, or spiced.’ He licked his lips. ‘When you come in the evening, no, get me some bajjis from that Murugan Bajji Palace.’

‘Sure! You want the green chilli one too?’

His grandfather slowly leaned forward and reached for his wallet on the table nearby. He fished out two coins and gave them to Vikram. ‘Here. Two rupees.’

Vikram fingered the coins. ‘Thatha, it’s more than . . .’

‘Back in my day,’ his grandfather said, easing back into his chair and folding his arms across his chest, ‘one packet was six annas. And the oil was fresh daily. And he used fresh vegetables. There was a Shiva temple right next door to him. Cha! Cha! What am I saying? The bajji stand was next to the temple. And what a beautiful temple it was! So vibrant with large kolam by the entrance and the bell could be heard for miles.’ He tapped the armrest. ‘Even till here. Your granny kept the time by the evening arthi bells.’

Vikram looked at his watch again and stood up. ‘Okay, thatha! I’ll get us a packet.’

‘Make sure the bugger does not use the Carnatic events page to wrap the bajjis. Those people didn’t become pandits

to end up as wrappers for oil-soaked bajjis. People have no respect for music these days. Vikky! What's that in your hand?'

'This-aa?' Vikram said, holding up the *Chandamama* comics.

'It's *Chandamama!*' his grandfather said in a cheery voice, leaning forward. 'You know what it means? Means uncle of the moon in Telugu.'

'Oh! I didn't know that,' Vikram said slowly.

'I was joking! It means the moon. It's the bible for folk stories, Vikky.' The old man raised his finger for emphasis. 'Bible!'

'Thatha, I am getting late.'

'Don't forget the bajji, okay?' He sank into his chair and softly said, 'Tonight, in the thathosphere . . . calm winds, clear skies with a chance of bajji showers . . .'

Vikram stuffed the book in his satchel. Just as he reached the door his mother approached him with a handkerchief and a copper plate which had a smouldering piece of camphor and a splotch of sacred ash on it. 'Vikky!' she said, pocketing the handkerchief. 'Put veebudhi on your forehead and let me take off your dhrishti.'

Vikram shot another glance at his watch. 'I'm late, ma! I'll miss the train.'

His mother stood at the doorstep, frowning. 'It's inauspicious to leave home like that. At least go to the Vinayagar temple and apply veebudhi from there . . .'

Watching his head bob to the music he was listening to through his earphones, she sighed and turned around. 'Bad things will happen,' she mumbled.

2

Vikram drove by the temple down the street. For a moment he contemplated stopping and entering the sanctum. He would circumambulate the idol, accept a flower from the priest, drop a coin in the donation box and mark his forehead with vibhuti. Instead, he zipped ahead on his Scooty, navigating the morning traffic with the left earphone dangling out and the other blaring film songs from the local FM station into his right ear. He reached the railway station, parked and locked his vehicle. He still had a little more than ten minutes before his train arrived. Even though it was early in the day, the Chennai heat was already harassing its denizens. Mopping his forehead with his handkerchief, he sauntered to the metal shack near the station gates underneath a large and shady tree. A crow cawed solemnly from above.

‘Mohan,’ he said, knocking on the steel and yanking out the earphone. ‘Two Wills. Fast! Train is coming.’

Mohan quickly ripped the plastic off the cigarette pack and whisked out two smokes. Vikram handed him the cash. ‘No change,’ Mohan replied and slammed two Halls mints on the metal lid of a candy jar. With a flick of his wrist, he produced a box of matches.

Vikram lit the cigarette and let it dangle from the corner of his mouth. Checking his phone, he said, 'When only you'll have change, Mohan? For all the Halls you have given me, I could have bought a proper motorbike instead of this Scooty. Which girl is going to give me a second look when I drive by on it.'

Mohan laughed and brushed his moustache with his nails. 'Oho! So with a bike you can get any girl to finally fall for you, is it?'

Vikram grinned and saluted him. 'See you tomorrow.'

'Eat a Halls before you go home,' Mohan yelled as Vikram left. 'Or else your mom will know!'

Just as Vikram made it to the platform the engine blasted its horn and the train lurched forward. Running along with it, he waited for the doorway to appear and then hopped into a carriage.

A couple of his friends hopped on at the Chromepet stop. 'I'm going to fail today,' Tony said. 'Guarantee.' He reached for the crucifix around his neck and toyed with it.

Tony, one of his close friends, was shorter than Vikram and so thin that Vikram had once asked him if he had any thyroid issues. Tony had hung his head and confessed that he did. 'I have to . . .' Tony's voice had dropped in embarrassment. 'I have to take an injection daily . . . myself.' When he had opened his satchel to reveal a set of vials and a syringe, Vikram had decided he would protect this frail friend whose name didn't fit in with the stereotypical Tamil names in their classrooms. With each passing day they had grown closer, sharing the train journeys to and from college

and many evenings afterwards. Despite his diminutive stature, Tony was an excellent footballer. The days when their friends didn't show up at the grounds, Tony and Vikram shot penalty goals at each other. That same height, Vikram theorized once, must give his blood a shorter distance to travel, making his brain more oxygenated. There could be no other explanation for why he was so sharp at mathematics. Or how he could rearrange anagrams to solve a cryptic crossword clue which, to Vikram, made no sense.

Tony was a wizard at solving the cryptic crossword. He carried the paper in his back pocket the entire day, having folded it in a way that only the crossword was visible. He would often bite the blue cap of the Reynolds pen and ask Vikram something like, 'Viks, seven letters for excess. Starts with *s* and ends with *t*.' Vikram would give his best effort and start spewing words at random. 'Socialist! Excessive! Seagull!' Perhaps Vikram's solutions dislodged the boulders in Tony's mind, for his eyes would invariably light up and he'd neatly fill in the actual solution to which Vikram would say, 'Surfeit? Such a word exists?'

Once, after an evening of playing Frisbee on the beach and constructing intricate tunnels by the shore, they lay on the sand and stared at the sky, trying to identify constellations. 'Who came up with this dumb idea of Orion and Ursa Major Minor,' Vikram said, amused. 'I can make it up too. Henceforth, I declare that any two stars form a Vikram constellation.' Tony quipped, 'I declare any star to be a Tony constellation.' And the two friends broke into fits of laughter.

Now Tony's lack of confidence in his preparations made Vikram happy. 'Pffft . . . Not sure why I'm going to write the test. Might as well prepare for the arrears and the vacation,' Vikram said and turned to his other friend. 'Sukku, what about you, da?'

Shivakumar was a portly chap with a porcine face. He had wide-set eyes and a bulbous nose. He wore thick glasses and was almost always buried in his notes. He was a smart guy who hadn't managed to get into the prestigious IIT, which he had taken as a personal insult. He swore to himself that he'd pass out of college with the best marks possible and land either a cushy job or a scholarship to study abroad. And to achieve this goal he cracked a coconut each morning at his neighbourhood Ganesha temple, held his earlobes and performed squats in front of the idol, while mentally repeating formulas, for they were the only slokas that would lead him to engineering heaven.

'You are the same every time,' Vikram said, whacking Sukku on his head. He dramatically clutched his chest. 'Machan, I'm going to fail, da. Surely fail! And then when the results come, you'll get something in the nineties and say, "Machan! This teacher is an idiot. Cut five marks for not showing steps."' "

Not one to be left out, Tony added, 'If not, I would have got ninety-six.'

'While we all failed,' Vikram completed for his friend.

Shivakumar slapped Vikram's hand. 'Don't say such impure things before an exam. It's bad omen.' I'm going to revise. Don't disturb me.' And then he delved into his thick thermodynamics textbook.

Vikram noticed Tony massaging his knee. 'How's it? Your knee,' he asked.

Tony shrugged. 'It'll be fine.'

'What happened?' Sukku asked.

'Idiot was boarding the train,' Vikram said. 'Running as usual because he thinks it's cool. He twisted his knee and fell. Almost fell on to the tracks.'

'And then?'

'Then he rolled away and escaped but missed the train. Hurt his knee really badly.'

'Go to the doctor, no.' Sukku suggested, always the pragmatic one.

Tony scoffed. 'It'll heal. Ligament must have torn slightly. It'll go away.'

Sukku stared at the duo, shook his head disapprovingly and went back to his notes, muttering, 'Why didn't you study medical?'

Vikram and Tony exchanged smug grins.

'Oh, by the way,' Vikram said, reaching into his bag. 'I found some old *Chandamama* comics.' He handed Tony an issue and flipped through another himself. 'Remember this from back in the day?'

Tony put his finger on the pages and ran them over the print. The train jerked and they grabbed the leather hand straps. 'So many stories from Mahabharata,' he said. 'And all these silly titbits . . . check this out . . .' He held a page out for Vikram to see. 'An ad for Forhan's toothpaste. Do you remember Forhan's? I vaguely remember it from my childhood.' Vikram shook his head but held up his own copy, saying, 'Oh, and remember this? Vikram and Betal.'

‘Ha! Yeah, I do. That thing always had me on edge. I thought Betal was a ghost or something.’

‘Sometimes I’d take two issues and compare the image of the king carrying the corpse to see if there were any differences.’

Tony laughed. ‘I’d never thought of that.’ His face grew serious. ‘Actually, you know, I have seen the original book at my uncle’s place in Kottayam.’

‘What book?’ Vikram asked.

‘Hey guys,’ Sukku moaned from behind. ‘Come and study. Sums are going to be hard.’

‘You study, Sukku,’ Vikram said. ‘And pass the paper.’ He turned back to Tony. ‘Yeah, what book?’

‘Original Vikram and Betal, man. You think *Chandamama* people made that story up? It’s been there forever.’

‘Oh! I didn’t know that. How was it?’

‘Like those old and well-worn books in lawyers’ offices. Very British. Hardbound in that shit-brown colour. Weird font. And the pages smell old and familiar.’

Vikram nodded. ‘Yeah, yeah. I get it.’ His phone buzzed with an incoming message. ‘Guys at the college are saying that the paper is going to be tough.’

Tony shrugged nonchalantly. ‘We do our best and still fail. The system is broken. Who cares. What matters is the university exam.’

‘Well, that’s in six weeks.’

‘So we have time. We’ll finish the syllabus in the study holidays after the trip. Okay, listen, I was not done with the Vikram–Betal thing.’

‘Yeah, what?’

‘The original was in Sanskrit and my uncle said that it’s kept at the Theosophical Society’s library. You know that place in Adyar?’

‘Yeah, near Aavin Circle. I’ve been there to see the banyan tree.’ Vikram snapped his fingers. ‘Why don’t we go check it out?’

‘What now-aa?’ Tony asked incredulously.

Vikram threw his head back. ‘Fuck this exam, man! Anyway we’ll flunk it. Might as well cut it, no?’

Tony was not sure. ‘But report card . . .’

‘We’ll worry about that later, da. I know how to fix the numbers. There’s a guy at a Xerox shop who does this for a small fee.’ He turned to Shivakumar who was nose deep in the textbook. ‘Sukku,’ Vikram said, ‘Tony and I are going to cut college.’ He walked up to his friend and drew his palms around his head and then cracked his knuckles on his own forehead. ‘There! I have taken away your dhrishti. No evil eye will bother you. You do well in your exams, okay?’

Shivakumar looked up, nervous. ‘Where . . . where are you guys going?’

The train was slowing down at the Meenambakkam stop. Vikram and Tony hopped off and waved him goodbye.

‘Dei . . . don’t cut college,’ he said, adjusting his glasses. The duo had already begun to walk towards the exit. ‘Bad things will happen . . .’ he finished, but they were gone.

Little did he know how prescient his words would turn out.

3

Vikram and Tony boarded the train going back and got off at the Saidapet stop. Mohan's shack was teeming with people. Vikram elbowed his way through to the front.

'Wills?' Mohan asked in a businesslike tone, and before Vikram could respond, whisked out two cigarettes and a couple of packets of Halls. He then moved on to the next customer.

Vikram paid and carried the cigarettes to Tony. 'Here,' he said. 'It's only Wills.'

Tony waved him off. 'Gold Flake is no better.' They lit their cigarettes, hopped on to Vikram's Scooty and took off.

Vikram zipped through the Chennai traffic, weaving through stalled cars and avoiding pedestrians. Tony checked his phone and said, 'Sukku messaged.'

Vikram exhaled smoke with the cigarette still in his mouth. An autorickshaw in front of them belched blue smoke in response. 'What did he say?'

'Says there is a strike in college. No one is allowed inside.'

Vikram narrowly escaped a cow that was casually ambling along the road. 'Strike-aa?' He spat out the cigarette.

Tony put a hand on his friend's shoulder. 'Yeah, some issue

with the neighbouring college guys. They suspended a few people and now it's got out of hand.'

Vikram laughed and clapped his hands. 'I guess the study hols started early!'

'Dei!' Tony yelled. 'Hold on to the bike!'

Vikram gripped the handlebars again. 'Why are you fretting? You are the guy who used to hold my shoulder while sitting on a bicycle and ask me to go as fast as I could.'

Tony's grip tightened. 'Teenage follies, man. What only I was thinking those days! One slip and I would have been smashed like a good-luck pumpkin you guys use.'

Vikram laughed harder. 'Good-luck pumpkin!'

Tony grinned. 'Vicks, want a clue?'

'Shoot.'

'To New York with my best friend. Four letters.'

Vikram thought for a moment. 'New York. NY. My pal.' He turned his head to one side and exclaimed. 'PayPal!'

Tony slapped the back of his friend's head. 'How on earth is that four letters, you idiot!'

'What is it?'

Tony stuck his right hand out and waved it about. 'Take this right, Vicks. Shortcut. It'll put us right near the Theosophical Society. Tony da. My name.'

Vikram shook his head. 'Yeah, I know. What about it?'

'Dei! The answer to my clue.' He gave an exasperated sigh. 'New York is NY, you got that right. To . . . the first word. To plus NY equals Tony.'

Vikram was confused. 'But how are you your own best friend?'

Tony squeezed Vikram's shoulder lightly. 'I mean . . . yeah . . . the clue was for you. So I thought you'd interpret it as your best friend, but you're right. It needs work.'

Vikram grinned as the Scooty coasted and came to a halt. 'Come! We're there.'

The Theosophical Society was a verdant campus situated by the Bay of Bengal. Inside, old and shady trees stood like ancient guardians of a sacred place. They shook their boughs in the sea breeze and spoke in leafy whispers, throwing shadow puppets on the ground for all to enjoy. Many decades ago the Society had allowed a road to be built through its premises, so anyone driving on it felt like they were going through a forest.

'It's so much cooler here,' Tony remarked as they reached the gate. 'It's like AC.'

'Gets even cooler as we go inside,' Vikram said.

The old watchman dressed in loose-fitting khakis rose from his foldable metal chair and beat his lathi once to get their attention. 'What do you boys want?'

Vikram glanced at the white board that stipulated the timings to visit the banyan tree. It was believed that the banyan tree inside was the oldest in the world and, in a fashion, a local attraction. 'We came to see the tree,' he said.

'Go straight. Don't take any other roads. See the tree and come back. Okay?' The watchman directed them in.

They nodded and walked in.

The air did grow cooler and the din of traffic was replaced with the sounds of birds and insects. The banyan tree was enclosed by a rusty chain link fence as if it were an animal at the Guindy Zoo. A metal plaque with lettering in English,

Hindi and Tamil explained its significance, how old it was, how diverse its mini-ecosystem was, and how a century ago it was considered a deity capable of bestowing boons.

‘Cool!’ Tony exclaimed and gazed up at the tree. It looked like yet another banyan tree with its snaky overhead roots that criss-crossed its various branches like an aerial roadway. It formed a splendid canopy and the air was noticeably even cooler around it. Little birds hopped and tweeted as a murder of crows eyed the boys carefully, their heads tilted to one side.

Vikram turned around and snapped a picture of himself against the tree. ‘I think the library is that way. Come.’

They walked on the gravel road past old British era bungalows which were painted a staid grey. Massive arches bloomed from the foundation, many chipped from their time spent in the unforgiving monsoon and heat. Most houses had ornate gardens teeming with tropical plants and iridescent flowers. Ancient ceiling fans with leaf-shaped blades lazily wobbled and spun in the large and airy verandas. Plants hung and overflowed from pots along the sides of the houses, snagging and dragging one to surrender oneself into their perfumed silence. Colourful birds, some rarely seen in the city, flitted from tree to tree, sounding alien to ears accustomed to the drab caws of crows.

Now they reached a simple concrete building. A small sign indicated it was the Theosophical Society Library.

‘This way,’ Vikram said, walking straighter. ‘Act like you belong.’

Tony opened his lab notebook, pinched his chin and tapped on the page studiously.

Vikram smiled and walked briskly. The library was an unassuming place with many tables in the middle of the room. Along the walls, scores of books rested on glass-covered shelves. Large windows allowed for ample light and the garden smells wafted in. An array of urgently spinning ceiling fans riffled the edges of the pages as if an impatient ghost was searching for something in those books. Motionless geckos clung to the pale walls, staring at the world with their distant gazes. There were a few people there, immersed in their books, although none of them were as young as them.

‘What are they reading, da?’ Vikram asked.

‘Arrears, machan,’ Tony said. ‘Once you fail, you have to keep writing forever.’

Vikram elbowed his friend. ‘Shut up, man. I had just forgotten about that stupid paper.’

‘Who cares. It’ll be cancelled surely.’

‘Vikram!’ a shrill voice called out.

He turned to face the corpulent lady in oversized glasses. ‘Uma aunty?’

The lady smiled. ‘How are you?’ She looked at Tony. ‘Your friend?’

‘College friend, aunty . . . Tony.’

‘Anthony.’

Vikram shot him a surprised look. ‘That’s your name?’ He snapped his head back towards the lady. ‘Uh . . . what are you doing here, aunty?’

‘I work here, pa. Amma never told you or what? And your hair has grown so long!’

Vikram scratched his head and tried to smooth his hair. 'Oh ya! Amma used to tell me that Uma aunty worked in the banyan tree library. I thought you worked in a treehouse when I was a kid.'

Uma laughed. 'You did have a wild imagination. Anyway, what are you boys doing here?' Suddenly her voice dropped. 'Shouldn't you be in college?'

'Uh . . . thing is,' Vikram began, 'we had an exam—'

'Example to demonstrate Betal,' Tony finished and looked on blankly.

Uma knitted her brows. 'What?'

Vikram quickly cut in. 'That is, we . . . we had this philosophy . . . introduction to philosophy course, no? For that we had to . . . uh . . . demonstrate by giving examples.' Now his voice grew confident. 'And Sir was asking us to give examples of ancient Greek philosophers, but I thought' – Tony kicked his foot – 'we thought that we could use Indian examples. So, we decided to research Vikram and Betal.'

Uma's face underwent a series of contortions before settling on a smile. 'I'm proud of you boys. This library, you know, has the largest collection of occult books in the world.' She beamed at them. 'In the world, Vikky! Do you want to see the original copy or the first English translation?'

The boys' eyes lit up. 'That would be awesome, aunty,' Tony said.

'Can we see both?' Vikram asked eagerly.

'Come, come. This way.' She adjusted her spectacles and led the boys to a corner. A table with a glass box stood by itself,

containing parchments and strips of bamboo with writings on them. Uma carefully opened the glass cover, retrieved one of the parchments and placed it on a nearby table. She then picked up leather-bound book.

‘Here,’ she said and tapped Vikram on the shoulder. ‘Be very careful. Okay? The book is more than a hundred years old.’

The boys nodded in unison. ‘And this . . . cloth?’ Vikram asked, placing a finger on the parchment.

Uma shrugged. ‘No one knows. I’ll be back in twenty minutes.’

The cover said in cursive Gothic font *Vikram and the Vampire, or, Tales of Hindu Devilry*. The words were limber and inked in gold. Age had worn the leather down and left it looking dull. Vikram carefully opened the cover. It smelt exactly how an old book would – slightly dank yet evocative of quiet libraries where bibliophiles hovered. ‘Works of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton,’ he whispered. He reached for his cellphone and took a picture of the cover.

‘Some cricket captain?’ Tony enquired and tittered.

‘I doubt it,’ Vikram said, putting his phone away. ‘Remember cricket came from gilli-danda and we had to yet give it to the angrez.’

Tony nodded and slowly flipped the pages. He stopped at the first illustration. It showed two bearded men, dressed in soldiers’ livery, looking up at winged creatures with fear. Four impish beasts hovered over the petrified men. They had hooked beaks, large leathery bat-like wings and sharp claws.

They grinned from ear to ear as if about to throw balloons filled with coloured water on the hapless soldiers.

‘So cool,’ Vikram whispered as he turned the pages.

A faint aroma of ink emanated from the pages. Some of them stuck together and many had worn-out edges. An illustration appeared every other page or so. ‘Look here,’ he said, *The Baital Pachisi*, or the twenty-five tales of a vetal, is the history of a huge bat, a vampire, or evil spirit that inhabited and animated dead bodies.’ He glanced at his friend.

‘Fuck, man,’ Tony said. ‘This is already giving me the creeps. *Chandamama* made it sound like a fairy tale my grandma would tell me. This looks like that crazy chick from *The Exorcist* will appear in the corner of the room if I read it aloud.’

They flipped through the pages some more and gave up. ‘I don’t remember any of these stories and this English is too stiff,’ Tony complained. “Love is like the drunkard’s cup . . . delicious is the first drink, palling are the draughts that succeed it.” He looked at Vikram. ‘What the fuck does that mean?’

Vikram shrugged and turned a chunk of pages. He cleared his throat and said, ‘And now a love poem.’ He spoke in an ersatz British accent. “She was to me the pearl that clings / To sands all hid from mortal sight / Yet fit for diadems of kings / The pure and lovely light.”

‘Wah! Wah!’ Tony said and started showering imaginary currency notes on Vikram. ‘You’ll crack the GRE for sure.’ As soon as he said this, his phone started crowing like a rooster.

He jumped and took it out of his pocket, which made the crowing louder. Other readers shot him disparaging glances. Fumbling, he silenced it finally. Uma came up to them and put her hands on her hips.

‘Sorry . . . aunt . . . m’am,’ Tony said. ‘I . . . I have to take an injection twice a day and this is my reminder.’ Seeing that she didn’t believe him, he showed her the syringe and medicine packet.

‘Thyroid issue,’ Vikram said and pursed his lips.

Uma’s nostrils flared as she sighed loudly. ‘Put it on silent.’

Vikram quickly went back to the book as Tony lifted his shirt and stabbed himself near his waist with the syringe. ‘Bugger!’ he said. ‘Silence it, man. One day it’s going to ring in some exam or some important place and you’ll be in deep shit.’

Tony was unperturbed. ‘If I don’t hear the alarm, I won’t remember.’

‘Anyway, this book . . . it’s got the poetry to rhyme and all. I didn’t know the stories were written in sloka form.’

‘Hey, you know Sanskrit, right?’ Tony said, pressing his fingers on his hip.

Vikram shrugged. ‘A little. Studied it in school. It came naturally to me, but it’s a bloody hard language to learn. Everything has one of three genders.’

‘Three-aa?’

‘Masculine, feminine and neutral.’

‘It was hard enough learning French with its two genders,’ Tony said. ‘How do you handle three?’

‘I don’t remember. As soon as I finished ninth standard,

I didn't have to study it any more and forgot everything I had learnt.' He traced his fingernail along the verses and said, 'Man! These Britishers were really serious about this translation.'

'Then imagine the original,' Tony said and moved his attention to the parchment. It was rolled up tightly.

'What do you think this is,' Vikram said, running his finger along the rough surface. 'Cow?'

Tony leaned in and sniffed. 'I don't know. Maybe.' He glanced around and whispered. 'What if it's human?' He carefully undid the black thread binding it and tenderly unfurled the many scrolls that were layered on top of each other. The duo hunched over the table and brought their faces close to the scrolls. The writing was small and in Sanskrit. There were no pictures of the vampire or spirits and if someone had handed it to Vikram he'd have guessed it was just an older version of the *Vishnu sahasranamam* – the thousand names of Lord Vishnu – composed as slokas. The only illustration was a carefully drawn tree on the last scroll, its dangling roots resembling serpents.

'It's a banyan tree,' Vikram said.

Tony's pocket made a buzzing sound. He read the message and said, 'The strike has got out of hand, Sukku says. I have to go.'

Vikram shot an annoyed glance at his watch. 'It's only afternoon.'

'No, I have a contact who said he could leak the question paper if the exam were to be cancelled.'

'Oh! So the exam has been cancelled today?'

‘Exams. Sss. Plural. All of them are cut until the strike is resolved.’

Vikram looked at the parchment. ‘I want to read this, then.’ He grinned. ‘Now that we have holidays.’ Tony picked up his satchel and walked out, gesturing to Vikram to message him later. He waved at Uma and slipped out.

Vikram’s mother had decided that he would learn Sanskrit instead of French as his third language at school. Vikram wanted to learn French, like Tony. But his mother was firm. ‘A Brahmin boy must know how to recite the Vedas,’ she said. ‘It will come useful in your life.’ And so, she had unknowingly set a malfeasant ball rolling.

At first the language had confused him. The script was Devanagari, the same as Hindi, which he had studied all his school life. He could read the language but didn’t understand a word of it. The Sanskrit teacher was a crotchety lady named Seethalakshmi, with a penchant for smacking the boys with her wooden ruler if they didn’t perform well. Most classes, Vikram zoned out, befuddled by the number of ways a word could be conjugated before it subjugated him. By the ninth standard, he had got a passing grade and was glad to be done with the arcane language, though his mother remarked that his enunciation of the slokas had become much better. Even the priest who had performed his sacred thread ceremony praised his recitation of the sacred mantras and urged him to come to the temple each evening so that he could learn to recite the Vedas. But Vikram had chosen not to indulge him.

The original stories of the Betal intrigued him. Outside, the sun had sunk behind the clouds and a cool breeze rose