

The Sirens Call



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*Short Stories, Flash
Fiction, Poetry,
and Artwork for
Horror Fans!*

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There! There it was, the apparition in the flowing white saree, floating above the Ashtakoni Talav, well in the Lohagad Fort at Pune. Shiva, the security guard had been warned about it. It seemed to beckon him, disappearing into the waters as he went to it...

The first drops of rain had turned into a deluge, shrouding the fort ramparts in a thick mist that covered the countryside below in a suffocating blanket. Shiva, a WWI army veteran pulled his army-issue trench coat tight against the rain that struck him like bullets. He tottered out of his quarters near the well, struggling against the strong winds to warn picnickers to take shelter in the caves.

The fort was managed by the British regiment in nearby Lonavala hill station. It was the 1920s and wives and children of the British officers often vacationed in the hill station. Some of the younger children and staff members often trekked to the forts, making merry, and enjoying the breathtaking views.

His main task was to stop dejected, drunk, lovelorn people jumping from Suicide Point. Suicide of a British citizen was bad news, and when someone died, his Sergeant would shout at him for 'bloody sleeping on the job.'

The suicide point was a thin strip on the cliff informally called Vinchukada, Scorpion's tail, flanked by a sheer drop of a thousand meters into the backwaters of the Pawna River. Vinchukada was a favorite spot for suicides.

Built by Kings about 2000 years back, the Lohagad, the Iron Fort had changed ownership over the centuries. The village of Lohgadwadi nestled at the foothills and which Shiva visited for provisions and to drink mahua, country liquor brewed fresh from the mahua flowers.

Over the years, the fort had acquired a sinister reputation, complete with an urban legend about Vatsala, a female ghost. Visitors were advised against spending nights there.

An old villager told Shiva the tale. "Many centuries back, a chieftain guarded the fort. He had a beautiful daughter named Vatsala. The king, who was a tyrant saw her on a visit and wanted to violate her. She had to either agree or watch her father die."

The villager lit a beedi, and continued "In desperation, she jumped into the Ashtakoni Talav, a well in the fort complex and gave up her life. It was summer and the well was dry. The legends say that River Pawana rose in the well and received her. Her atma, her soul is trapped in the well and haunts the fort. The tyrant died later and is buried in the tomb near the well."

"Why does she come back?"

"Her soul is stuck in the well, the nether world. She seeks someone to guide her to the after world. The evil king watches and prevents her escape."

Shiva was skeptical about this story and smirked "It is an elaborate ruse to attract visitors to the fort."

The villager lashed out "Sipahie (soldier), just wait. She will appear and take you. Her image is carved on the well wall."

Shiva rued that rather than blame a ghost for the deaths, irresponsible weekend picnickers and hikers were to be punished. The visitors were young, careless, drank, smoked ganja- weed, acted promiscuously, and they imagined themselves as seasoned trekkers. He had even caught a few making love in the old Hanuman Darawaja, a temple of the monkey god Hanuman, and the old tomb in the fort.

He had lashed out at them "Show some respect. Kings and soldiers fought and died protecting this fort."

His tough-soldier demeanor and his trusted khukri were sufficient to quiet them.

As Shiva rushed out of his quarters, the wind howled and he struggled to move forward. Some of the hikers had made it to the cave and were laughing at the thrill of braving the elements.

Shiva shouted, "Is anyone missing?"

They looked around then answered "Sara and Richard have gone to Suicide Point."

Shiva turned back into the storm. A stout knotted rope ran from the fort's rampart to the beginning of the strip. There was nothing beyond. He grabbed the rope, hunched down and started forward. Through the rain and wind, he could dimly see the duo on the ground, clinging to a rock. The storm shrieked and plucked at them as they flailed their legs. They probably had a few seconds to live.

Suddenly, a white apparition rose from behind the couple, shrieking above the wind. Long hands reached out and tossed them from the cliff. The apparition turned towards him and he imagined it screamed "Jump!" before it disappeared.

In anger he shouted "Why do you kill? What had they done?"

Next morning, a search party went hunting for the bodies, and found no trace. Villagers said that Vatsala had claimed them.

The next few days were calm, bright, sunny, and brought hikers in droves. The deaths and the lurid tales recounted by the villagers inflamed the visitors. Shiva stood guard at the strip warning people to behave.

The tale of Vatsala was fascinating and Shiva wanted to confirm that the carved figure was indeed on the well wall. During a break, he went to the well and looked carefully at the outer walls for any carved figure. The placid waters were slightly murky. The well was very old and over the centuries, artisans had carved various figures of deities and stories from the Puranas on the outer walls. He had almost given up looking when a small carving of about four square inches caught his attention.

It was near the base and unlike the other figures made of granite, this was carved in marble and half covered in soil. He scooped out the mud and washed it with water from his water bottle. A beautiful figure of a woman stared back.

She had delicate features, rounded thighs and up thrust breasts with a saree draped over the shoulders. The figure looked back at him and their eyes locked. Shiva felt himself dragged inside the eyes.

A cohort of hikers ran across shouting and the spell broke.

After dinner Shiva slept in his hut. He woke with a start to the sound of anklets and an overpowering smell of decaying stagnant water. The figure from the marble carving hovered above his bed, her hands reaching out, dripping with water.

In a trance, he grabbed her arms and shrank back in terror when he grasped decaying, water-logged skin instead. She came forward thrusting her beautiful face, framed with full lips, straight nose and large eyes. For an instant, before he could react the face changed into a decayed mass with small fish and crabs crawling in her eyes and mouth. Then as suddenly it turned back to her beautiful self. He jerked awake drawing his khukri.

In a hypnotized and dreamlike state, he walked behind her as she led him to the well.

"Oh soldier! I am Vatsala. I beg you. Please complete your vow to protect the weak. Take me from this Nether World through the portal of light to the After World."

Lightning rent the night, hitting the ramparts and breaking off chunks of stone and mortar. The water in the well was a roiling mass of flesh, blood, and bloodied limbs. She jumped in and Shiva completely in her spell followed. His senses clogged with the stench of decaying flesh.

She held his waist and Shiva swam warding off the fishes and snakes that bit him. Vatsala gave him new strength and he fought with the beings.

Something cloying seized his leg and he glanced back to see long tentacles with suckers pulling him into a dark hole. He slashed at the creature with his khukri and they dove deeper.

He expected to drown but found he could surprisingly breathe and see through the muddy waters. It seemed that Vatsala had given him new powers. Slashing, he fought through the mass of bodies that swarmed them. These were the souls and bodies of the countless that had died over the centuries. They were decayed with gaping skeletal mouths and bit him, disintegrating with the first blow.

After a long struggle, he could see a faint light at the bottom and they swam to it even as he kept cutting at the endless stream of beings grasping at them. Something huge and glowing blocked the light, it had a formless body, a large face, and fire rimmed eyes, with mouth bared and claws reaching out for Vatsala. It was the evil King and it caught her by the waist.

Swimming powerfully, Shiva went under the flailing arms and struck with his knife deep into the soft decaying belly. The creature let go Vatsala, turned and grabbed Shiva by the chest pulling him to its mouth.

Their struggle had brought them near the light at the bottom. He was at arm's length from the gaping mouth. Shiva lunged and thrust his khukri into an eye. Bubbles of ooze erupted and the creature loosened its grip on him.

Shiva grabbed Vatsala and they swam to the light. Realizing that they were escaping, the creature turned, kicking up a cloud of mud and came after them, long claws thrusting out to shear and impale.

They made it through the light and broke into the tranquil and peaceful waters of the river. Shiva passed out.

Shiva woke to English and native voices that gathered around him. The fort ramparts stood far above, the sun shone brightly, and he was alive. He looked across the waters and saw the beautiful spirit, complete in her form, prancing on the waters. She looked at Shiva and bowed, folding her hands in a deep namaskar.

Yes. Vatsala's spirit was free.

About the Author:

Based in Pune, India, Shashi Kadapa is the managing editor of ActiveMuse, a journal of literature. His short stories have appeared or shortly due in print anthologies of asagrande Press, Anthroposphere (Oxford Climate Review), Alien Dimensions #11, Agorist Writers, Escaped Ink, War Monkey, Carpathia Publishing, Verses of Silence, and in online publications of Spadina Literary Review, Nymphs Publications, Schlock Webzine, and others.

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