

Cleaning The Dead

by Ajay Vishwanathan

"Don't pull too hard," warned Father. "You might sever it from the body, spraying blood into your eyes."

I let go and the leg plunked onto the wet ground, splashing muddied water on my bare feet. The storm was brief but had left a trail of water-logged potholes in the roads. The weak flicker from the lantern that Father held in his hand was hardly enough to illuminate our faces.

It didn't bother him. "Once my eyes adjust to the darkness, I use the stars, the moon, and the occasional flashes from fireflies," he always claimed.

To me, nights always seemed darker when damp. The buffalo was probably thinking the same thing when he was hit by a lorry. His stomach had been ripped open, but thankfully, the guts had not spilled onto the road; they dangled from the gash.

Father went around the animal and pushed at him with his foot to gauge his weight. Untying the cloth from around his head, he started sliding it under the belly of the flopped animal. The air was muggy. Usually, I hear bats screaming in the woods and see a random animal dart across the dirt road, but it was very quiet this night.

"Pull it from the other side," said Father, "and bring it over the top."

The animal hardly moved as I tugged at the cloth, bloody by now, and wound it over his stomach. Father preferred doing this to cleaning up the spilled remains. He would then use his enormous strength to muscle the animal onto the iron cart that was lying on its

side at the edge of the road. Father has the power of three bulls, Mother used to say.

I have never asked him how long he had been scavenging dead animals for Malkan but from my friends I gathered he had been clearing bodies for ages. I don't think there is anybody else in the village capable of doing what we do. Shyam teased me all the time, said no one else wanted to do it. He blamed it on our caste. Did it mean I was just unlucky to be born into this family? I've never heard Father complain about it. But then, he rarely speaks. He hardly spoke a whole sentence to Mother. She died two months ago. Mother mentioned one day that he spoke more openly when they were alone together. I don't even remember him crying when Malkan told him that she had fallen into the well and drowned. After Mother's death, Malkan increased Father's pay and, despite working for the village chief, lounged with Father, smoking *beedis* until wee hours, sitting outside our house staring at slow-moving clouds grazing mountain tops.

Tonight, as Father pulled the rope attached to the heavy cart, he didn't seem as strong. He was gasping for breath. The lantern had gone out but I still noticed rare beads of sweat on his forehead. I guess I had learned to see things under the glow of the stars. We approached a sharp slope and I wished I was big enough to help Father haul. The rope slipped from his grip, sending the cart careening back down the road, the large carcass flying onto the grass by the roadside. The noise tore through the silence, sending owls and other birds clapping through the trees.

Father slumped to the ground and covered his face with both hands. I watched him squat in this position for a few minutes, then look up at the sky and shake his head wearily.

"I will help you lift it back onto the cart, Father."

"Your mother didn't listen to me," he said without looking at me. The ruffling in the trees had settled down. "I used to tell your mother to be careful around those wells... she just didn't listen."

I had never seen Father so powerless, hands limp, flecks of dirt glistening below his eyes. I wished I had not learned to see so well in darkness.

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