

A renegade Catholic priest becomes an instrument of God.

Lanterns in the Mist

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Lanterns In The Mist

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Bali-1981

Beneath the weight of dark morning shadows, he lies on a bare mattress in a thatched-roof hut. He is thin and weak with fever. His face is drawn and sallow behind a bushy beard. The sleep in which he is immersed is not peaceful. It is the kind of sleep we enter with dread. For we know what's coming. We've been there before.

Eyelids dancing a distressed jig. A shadow of grimace plants its dark roots around his mouth. Now, a deep, guttural sound coming from his belly. His mouth opens, fitfully. The sound is pitching higher. A wailing comes up through his torso causing chest, throat, and lips to spasm. With a shattering start, he awakes with convulsion. Breathing heavily. Perspiring. Weeping. The very marrow of his bones ache. It is another day.

The dreamer has relived, for too many nights now, an inscrutable horror of the waking state. In the mountain village of Bayung Gede, where goiter is common due to generations of thyroid deficiency, a twelve-year-old girl has turned rancid. What is thought to be a baseball-sized goiter at the base of her throat is the least of her problems. Her once beautiful cocoa-butter skin is now the color of black ash. Her coal-black hair has turned gray. Her aqua-green eyes are now incandescent yellow. Her tongue is blood-red and entertains a fowl gray spittle. She speaks in tongues and, on occasion, bovine whines and howls come up from deep in her belly. Unspeakable evil lurks here.

He enters the mud hut armed with Bible and holy water. It is the seventeenth day he has done so. He is collapsing from exhaustion. The hut reeks of vomit and excrement. Two elders of the family, both women, are attempting to sponge-bathe the child. Not long ago, the

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girl was playful and happy, singing nursery rhymes and dancing to the Gamelan drums of village musicians. Now, she is in no-man's land.

He asks the elders to step aside. They huddle in a corner of the hut. They brace themselves, as they have done sixteen times before, for what's to come. The priest decants some holy water from a coke bottle into the palm of his hand. With this provocation, the child slithers like a snake across the floor. The priest stalks her and flicks the holy water on her head. As the water makes contact with her forehead, black puffs of soot-smoke evaporate into the air. The child shrieks as burn-marks appear on her brow. The goiter at her throat expands like a balloon at the lips of an excited child celebrating a birthday.

*Now, the girl resembles nothing human. It moves along the ground like a spider in distress. The priest is chanting, adamantly: **"By the power of Christ, I command thee...By the power of Christ, I command thee..."** The thing is scurrying across the floor sideways, back arched like an anticipatory cat. It stops, suddenly. Hissing. Yellow eyes darting back and forth.*

"Our father which art in heaven..."

*The thing slowly turns its head. It has its elders in mind. The old women huddle in a corner of the hut, faces turned away, sobbing. **"...Give us this day our daily bread..."** They never saw what hit them.*

*In an astonishing display of brutal athleticism, the thing pounces with the force of a hurricane. Arms flaying, legs kicking, thin calcium poles covered with skin execute the bloodletting. In a matter of moments, two battered, faceless heaps lie in the corner. The thing, covered with blood, is giggling. Belching. The smell is foul. Its tongue darts around its lips, looking for and finding blood and skin fragments. It speaks. **"Your turn, Padre."***

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The priest has had enough. The Bible drops to the floor. He involuntarily raises the coke bottle to his lips and drinks deeply of the holy water. Is it blood he tastes? A cold shadow of steely energy washes over his eyes like cataract. His breathing is deep, slow, powerful. The thing is moving once again. Slithering across the dirt floor of the hut. The priest stalks it. His eyes do not blink. A fixed relentless stare. He has it cornered.

*Nothing purely human exists in this forsaken hut in the mountains of Bali. Two forces of nature. Two poles of concentrated energy. No conscience to redirect the forces. The priest leaps like some forgotten feline ancestor. He has the creature by the throat. Pinned to the dirt floor. **“By the power of Christ, I command thee...”** The thing jams its fingers—they are like claws of molten steel—into the ribcage of the God-man on top of her. **“By the power of Christ, I command thee...”** The pain is unbearable, radiating up through his torso and down through his thighs. His grip on the thing’s throat tightens like a vise. The eyes of the thing are turning red. Is it blood he sees? A faint numbness saturates his body. **“God, above, commands thee...God, above commands thee...LEAVE THIS CHILD OF GOD!”***

The priest is gone now. Numb as death. He witnesses the struggle beneath him, floating above it all. The thing’s eyes are flashing. Red—green—red—green. Green. Aqua—green. The little girl screams: a piercing scream signaling a fresh awareness of the present. Black bile gushes from her mouth. With each expulsion, the swelling in her throat dissipates.

Bali. The mountain village of Bayung Gede. A mud hut. Darkness. Stillness. Two shadowy heaps lie in a corner like discarded bundles of hay. A child is crying. Here we have human tears. A body lies on top of her. A heavy weight with no will of its own.

One Year Later

For two years now, the Goa Gajah Temple had been his home. An incongruous fact, especially for a Catholic priest. Twelve hundred years ago, the temple was constructed and occupied by Buddhist monks. In the still hours of the morning, if one is quiet enough, faint echoes of *OM MANI PADME HUM* can be heard in the wind. Since the eleventh century, Goa Gajah has been the home of Hindu monks. Bali is this way: it is a place where the force of underlying unity prevails.

From his thatched roof hut on the hillside, he could see the temple courtyard above him and the deep jungle river-valley below. The rarified air of open space and silence allowed his life of discipline and solitude to take the form of simplicity itself. Long hours in meditation, solitary walks along the river's edge, sleeping little, eating less. A monk removed from the conventional paths walked by ordinary men and women.

He had spoken little in the past year—in fact, only when the exigencies of life made it absolutely necessary. Observing a vow of silence had drawn him inward—to a point where the space of his inner life opened up to a vastness only the mystics really know. The vow of silence was precipitated by a horrific seventeen-day exorcism in the village of Bayung Gede, leaving him temporarily paralyzed from the neck down. Upon recovery, the wisdom of silence became the curative tonic in which he bathed.

This morning, an intuitive awareness told him it was time to return to the world. This was why he had come to Bali: to prepare himself to go back to the world. Those who really want to give themselves to humanity must first abandon the world—and may only authentically return after emptying themselves completely of selfishness, fear, and

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expectation. For him, there would be no more demands on life. Rather, he would be a still and empty vessel waiting to be called to serve humanity (in ways he never would have imagined) by life's curious happenings and interplays. In later years he would say, "I am a puppet. The movements of life pull my strings."

This morning, he put on sash, sarong, and headdress and rode his bicycle to Monkey Forrest Street in Ubud where he marched in a grand funeral procession for an old Brahmin priest. In the clearing of the forest where the cremation was held, he felt some previously imperceptible tension in his chest and forehead *snap* just as the great white ceremonial bull housing the Brahmin's body went up in a hot-white blaze. Standing fast and close to the raging inferno, he felt all sense of finite self melt away. What was left of him merged lightly with the fire's palpable heat.

When the body of the burning Brahmin collapsed through the gutted belly of the white bull and fell to the charred corrugated metal sheet resting on the platform below, the flaming head separated from the body with an eerie *pop*, rolled off the metal sheet, and came to rest at Father Byron's feet. Blue-dagger flames shot through the sockets of eyes and mouth and lipped orange at the blackened skin. The charred eyeless skull stared him down with a look that spoke of eternity.

Twenty-four hours later, somewhere over the Pacific, Father Byron stared into the lavatory mirror of the Boeing 747. He did not recognize the face staring back.

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