NORMAL
A Desi Queer Horror Zine

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Published in **2019** by
Gaysi Media Private Limited

(gaysi)

Gaysi Media Private Limited, 14A/71, Third Floor, WEA, Karol Bagh, Delhi - 110 005.

ISSN 2350 - 0425 07

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This zine would not have been what it is if not for the generous support of Consulate of Canada and Imbesharam. We are equally grateful to every single contributor for helping us crowdfund the zine on Milaap.org.

NORMAL.

A Desi Queer Horror Zine by Gaysi Family

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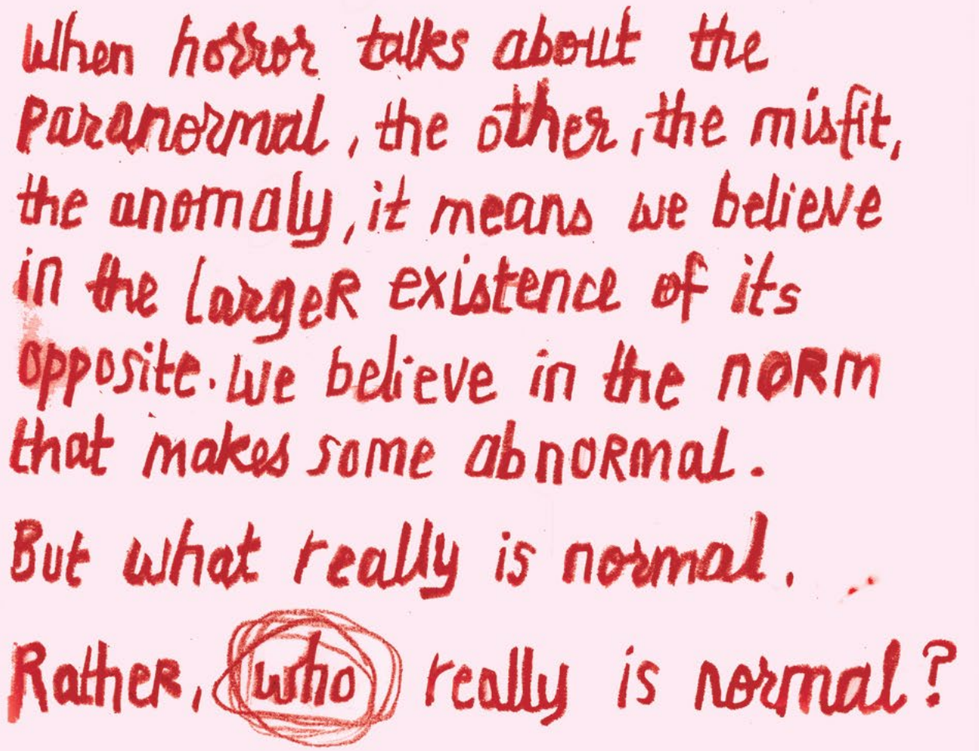
***TRIGGER WARNING :** A few pieces featured in this zine may be triggering for some people and such pieces will explicitly specify the corresponding trigger warning. Sexual assault, self-harm, death, and violence are some of the topics mentioned within.*



Horror has had a tumultuous history. From not being taken as seriously as other narrative genres – because it was considered a 'feminine' genre (a discussion for another day) – to becoming a symbol of hypermasculinity and promoting some of the most sexist and non-inclusive tropes, its transformation has been evidently massive. And with its mass appeal, it lost its most distinctive quality: the ability to shock.

Horror amplifies some of our biggest fears – rational and irrational, personal and communal. As a device, it not only scares, but provides a sense of security in its denouement. We tend to believe in stories more when the 'monster' is vanquished and all is well with the world. But that's not quite how reality functions. Not for a large part of the Indian queer population.

We see reports of cruelty, discrimination, and violence against (and within) the queer community every day. In fact, we see them so often that we might even be getting desensitised to these very real horrors. We're so used to an overstimulation of all our senses that we don't realise when things start going wrong right next to us – and sometimes even with us. As much as we try, some 'monsters' simply refuse to be defeated. Do we then start living with them? Or worse, become one ourselves?

When horror talks about the paranormal, the other, the misfit, the anomaly, it means we believe in the larger existence of its opposite. We believe in the norm that makes some abnormal. But what really is normal. Rather, who really is normal? While this is pretty much a rhetorical (perhaps even existential) question, it is one that we've nevertheless, set out to answer with this zine.

Today, much of the stories that are created and peddled in the horror genre largely take place inside a heteronormative universe. Even though, ironically, the central characters of nearly all these stories are 'outcasts', 'freaks', or 'deviants'. There is enough and more evidence that creativity doesn't flourish from a singular worldview. And thus, we are gradually seeing a slight shift in the genre – at least outside of the mainstream. Many artists, publications, and writers are exploring newer narratives, perspectives, and techniques to capture the essence of horror. But as is the case with most avenues trying to experiment, India has been quite behind at this trend as well. In fact, we're so far behind that we don't even have enough examples of original Indian horror, let alone creating and consuming 'alt' horror.

This is especially astonishing, considering there is hardly a dearth of horror narratives in traditional Indian myths and folklore. Each region in India has its own set of ghosts – notwithstanding skeletons in their respective closets. Indian mythology often talks about taming 'demons' within ourselves by using literal demon/rakshasa imagery. For a genre that holds up a mirror to some of the most extreme social evils plaguing society, it is indeed surprising that we don't see more explorations on horror in India.

The beauty of the word 'normal' is that the more you say the word out loud, sound it out in your brain, read it over and over, the more it keeps moving away from its meaning. Try it!

The more you say it, the more it begins to take the form of merely a sound, a random collection of letters, an abstract idea that doesn't quite grasp at anything anymore – a deconstructed version of itself.

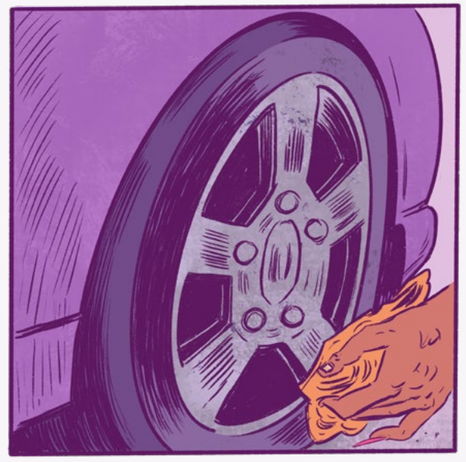
The idea behind NORMAL was to not only pay homage to the genre of horror – from some of its cult tropes, to taking it in extreme spaces – but do it while holding on to an inherently Indian, desi, voice. Like Rashmi Ruth Devadasan's *The Legend of Rani Grace*, which tells an original love story that emerges from traditional folklore. In Joshua Muyiwa's *Wrist Action*, an urban slasher set in the busy, traff*cked streets of Bengaluru, we see an urban India trying to find its footing in a foundation muddled with the slush of conservative thinking. Anshumaan Sathe and Tora's pieces are some of the most detailed, vivid graphic pieces that depict unique takes on issues of gender, identity, and violence that are currently plaguing the queer community in India.

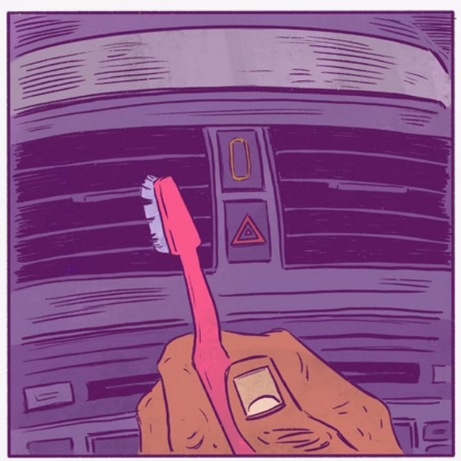
However, NORMAL isn't just about narratives but also how those narratives are presented. Pooja Krishnakumar's *Kiss Me Again* and Mehershad Wadia's *Tinder Chat* are excellent examples of desi narratives told in a style that is anything but. And while we are trying to defy the limits of visual narratives, we've ensured that the stories have an inherent Indianness to them.

Apart from celebrating horror, NORMAL – like all previous Gaysi zines – is a means to amplify diverse, and especially queer writers and stories from India. The beauty of the word 'normal' is that the more you say the word out loud, sound it out in your brain, read it over and over, the more it keeps moving away from its meaning. Try it! The more you say it, the more it begins to take the form of merely a sound, a random collection of letters, an abstract idea that doesn't quite grasp at anything anymore – a deconstructed version of itself. We've tried to include as many different voices and sub-genres as we could to meditate – in a way – on what 'normal' means but I'm sure there's always scope for more. We're excited for you to sample this offering and we hope you'll like it enough for us to continue doing what we like doing best. Enjoy!

– Niyati Joshi

Wrist Action





By **Joshua Muyiwa**

Illustrated by **Gaurav Sharma**

* **TW** // Violence, Death

Cash. He'd pay for everything with cash. He'd never even thought of getting a card. He wanted to tell her, in his school days, all the shops had a 'no credit' sign. He'd learnt to confidently say, cash. He'd previously settled on an affirmative nod to her query, only cleaning products, sir. He didn't like supermarkets, he didn't like the casual chirpiness of the counter girl either. He'd rather have gone down his street to Peekay's. Over there, the boys behind the counter were all business – brief, brisk. He liked that, he thought it was best. Though, he liked that they'd always say hi and bye to him.

Do you need help with carrying your bags to your car, sir, she asked him. As if. As if she was going to carry them for me? He grumbled to himself. No thanks, he shot back and began to walk out. He didn't like that he'd sounded angry for such a small thing. His father was constantly telling him to say, good morning, good afternoon, good evening and good night to everyone. Be a decent fellow, his father would still say. He turned around, went up to her and said with a smile, bye have a nice day. He liked that she smiled back, he thought she looked like a torch. Even he was going to give this a try: service with a smile.

In the parking lot of the supermarket, he began to wipe down his car with the imported cleaning products. He was happy that they were on a good discount. He stepped back to look at his car and looked at it proudly. Do driving, his father had said to him, it's a good salary. Why to simply fight, he'd told his closest college friend at their last meeting, boring sitting full daynight alone in the house with my father. He is watching news channels always. Daily so many peoples are dying off, you know. His friend just nodded; they didn't seem to talk like they did in their college days anymore. He also didn't like that he couldn't practice his English in these conversations. He wondered, how will I improve?

After signing his taxi driver papers, he stopped at a nursery. He noticed that the uncle at the shop didn't smile at all. He just wanted rolls of plastic sheets but also bought a cactus with a pink bud for his dashboard. He thanked the uncle at the shop for telling him, that the sheets were thick and good for the monsoons. He gave him a smile: a big one. Still, the uncle at the shop didn't smile back.

* * * * *

Within a few minutes of reaching the airport, he got a booking. I will be a nice person, I will do everything my father told me to, he loudly repeated to himself in the car. He wanted his first day to continue being good. He hadn't told his father but every evening for the past two weeks, he'd been going for spoken English classes. Going to do Jayaprada dance again, his father had taunted him. It's the same sentence, he's been throwing at him since he'd started dance classes in the evenings after school.

He shook his head to clear these thoughts. Have good manners and greet people, it is very important, he remembered the English teacher telling them in class. Good evening sir. Good flight sir? Evening, evening. Not too many complaints, thanks. You've got a very clean car. Are you a new driver? Yes sir, first day. Thank you, sir. I and my father have taken loan from bank to buy car, sir. That's good. Yes sir. Do honest work, my father is always saying for me, sir. Don't call me sir. I've got a name. It's Sanjeev. Okay, sir. Is your air-freshener pine? I don't know, sir. It is coming free with one imported cleaning spray from supermarket near my house. Oh okay. It is shaped like a pine tree, which is evergreen, you know. What sir? The air freshner in your car. Stop this sir business. He dropped the sir but just couldn't get himself to say his name. Ah, in college days no, I was walking with my friend in one park and he is asking, why they don't have apps on smartphones for telling the names of trees and flowers. Like Shazam? What sir? It's an app that can listen to a bit of any song and give you the name. That is very nice. I will download.

He didn't like that the man in the back kept looking at him in the rear-view mirror. He didn't like that he hadn't smiled even once. It really takes quite a while to get out of this airport to the city, huh. Quite far, huh. Yes, this is new airport no.

They'd been stuck in a traffic jam at the toll gate for quite a bit.

You know, there are just too many people in our city. Too many people, man. You know what we should do? We should just kill off the new people in this city, one by one. Slit their throats and leave them to die. And there's enough shit everywhere in this city to hide all of the bodies. Fuckers! Sorry man, don't look so scared. It's a joke. Relax. Just lots of loud people on the flight, you see.

The driver just smiled into the rear-view mirror. Has anyone told you, you've got a great smile, man. It's beautiful and bright. Like a headlight. For the rest of the way, the driver didn't smile anymore. The man in the back didn't smile either. But every time the driver looked at the rear-view mirror he caught the man's eyes staring intently and began to feel a little scared.

So, who did you vote for? Modi? Did you vote for him? Or the Congress? Do you eat beef? Or just chicken? He didn't respond to these questions; he didn't like them. Looking only at the road he refused to even acknowledge the questions, but it didn't seem to make any difference. Looking straight, that only is good driving, his father had told him during their driving lessons.

I didn't think he'd win again. Such a big margin. We're fucked. Definitely fucked. Everything's fucked. Fuck! Man, it's like no one reads the papers or watches the news anymore. Everyone believes all the shit forwards on WhatsApp. The rant upset him and he shook his head. My father is still watching the news. Daily he is watching from morning to night time. He is sleeping with news on full blast, he said attempting to calm down the man in the back. Want radio songs? No, that's okay. I like talking to you, the man in the back said, still intensely looking at him in the rear-view mirror.

Oh, you're taking a shortcut, that's great. He couldn't decide between words and a nod, but the man simply carried on. Away from all this bad traffic, that's nice. Do you smoke? Yes sir from college days. Do you mind if we stopped on the side of the road for a cigarette? Feeling damn fried from the long flight. Stop here. It looks really quiet, come on. He didn't like the strong smell of shit near these railway tracks and all the rubbish, his car was still new. He also didn't like it that the man had lied to him. He clearly wasn't smoking a cigarette, for he'd taken something from a pouch, put it into a paper, licked it and rolled it. It is ganja, he was sure. You want a rollie? No thanks I am having my packet.

> He didn't like that the man in the back kept looking at him in the rear-view mirror.
>
> He didn't like that he hadn't smiled even once.

Rollies are my only workout. I must say, you've got a great body too. Just noticed it because you're standing up. Do you work out, go to a gym or something? I've stopped going for some months now. Touch my chest. Grab it. Properly man. Do you think I have manboobs? What sir?

He felt himself shiver a little. I will just go for number one and come. While slowly walking away, he remembered a joke that his college friend told him, our city is going from garden to garbage city. It was not a joke any longer, he thought, this is really such a dirty place. He looked back briefly and the man seemed to still be watching him. The man was blowing out the smoke in his direction, it nearly seemed to touch him. He walked a little further in, he didn't want the man following him.

* * * * *

The next morning, he used his fancy sprays and cleaned out the car again. He didn't miss a single spot. Always the customer is right, his father reminded him in the morning before he headed out. But. But that fellow from last night wasn't right, he was convinced.

He just couldn't get the stare of that man in the rear-view mirror out of his head. He didn't like it that his eyes were jet-black. They reminded him of the black painted eyes of the stone statues in saris at the end of his street during his school-days. He remembered that once the statues had cried bloody tears. Everyone had come to see it; his father and uncle had even carried his sick mother to see the miracle. That man in the back had fixed his eyes on him just like those statues had done then. He hadn't liked that at all.

He liked today's trip: the two aunties in the back who were discussing Deepika Padukone's wedding dresses. The aunty with the many rings had just declared that, it isn't an Indian wedding without the bride wearing a Sabyasachi outfit. He had heard that name and knew that it was some Bengali man and wanted to tell them, Rabindranath Tagore is also Bengali, madam, he is the writer of Jana Gana Mana, but before he could get that sentence out, they had moved on to discussing something called "goochi".

But he couldn't stop thinking about the man from last night. He decided that he hated him most for his obsession with Modi. Everyone seemed to talk about this man all the time, he couldn't ever seem to escape it. Even his college friend was completely captivated by him. In their college days, they'd go for long walks, eat a South Indian executive meal at a *darshini* and even sit on the same bench. But they never spoke about politics. He'd always described his college friend to his family as a decent fellow. He'd always follow the declaration with the story of the way his college friend would decline all the girls asking him to come to the movies with them. But they always went together to the late-night shows. After the movie, at first, they'd discuss the plot and the heroes. But quite quickly, they'd skip this step and discuss the actresses in great detail, while they disagreed about everything from hemlines to hairstyles, they both were certain Sridevi could never do wrong.

After college, the two of them went on a holiday to Goa on a bus. They had to share the sleeper on the bus and the single bed in their beach shack. He had been very excited, it was his first holiday without his parents.

He didn't like driving to malls but he liked the happy guy in the back now. He was surprised by this guy's excitement with getting shoes from Japan. He kept saying, these are beauties, he was going to tell his college friend this line, he found it so funny. In his school days, there was just one mall in the city, everyone would go there to ride the escalator. Now, there were so many escalators. He wanted to say this to this fellow but he was on the phone the entire trip. At least, he got five stars and unlocked the cash bonus on this trip.

He stopped for a cup of tea with the other drivers. He was ready with his best smile but everyone seemed to be in some serious conversation, so he stepped to one side and sipped his tea. You've heard no, the driver standing next to him said, there was a murder yesterday night on that airport shortcut road, near the railway tracks. A police search is on for the killer. *Aiyyo?* Better be on full attention, *kanno.* Hope you have all your car papers? The police are always checking there.

As soon as he heard this, he thought of the man from yesterday's ride with the jet-black eyes. His eyes seemed to glow even on that dark, quiet road. He didn't smile even once and just kept staring at me. He decided to tell the driver standing next to him. You know. Two nights before, there was this fellow coming from the airport. He was one Modi *bhakt*. He kept looking at me in the rear-view mirror, not smiling only. I smiled, he didn't smile. Only staring at me. He was sitting in the back and shouting about politics. He wanted a cigarette. First, I thought I'll finish trip fast but he was getting so angry I felt, so I finally stopped on that road. But then, I was so afraid that I left him smoking there and ran. I told him, I'll make number one and come sir, and then took taxi and came. I looked in the rearview mirror, he was still standing there, smoking. Ganja, he was smoking. He didn't even call me back.

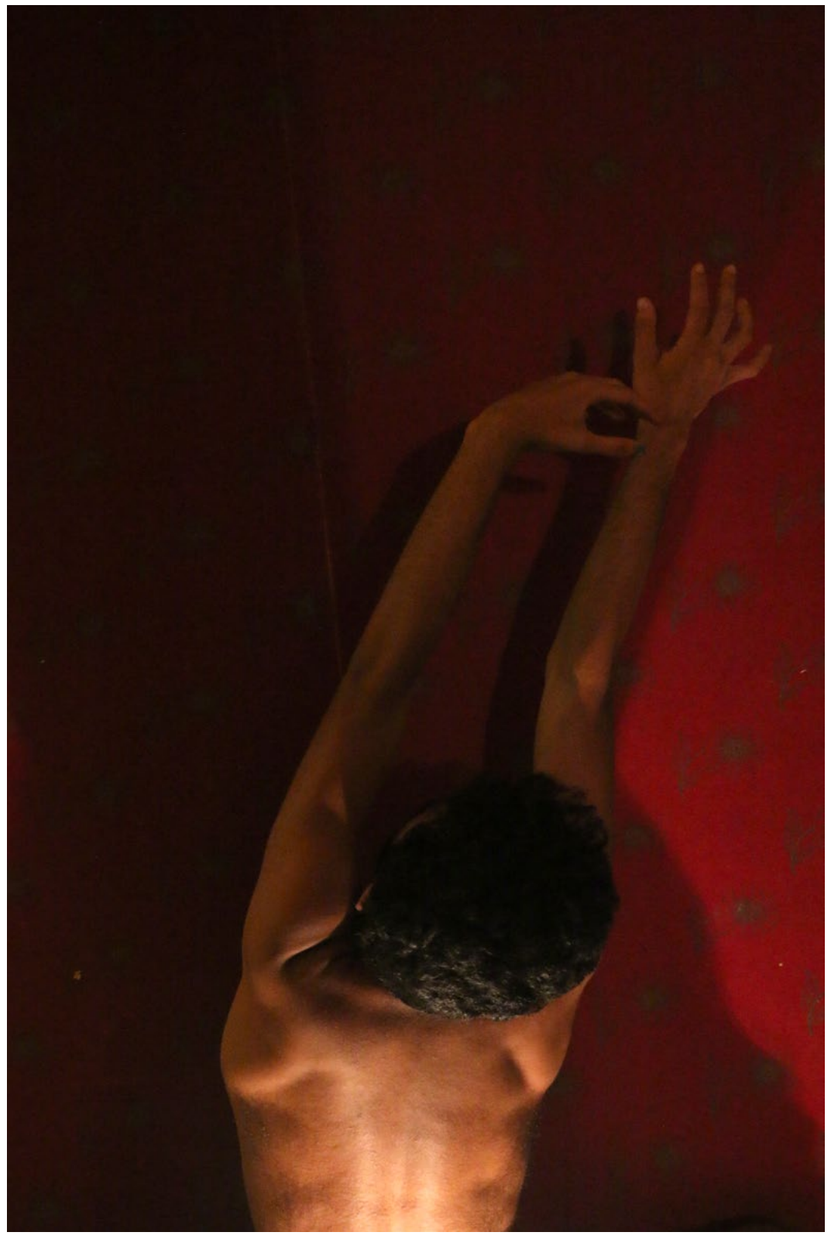
What is even more strange is that he didn't complain and he gave me five stars. Yes, that is strange. Should I tell the police about him? Something was not correct about him. Eh, don't be one super smart fellow. They'll throw you in jail. Police just want to close cases. Rich people are important, even their dead bodies. Do you have lots of money or what? You have money for lawyers? Shut your bum and do your work. Don't take it to heart, *kanno.* I just said it for your own good. Come, come. Don't worry, I'll buy this tea for you. Tea is nice no, It's the sweetest. *Sigona.*

* * * * *

Driving has become boring, but his father was right though, it was a good salary. He didn't like that he'd spent money on his English classes because no one talks anymore. You know, always everyone is looking in their phones, he told his college friend. Listen to the radio, his friend suggested but after six months, all the songs sounded the same. He had tried to tell his college friend about this booking who smelled of jasmine and ganja but he didn't really care for it. He remembered putting the pine car freshener on the AC vents to fight the strong smell. He wanted to tell his friend how and why this booking was interesting, and why it surprised him. He wanted to tell him, he'd turned around to see that he looked just like the aunties with goggles waiting for the rich boys outside his school. But they didn't talk the same anymore. He just sat with his college friend and remembered the conversation with this booking.

Thank you, *saar. Ille* U-turn *madtira? Munde tumba traffic ide.* Coming from party? He had taken out his earphones and put them in his purse. Yes. It was fun. I'd go dancing every night if I had the money. You are from here? You are looking different. Yes, I grew up here. You speak

"HOLY HOLY HOLY"



this way
walk in this line
CHIN UP
DON't sway your hips
SKINNY. deep voices only
weak Weak Weak!
DON'T CRY. LOSER.
INCORRECT.
Laughter laughter laughter!
SCREAM only inside!
Screech, Howls;
cars, trophies, guns and knives
consume, commodify,
Destroy, decay
turn into a parasite
drown, sink, dissolve
ASPHYXIATE!

The Legend of Rani Grace

By **Rashmi Ruth Devadasan**
Illustrated by **Harmeet Rahal**

* **TW** // Kidnapping and Abduction, Death

There was nothing to boast about in Puthuyirpet.

It was a town with a power plant and a population of people that hardly ever left. Rani Grace was the town's gravedigger. It was a job she inherited from her mother. How did that come to pass in an otherwise quiet, mostly traditional place like Puthuyirpet? Well, someone had to bury the dead, and when Rani Grace's grandfather died it had fallen to her young mother to do what had to be done. At first, the people in the town were shocked at having a woman gravedigger. There was lots of loose talk. A council meeting was held. But since no one else came forward to take on the task…

The Grace family home was a modest two-bedroom house built with laterite bricks. It stood at the top of a hill whose gentle slopes were dotted with the graves of people who had died as far back as 250 years ago.

Rani Grace was quite comfortable with death. After all, she had been around it since she was six months old. Her mother had strapped baby Rani Grace to her back in a hardy cotton dupatta and hummed "*Laila oh Laila*" as she dug into the earth to make a rectangular hole that would receive, the next day, a person who was no more. Baby Rani Grace liked the movements of her mother's strong body as she worked – scooping up load after load of loose, damp, fragrant soil and making a large neat mound of it to the side.

Once, at age two, Rani Grace had fallen with a gentle dhap! four feet down onto the lid of a coffin that had been placed there just an hour and a half before. Her mother, who had been about to start covering it with earth, had just turned around for a few minutes to make sure she had brought the right shovel when Rani Grace furiously waddled to the edge and tipped over. She didn't cry; instead she righted herself into a sitting position, and began giggling and playing with the damp soil that had been thrown in as a last farewell by the friends and relatives of the deceased.

As a girl, she always wore the same outfit: single-color knee-length kurtas, with long sleeves folded up to the elbow, and khaki trousers – the former from Khadi Bhavan, the latter from the military surplus store in the next big town. Her hair was thick and short.

By far her most favorite thing to do was to practice digging graves by night while listening to seventies Ilaiyaraaja hits on her Walkman.

On full moon nights when she had finished her daily digging *riyaaz,* she would lie down on the damp earth at the bottom of the hole she'd just dug and stare up at the complete moon in its perfectly rectangular frame. Nothing could top this simple pleasure.

At school, she was quiet and solitary. Not that she was shunned, or anything filmy like that; it was just that Rani Grace was not a "people person".

For her 16th birthday – when most of her peers either got a bicycle, or if they were more well-off, a scooter – Rani Grace was presented with her first spade. She went to the table for breakfast and there it was, wrapped in old National Geographic covers that her mother had meticulously stitched together to make a very large piece of wrapping paper, the size of a single bed sheet.

Rani Grace's mother stood by the kitchen door watching her daughter with a serene smile. She had been feeling unusually tired this past week; just age catching up, she thought. She was proud of her child, who at 16 could dig a grave just as finely as her. Rani Grace of course knew at first sight what was in the package. She sat down at the table and pulled it towards her. She liked how the handle felt through the wrapping.

She carefully unwrapped it and gave a barely audible gasp. It was a fine, full-sized spade. The wooden neck was made from solid, well-aged teak wood. The handle was carved from the femur of a water buffalo, with Rani Grace's name inlaid in the bone in pure silver. The metal blade itself was molded and shaped from top quality steel.

Rani Grace wrapped her hands around the wooden handle. This was *her* spade; she could feel it in her soul. She carefully raised it above her head. She could feel an energy surge through her. Outside, thunder sounded, and lightning flashed across the sky. It was mid-April, a month known for its out-of-the-blue summer storms. Rani Grace rushed out of the house and ran down the hill towards the old jamun tree at the center of the hill of graves.

When she was a meter away from it, the ground gave way beneath her feet, and she fell.

Rani Grace was quite comfortable with death. After all, she had been around it since she was six months old.

Too Many Worlds

By **Tashi Choedup & Dr. Filip Majkowski** // *Illustrated by* **Preetam Dhar**

* **TW** // Homophobia, Abuse, Death

In Dharamsala life is different.

It's a land of great masters, blessed by the sacred teachings of the Buddha.

But there is a darker side to it too.

I saw him. I swear. Or maybe I felt him more. And the cat saw him too. Her fur transformed almost into a hedgehog's needles and her tail got thick like a toilet brush. She froze and refused to go. Then I thought I heard him too. Crying or howling. Or maybe I just imagined things. Your imagination can play tricks on you when you're half asleep.

On this very early morning in the Himalayan village, I was walking with my cat and this half-blind elderly man. The sun did not yet rise but it wasn't dark anymore. The air was crispy fresh and clear but this morning on that road in Gamru for a few moments it became smoky and eerily chilly. People did say this place was haunted but I wouldn't believe them. These things never happened in the Chamba Valley. But this wasn't Chamba. In Dharamsala life is different. It's a land of great masters, blessed by the sacred teachings of the Buddha. But there is a darker side to it too.

Together with the centuries-old statues and images of the most holy beings came also the hounds of Māra, hunting for the weak-hearted and feeble-minded. This land has changed a lot since they arrived – the half-blind uncle told me once. Even Bodhgaya, this holiest of holy places, is said to be located upon the entrance to the darkest of hells. Where there is a blessing, there is a curse.

I was walking with him to the Tibetan Medical Institute. It was perhaps his last chance to save his eyesight. The cat had woken up instantly and followed quietly like a shadow. This renowned doctor was seeing his patients only at five in the morning.
I didn't want to go but I had promised.

As we went down the hill, the dusty village path changed into a proper asphalt road – a very good one, as per Indian standards of course; scattered machines and piles of stones all around. The work hasn't been finished yet. I knew some of those people. They came from distant Chhattisgarh, looking for better money, hoping to escape the escalating tribal violence. They had come with their whole families. Last year I taught their kids math and computers; my small contribution to the glory of India.

I knew that man too – dark, rugged, sweaty road worker. He looked just like everybody else in his team. I would never have paid any attention to him if it hadn't been for this one chilly morning above the Kangra Valley.
I remember I looked at the grey sky and thought to myself: there is no moon, the holy Saka Dawa has just begun. And then I saw him. Or did I first see the cat? I don't know what happened. The old man squeezed my hand harder, he turned his face towards mine and whispered something I could not make out. Time stood still.

Just before the new road made a bent over the next hill, it seemed as if the asphalt moved. For a split second which felt like an eternity, it seemed to change into a flowing river of dark lava. I swear I saw this boy. A youth of maybe seventeen, not more. Wearing a traditional Himachali hat. I could see he was beautiful, with his hazelnut eyes glowing with tears. He came from the road, emerging from the hot asphalt river and seemed to look at something or someone beside our frozen silhouettes.

He stood maybe a hundred meters away and yet in this half-dark hour I could see him very well. He was smiling and wanted to say something. Then apparently changing his mind, he just hung his head and gave a sigh. He then looked up again and opened his mouth. But instead of words there came this cry or a howl that I will never be able to forget. The beautiful eyes instantly filled with terror and just before he covered his face with his hands I could swear he looked at me. The horror in his eyes was the last thing I saw.

The next thing I knew was the cat's pliant body meandering around my ankles. It threw me out of my stupor. The road ahead was empty, not a living thing in sight. The village was still asleep. Maybe I had just hallucinated? Maybe I should not listen to the stories they tell around kitchen tables here. But then I felt the sharp grip on my right hand. I looked at my companion. He had tears in his eyes. He must have seen the boy too. Or did he feel his presence instinctively? He knew the story as well. Everyone knew the story.

Of course people in the village started talking. They said it was love. But how could this be love?

How could it be in India?

There was no room for such a thing in this land of tradition.

Two years ago, they say, workers from Chhattisgarh had started constructing this village road. Five men and their wives toiling in the heat of a pre-monsoon sun. A common picture you can see anywhere in India. One of the men worked a little apart, hardly speaking to the others. They said he was a loner; he had always been like that. He did not talk much; he did not often share lunch with his companions or even his wife. He preferred to stay away.

But there was someone he did talk to. One boy from the village. Nobody knew why.
No one knew what they talked about – they always kept it to themselves. The boy would come to see him every morning when he was on his way to school and in the evening when he was returning home. And this rugged Chhattisgarh road worker seemed to enjoy his company a lot. His face would light up and they would spend whatever little time they had together. Always aside. Just the two of them.

Of course people in the village started talking. They said it was love. But how could this be love? How could it be in India? There was no room for such a thing in this land of tradition. First, they started laughing, then they pointed their fingers. But these two seemed not to care.

The growing whispers of the villagers and the people around did not bother either of them and their relationship continued to become more intimate with each passing day. Engrossed in each other's company, they paid no attention to the hostile environment that was building around them. But the comments of different people, including her fellow co-workers started troubling the wife. Her disappointment of not having children years after the marriage seemed to have found a reason. She felt very wronged and hurt for receiving the blame of not being able to conceive children for so long. One evening after work, she confronted her husband at their settlement as their fellow community people watched on.

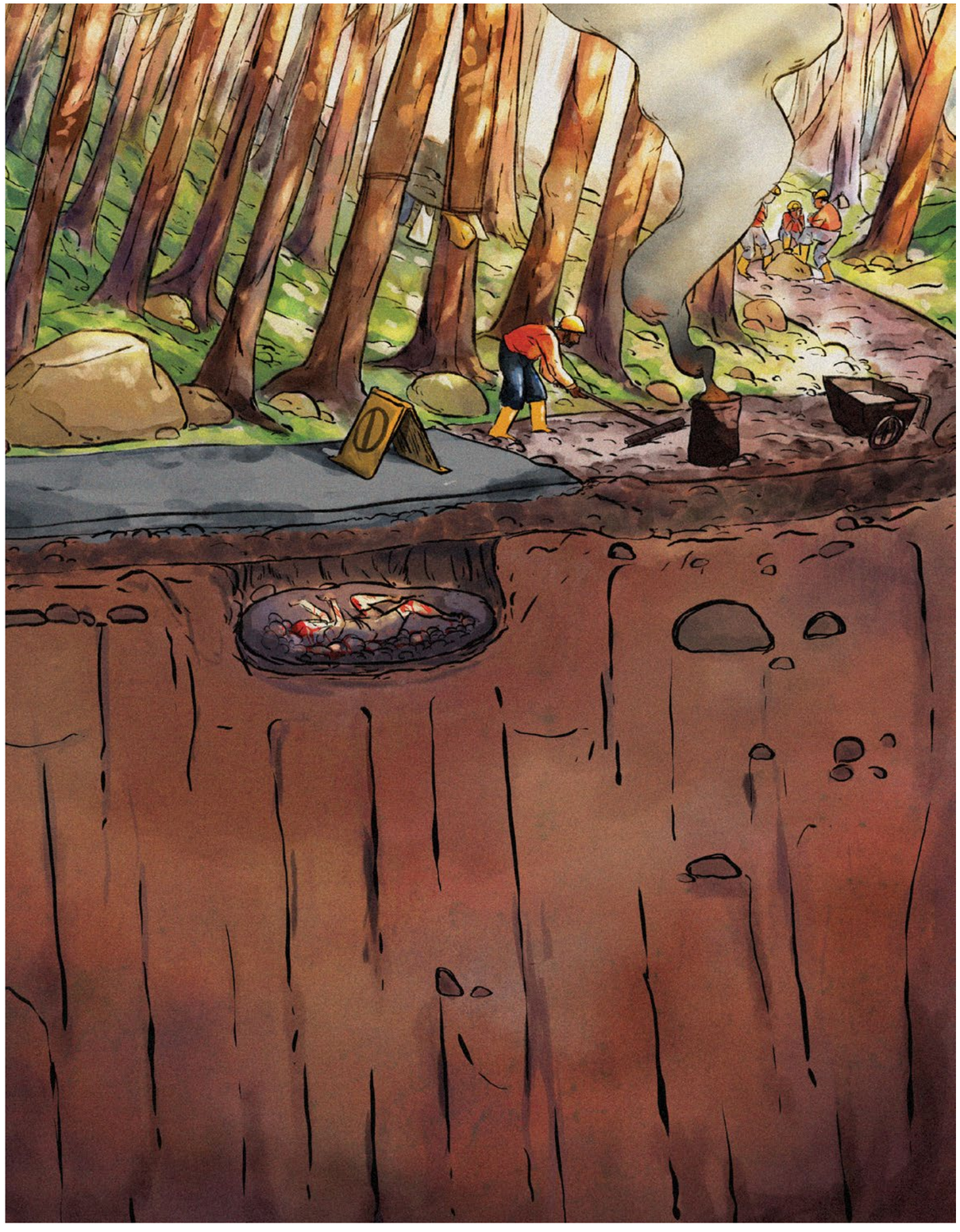
She questioned him directly about his interest in the young boy, to which she only received his silence in response, as if he didn't hear anything. On being asked repeatedly, he yelled that it was none of her business and went to sleep.

Feeling humiliated, deceived and hurt, she couldn't sleep all night. First thing in the morning, she called home and explained everything that had been happening. Following this, her two brothers with three other men from her village, Marnapur, took the next train and arrived at her place. The husband was surprised by their sudden visit but did not worry himself too much about it. The presence of her brothers and their assurances relieved her a little. They promised her that they would do everything necessary to save her marriage. In the next couple of days, after assessing the situation in order to make true of their promise they decided to get rid of the boy.

And one day the tragedy happened.
One evening, after their usual meeting, the boy bid good-bye and headed back home. That particular night it was darker than usual, but as it was the usual path he would take home every day it did not concern him until when out of nowhere four strange looking men appeared and blocked his way.

Even before he could ask who they were, another man hit him on the head from behind and made sure he lost consciousness. As per their plan, they quietly carried the body to the place where the new road was being laid.

While one of them watched over the unconscious boy, the rest quickly dug a grave deep enough to bury him. As soon as the digging was done, they tied the hands and legs of the boy and buried him alive in the middle of the path. To make sure the body would never be discovered, they laid a layer of road that very night without wasting any time.



Like any other day after work, the man went to their regular meeting spot to spend the evening with the boy. The evening began to turn into the night but there was no sign of the boy; there was an unfamiliar sense of fear and pain in his heart. Not able to wait any longer, he started walking to the village to see him. On his way, he heard several villagers talking about the boy, that he had been missing from the night before and didn't return home. They were also talking in a suspicious tone about the road worker the boy used to hang out with.

Before people could point out fingers at him, he disappeared from there and quickly got to his settlement. There, he spotted his wife and her brothers talking in a celebratory mood. The place was so dark, that he hardly could see their faces, but the voices were clear enough for him to recognize that it was his wife and her brothers. Unaware of his arrival they continued talking.

'Sister, you do not need to worry anymore.

We took care of the problem; there will be no one between you and your husband anymore.'

'What are you saying? My husband is never going to love me and give me a child as long as that devilish boy keeps corrupting him!'

'That won't be a problem anymore;
the boy has been taken care of.'
'What do you mean?'

'Don't bother yourself about the details, Sister. It is done. Now focus on your marriage and your husband.'

'We must take your leave; we need to catch the next train. Good-bye! You take care.'

Like any other day after work, the man went to their regular meeting spot to spend the evening with the boy.

The evening began to turn into the night but there was no sign of the boy.

As they departed from there, the man began to make sense of their conversation, which left him heartbroken and flooded with guilt. He couldn't move a step forward towards his home and face his wife. With all that grief, he turned back and walked into the mountains, never to return.

Since that day, it is believed that this place has been haunted by the cries of that dead boy.

Did I dream all that? How could I know this? I don't believe in ghosts.

My half-blind companion grabbed my hand more firmly and we walked on passing this creepy little place. And then I knew.

Blind men may not necessarily see what we see but they can see through walls and worlds… //

Triumph XX: Dharma

By **Shweta Narayan** *// Illustrated by* **Annada Menon**

* **TW** // Homophobia, Abuse, Self-harm

I file my claws down, gouge out every scale
scratch off the skin that doesn't want to shed;
I've pried the living gemstone from my head
defanged myself with braces, split my tail.
With fear's barbed wire I've bound this fluid frame
to silence, stasis, passing. I confess
I'm not convinced that speaking out hurts less
(you serpent, monster, freak) than acting tame.
So this split tongue sounds foreign to my ear
I shuffle round on knives that pass for feet
and gasp, ill-made, for air to shape deceit:
I'm straight. I'm fine. I'm what they want to hear.
This pain I know. I guess at what they'd say
or do, and rip the scales out one more day.

Spoils of War

By Tora * TW // Violence

'...nothing had changed, not even their faces
they looked the same, yet insisted they were different
comrades, bloodied and exhausted,
they drew their swords once again
this time, facing each other...'

INR 500

ISSN 2350-0425
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