

I'll do, I'll do and I'll do

It was a colonial sort of thing to do, I suppose – sit by the French windows in the reading room of the Royal Bengal Club and read your Shakespeare. Outside a muslin mist rose from the Hooghly, but your mind was full of the ‘Quality of Mercy’ speech which had been dinned into you as the most poignant bit of persuasion you could ever expect to find – and never east of the Suez.

We should have got over the Empire after twenty years of Independence. But we hadn't. Andrilla said that it was a carefully cultivated hangover and we'd never get over what we didn't want to.

Andrilla was my cousin on my late mother's side – sinuous, black as a switch and eyes like shadows on slate. Her teeth came as a surprise of white when her lips parted which they often did in laughter when she was with me. Both of us loved Shakespeare and I knew that she loved me to bits in spite of one of my legs being crippled by polio.

We had played ‘Shakespeare Games’ since we were thirteen. One of them was ‘Lady Macbeth’. It was set in the twentieth century, on Harley Street. It *had* to be Harley, you understand. I was always the ‘Doctor’ and the mysterious ‘Lady M’ was my patient. I'd take the case history:

Name?

Lady M.

Gender?

Indeterminate.

Meaning what?

Meaning neither male nor female, doctor. I've been e-feminated. That's why I have no heart, see, in this breast of mine. No feelings at all. Empty, that's what I am. Nothing at all, doctor – *except for the ideas inside my head.*

And what ideas are these, Lady M?

Just this, doctor.

Then Andrilla would make a clever little movement, a kind of sleight of hand and swish out an imaginary dagger and go for where both of us thought my jugular was located. I would thrash about and choke and then go stiff and still. Andrilla would laugh throatily like they did in second rate horror movies and say, ‘Yet who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him.’

Some years later I learnt where the jugular was when I joined Calcutta Medical College. Andrilla and I met on the weekends, when I could spare the time, and walked slowly down to the

Shalimar and had tea or just spent the evening at the Royal Bengal as I'm doing now, waiting for the inevitable and thinking out the answers I'll be called upon to give.

It was on one of those walks that we met an itinerant Romani woman who insisted that I cross her palm with silver and that she would tell me my future. I picked out an eight anna coin and she studied my lines of fortune carefully. 'You will be a rich man – very rich. In your hand I see vast land in the 24 Parganas. And I see a woman. Oyee! Oyee! It is a lal daag! A red spot!'

'Meaning love – or what?' I demanded to know.

But with a flash of slant eyes she had disappeared into the gathering shadows of Mayo Street.

'*Another* woman in your life?' Andrilla asked archly, trying to curl into my side as we went along.

'Why – who's the first?'

'Me, of course!' and she kissed me full on the mouth sending the Bengali babu types who worked in the nearby railway offices scattering for shelter.

'You believe in this sort of thing, Vaskar? This Romani business?'

'I believe in good fortune certainly, Andrilla. I don't know about fortune tellers. I believe in making my own.'

I was specializing in neurology. It was central neuropathy that interested me most – what happened to people's brains and spinal cords when someone slugged them with bullets or sank a knife into them, or when they were in a car crash. I had already decided to take the Fellowship in England and if it just couldn't be Harley, it would be a practice in the fashionable Thomas Cook building on Calcutta's Roy Sircar Avenue.

I didn't tell Andrilla that day, I wouldn't even admit it to myself, that the old Romani hag had set me thinking about my aunt, Binodini Dey and her extensive property in the 24 Parganas. She hadn't any children of her own – her nearest of kin were my cousin Protap Chandrasen and me, and she had made it clear that the land would be divided between us, neatly down the middle. But one day, I remember turning to Andrilla and whispering, 'Would you say, Lady M, that I suffer from vaulting ambition to want all that property of Aunt Binodini's for a noble cause - my career in neuropathy? After all, what will Protap ever need it for except to finance his next joint of hashish?'

Protap was a waster, hooked on hashish and addicted to addas, those unspeakable eateries where he hung about with other wasters who dignified themselves with the label 'Marxists'. 'What do Marxists want with money anyway, eh M?'

Andrilla smiled sweetly at me and recited, “Only look up clear. To alter favour ever is to fear: Leave all the rest to me.” I took her up into my arms, crumpled her against my chest and this time *I* kissed her in public.

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So that’s what I’ll tell them – all about my cousin Andrilla. I’ve got her diary written in her own hand, and her case history file right here with me. May be her story is best told as she put it down.

July 27th ’66: My left hand did it again. Speak of having a mind of its own...It prevented me from picking out the sari of my choice. Snatched it out of my good old right hand and put it firmly back in the wardrobe. Chose a garish red one instead. Must tell Vaskar about this new development.

July 30th ’66: Vaskar gave me a referral to Calcutta’s most eminent neuropathologist, Dr Alok Sengupta. His diagnosis confirmed Vaskar’s worst fears. It seems that I now suffer from a rare disorder - Alien Hand or Dr Strangelove Syndrome. They both of them agree that it is the result of the injury I suffered a year ago because of the car crash I was in. I have the diagnosis typed out in my case file:

The patient sustained anteromedial frontal lobe injury in a road traffic accident resulting in trauma leading to movements that are often exploratory in nature. External objects are frequently grasped at and utilized functionally without the simultaneous perception on the part of the patient that she is in control of such movements. Once an object has been acquired and is maintained in the grasp of the patient’s hand, she exhibits difficulty with voluntarily releasing the object from grasp and can sometimes be seen to be peeling the fingers of the hand off the grasped object using the opposite controlled hand to enable the release. This tonic grasping or instinctive grasp reaction or magnetic apraxia is consistent with a diagnosis of Alien Hand Syndrome.

Ha! The upshot of this is that I am not responsible for my own actions, it seems. But seriously speaking, it’s not funny. Right now leftie is snatching hold of the pen to prevent my right hand from recording his (?) misdemeanours. Shoo there, leftie! Go away, naughty hand. Nau----

Aug 15th ’66: I haven’t slept properly for a week. To cheer me up Vaskar took me on a long drive along the Esplanade. For a diversion, we decided to see who could recite more from Shakespeare. Vaskar began with ‘Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?’ It’s my favourite. I always maintain that I am a ‘darling bud of May’ my having been born on the eighteenth of the month. Then I recited ‘All the world’s a stage’.

But when we passed the traffic lights at Burra Park, disaster struck. Or almost. I suddenly became aware of my left hand sneaking along in the darkness of the car interior and making for Vaskar's throat. Not his throat really, but the gold chain and medallion he always wears around his neck. Before either of us knew it the fingers had a stranglehold on the chain and Vaskar was choking – this time for real. It was almost ten at night and the streets were deserted, so no help was forthcoming. I tried prising away leftie's fingers with my right hand then fortunately the chain gave. It was all that Vaskar could do to prevent himself from losing control of the wheel. I can't bear to record the details of what followed. Just the half comic bit about Vaskar holding my hands in an iron grip and kissing away my tears, then telling me to sit hard on my left hand while we sped home.

Sept. 1st '66: Vaskar and I spent the evening at the Royal Bengal. We walked about the old place. Leftie behaved himself till I felt him quietly trying to nick off my pearl earrings. I was naturally distraught. Vaskar tried to cheer me up. He said 'How about another Shakespeare challenge? What'll you be?'

'Infirm of purpose,' I responded, 'Give me the daggers: the sleeping and the dead are but as pictures.'

Then it started drizzling and we made for home in Vaskar's car. As we passed by one of those down at heel addas off Lower Banerjee Road, the headlights of Vaskar's car picked out the figure of a man. He was little more than a perambulating skeleton with a cigarette hanging out between his lips. Yellowed skin of someone who has chronic liver failure. Vaskar suddenly exclaimed, 'Did you see him? That guy we just passed on the road. Know who he is?' I shook my head. 'That's my cousin on my father's side – the Marxist Champion of the Addas. Delighted to introduce you to Protap Chandrasen, joint heir with me for Aunt Binodini's land.'

I turned back to look at the waxen figure quickly disappearing from view. 'Where on earth does he live, Vaskar?'

'In *Gul Mohur* that dilapidated tenement in front of which we saw him.'

Nothing more to pen tonight. I am still depressed. Vaskar's suggested I get a prescription from Dr Sengupta to help me handle these sleepless nights. Ah! The shadows lengthen. Let's hope this is the darkest hour before dawn.

Sept 20th'66: The chloral's working well – so far. Soothes my nerves and sweetens my sleeps. Haha! I'm beginning to sound like Lady M. I don't mind. Sometimes I think Vaskar likes me best as Mrs. Macbeth. I don't mind being anything that Vaskar likes. ANYTHING.

Oct. 15th '66: Almost a month since my last entry. It's just this listlessness that fills me, combined with leftie's increasingly bad behaviour. On my last consultation with Dr Sengupta, he (leftie) reached across and began unbuttoning the good doctor's shirt. The man did not know

whether to have a fit or write a paper about me. That's what he told Vaskar. Vaskar's a junior colleague of his now at the medical college hospital. And, of course, he's monitoring his lady love through Dr Sengupta.

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Andrilla seems to have made no more entries for over six months. I could see the changes wrought by chloral and one or two other prescription drugs in my dark cousin. The gloom hung about her like a thing of the night. And all the while she craved for more. I'll tell the Police Inspector that: *Mental confusion, stupor, even sleep walking are the side effects of the medication that Andrilla Mukherjee was on, Inspector Saab. There's evidence you will find and Dr Sengupta's testimony to support it.*

Ah, here she goes again; May 2nd '67 – only a month and a half ago.

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May 2nd '67: Vaskar called up this morning. Not sure he did. Just think so. Sometimes I can't tell the days apart, or night from day, or sleep from waking. They all seem so...so crepuscular. Jostling, pushing one another in the twilight. So I can't tell whether I slept and dreamt it all. But Vaskar said something about something. Yes – it was about his Aunt B. Damn! I can't remember her name. He said the old lady's worried about Protap. He's been visiting her and asking urgently for money. So she told Vaskar that she was selling off a good bit of prime land so that Protap can live decently. Someone's almost living on the pavement. It can't be the aunt so it must be the nephew, Protap. My mind's like overcooked porridge.

May 28th '67: I'm an old woman now. I feel an old, old woman. Sometimes I think: just cut off leftie; cut my losses. I had an evil dream last night – I went into the kitchen and found the sharpest of them, butcher glint-bladed thing. Then I tried to amputate leftie. But he was too strong for me, too bloody cunning. Then I awoke and found leftie was lying still and innocent as newborn calf. Quiet on my pillow.

I mustn't sleep! I mustn't! Sleep must be murdered.

I think I'm losing grip.

June 14th '67: Now there are whispers inside my head. Like conspirators in conference. I still don't know whether I sleep or wake. I only know that I'd been walking in the rain with something whispering in my ear: 'Go on, Lady Macbeth! Rehearse your lines for the murder scene. It's Act II Scene II, today, remember?'

I heard myself intoning, 'Come thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell ---'

Then hissing in my ear, 'You've forgotten your lines again, Andrilla! Practice! Practice! Tomorrow's the final performance!'

Good God! It was me out there playing Lady Macbeth, in the dead of night, on Lower Banerjee Road!

June 15th '67: I didn't do it! I DIDN'T! I'll tell them when they come for me. I'll tell them that it was the whisper in my head leading me down the alleyways into a tenement building. My mind was walking behind me and whispering things in my ears.

The corridors were narrow, damp and fetid. Like the entrails of a strange animal. A door opened, a curtain was drawn aside and I entered. I heard the voice say, 'Go on, good luck my Lady Macbeth. Shake the boards! Take the audience by storm! Good luck, dear girl! And oh yes, break a leg!'

This time it was a dagger in my right hand – a glittering Nepalese thing from my own drawing room wall. And a figure huddled under the bedclothes. Someone was playing Duncan so well.

But I couldn't! I just couldn't! Not even for a performance I'd dreamed up in my head. I turned back to the wings. But the prompter murmured, 'Go right back there and do your part. The dagger's only a prop. And it's only a dummy in that bed. '...the sleeping and the dead are but as pictures.' Remember your Shakespeare? Just pretend you're amputating leftie....'

You can't escape your mind, can you? So I went.

Good God in Heaven, I went!

I don't know much of what happened in my dream play after that. I only know that it's now the morning of the fifteenth of June 1967 and I am – I think I am - awake.

Vaskar's call awoke me. He said very quietly, 'My cousin Protap Chandrasen was found murdered in his bed in the *Gul Mohur*. I've been over to identify the body at the police morgue. Good God, Andrilla! Who would have thought the guy had so much blood in him!'

I don't know what he said next. The telephone is hanging by its wire. I've been washing my hands, and my nails and underneath them. But I can still smell the...

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Of course, that was Andrilla's last entry. That evening I told her I was picking her up and that she'd better tell me everything she had done. She'd better come clean. We went for a long slow walk along that lonely stretch of the Sonepara, a babbling brook that feeds the Hooghly. Andrilla was a throbbing bundle of nerves as she laid her head against my chest and told me all. Then she looked up with her shadows-on-slate eyes and said, 'They'll get me soon, Vaskar. Aren't you afraid of associating with me? I'll be hanged, won't I, for the murder of Protap Chandrasen? Lady M on death row. Or at very least a lifer? But you will stand by me and love me always, just like you do now?'

I can still hear her plea and my own whispered response, ‘Lady M’s played herself out. She’s dead, Andrilla. Play Ophelia now. Remember, Andrilla, **you’re Ophelia**. *Get thee to a nunnery! I say, we will have no more marriages. Those that are married already - all but one - shall live; the rest shall keep as they are. To a nunnery, go. Exit.*’

And she turned on her heel and ran sobbing into the darkness. I couldn’t run fast enough after her on only one good leg, could I? So by the time I caught up with her she was floating serenely, face downwards, where the Sonepara meets the Hooghly.
