

**A Death
in
Shonagachhi**

a novel

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LALÉE HAD LEARNED THE WORD ‘PHANTASY’. FOR REASONS HE couldn’t articulate, this made Tilu very jealous. Tilu Shau – obscure writer of erotic fiction – had been visiting Lalee for almost six months now, on every second Wednesday, given his book sales and assorted hustling yielded enough cash for him to afford Lalee’s door fees. He was a slight man, and nothing much to look at. It didn’t matter to him now, but he still remembered all those little ways his heart had sunk when he was a schoolboy and a pretty girl wouldn’t deign to give him a second glance. Especially now, as Lalee stood leaning on her door frame, smoking a cigarette, face averted from him.

Not too long ago, he had read a book on the mysteries of the human psyche. Everything, it said, had its origin in childhood. And though Tilu couldn’t fault his mother for more than an occasional smack across the head and a haphazard sort of neglect, he understood that now it was de rigueur to blame mothers for one’s adult failings. He, therefore, speculated that his troubles began with his mother not being able to remember exactly when, during her two-day labour pains, the tiny, wrinkled body of Trilokeshwar Shau had touched the earth. Or, that he didn’t quite touch the earth, but plopped unceremoniously into the hands of the buxom nurse with the prominent rabbit teeth who

scrunched up her nose and, pressing her front teeth down on her lower lip, said 'Eh ma' in a nasal falsetto, before holding him up for his mother's benefit, who, he was led to believe, had croaked a little. Such was the music of his passage onto this earth, and had set the background score for the rest of his life. His father was proud of him nonetheless – first male heir and so on. Parental pride had eventually given way to bitter disappointment, but at the time of his birth, overcome with emotion, his father foisted upon him the name 'Trilokeshwar' – god of three realms. The family name, however, could not be remedied. Still, there were all kinds of benefits in being low caste these days. At least he'd get a government job through some well-meaning quota, Tilu's father had thought.

Not only did Tilu fail spectacularly at getting that government job, but he also started writing erotic novellas at a dangerously tender age. As it happened, Tilu Shau wanted to put his theoretical knowledge to practical use. Since he was no prince, had no idea how to talk to women and possessed all the charm of a leftover roti, the usual routes of courtship normally earned him one brandished slipper and a volley of threats from both the object of his attentions and all the local thugs, dadas and old coots of her neighbourhood. After some stellar fiascos, Tilu did what every failed Romeo did in Calcutta. One early evening, clad in a mostly white pyjama-panjabi, Tilu stood in front of the Dinatarini Maa Kali temple and mumbled 'Ma, Ma' a few times before hitting his forehead thrice in quick succession on the grime-plated sacred floor. He walked purposely to the half-broken, non-AC Baroda Bank ATM and withdrew a conservative amount of cash, hiding it surreptitiously in the right front pocket of his Rupa briefs. He looked around himself, but grown men with hands inside their pants was such a commonplace scene in metropolitan Calcutta that no one had paid him any attention.

His first time in Shonagachhi was an adventure and a battle that had led him to Lalee's door. Tilu hadn't looked back. That was a long time ago. And now, Lalee had gone ahead and learned the word 'phantasy'. It was the way her mouth arranged itself when she said it, how she ducked her chin as she moved her neck to a decidedly sexual angle, the curl of the upper lip, a momentary half sneer baring an incisor. It beguiled Tilu. Lalee made him pay for what she called the 'Phantasy Speshaal' before letting him through the door.

'Since when?' he asked. After all, he had been coming to Lalee for quite a few months now. Every second Wednesday like clockwork, and whenever he had a small windfall. But today when he arrived, at 7 p.m. on the dot, Lalee turned up her nose (the gall of the woman!), and dragged on her cigarette. And said he needed to pay extra for what he was about to do. This was an outrage. He'd been on the special rate for returning customers, and now this. Almost double. The bitch!

'Why?' he asked, and she said, 'Phantasy sex will cost you more.' Tilu hadn't realized until then that his particular sexual predilections came under 'fantasy' ratings. He decided not to quibble over Lalee's pronunciation. If she wanted to replace her F's with Ph's, that was her business entirely. But Lalee went on to give him the breakdown of her new rates: Fantasy Mild, Fantasy Special and Fantasy Double-decker. He was almost sure she was making this up, but arguing with Lalee was not the way he wanted his evening to go. In the ensuing silence when Tilu was afraid to ask what this last package entailed, Lalee took the opportunity to inform him that what he had been doing all along would very much attract the Fantasy Special rate and that he owed about a few thousands in back pay. Tilu Shau's heart sank to his stomach. He had always known that his pocket and his penis shared a magical connection. When he got paid, days few and

far between, he was always quite tangibly delighted to meet her.

This, coupled with the look of unmitigated awe that glazed Tilu's eyes every time he sneaked a look at Lalee's bursting décolletage (not that Shau was aware of it, but women are good at noticing things like this, collecting them and storing them away for future use), encouraged Lalee to feel a sense of unprecedented control and power over him. Consequently, she had no respect for him. Tilu assumed that his loyalty would flatter Lalee. But his romantic devotion had backfired. Although Lalee herself was enough to give Tilu a lifetime's worth of erections, it was the thoughtfulness behind his preparations that should have earned him some special treatment if there was any justice in the world. Sadly, there wasn't. And Lalee treated Tilu with the contempt of the strong towards the weak. She didn't have to please him. She only had to drop the end of her saree and there he would be, saluting away to her glory. Her indifference burned a hole in Tilu's heart. But it had never stung as much as it did that evening, when, bold as brass, sucking on that cigarette, she demanded double the rate. Fucking fantasy! This was the problem with English words – you stuck one on and it started costing fucking more. He tried to put it out of his mind, but in the middle of a particularly stinging larrup, his heart started hurting. All these months of nothing but the utmost loyalty, yet not even a 5 percent discount. And then came the jealousy, not in a tidal wave as he had feared, but trickling in like the dripping of the leaking tap he heard every morning and every night in the dump he called home. 'Who taught you this word?' She said it was none of his business.

This was not a good answer at the time. Tilu was slipping off character. 'Which sonofamotherfuckingbitch taught you that word?' She hedged. She told him he must pay for what he got, that nothing was free in the world. Nobody did it better than her. Tilu knew this was true. She was hiding one fact with another.

How come this had never occurred to her before? She was happy enough to do what he wanted for the regular fee. Until now. She gripped his balls in a vice. Tilu whimpered. There were tears in his eyes as Lalee's face remained frozen in contempt. He no longer knew if he was crying from pleasure or pain. Why did he have to love a nasty bitch? He could have eaten better with the money. Lord knows there wasn't much of it. Under his leaky roof, on rainy days he was forced to move the bed around in a room that couldn't hold two lizards at the same time. He felt sad for himself. Someone, after all, had to. Unsure and out of breath, he shouted at her, '*Khaanki maagi, chutiya magi* – whore.' She slapped him before grabbing him by the neck. In the heart of his rage and bubbling self-pity, Tilu Shau was intensely aware of her beauty; it pierced through the fog of his pain.

She was riding him like the autumnal goddess rides her lion, him – Trilokeshwar Shau – the poorest excuse for anything. She was resplendent. Her black-and-brown skin glistened, dark coils of oiled hair reached down her back and spilled onto his navel, her breasts hung loose as she moved. She went for his throat and bit as if to draw blood, pressing tighter and tighter. He couldn't breathe. She smiled as though it was an act of mercy. She might have loosened a tooth with that slap. The traitor in him whispered that double the rate was, after all, worth it. In pain and pleasure Tilu Shau whimpered and sighed, but someone a wall's width away started screaming absolute bloody murder.



Lalee bolted from her perch faster than a fourteen-year-old's ejaculation. Confused and almost climaxing, Tilu had to remember to breathe. He followed Lalee as she walked out the door, hastily wrapping a loose robe around her body. Tilu stood

at the doorway naked and dazed, Lalee's back blocking his view. Then he saw the blood trickling in a line slowly towards Lalee's feet. She turned around and pushed him aside. 'Get the fuck out of here, now,' she hissed at his face, open-mouthed like a dead fish on the monger's slab. 'NOW!' A few people had begun to gather. He grabbed his clothes and ran out of Lalee's hovel, embarrassed and terrified. Stark naked, clothes gathered at his chest, Trilokeshwar Shau hurtled down Lalee's street before disappearing into the even darker alleys of Shonagachhi.

What had happened exactly? He was too scared of Lalee to ask. He felt ashamed at his own lack of courage, of manhood, his inability to face a difficult situation. He realized that even though it was cold and he was naked, and running down the streets of a whore pit, after being packed off by a woman he undeniably and hopelessly loved, he still had a raging erection. He also realized in the burnt-out bottom of his tattered heart that if Lalee was somehow in trouble, he'd fail her. He stopped and fell to his knees. Alone and crouching, Tilu Shau came, and then he cried a little for himself in the streets of Shonagachhi on that sultry, stifling June night.