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The Dancing Policeman and Other Stories

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

THE DANCING POLICEMAN AND OTHER STORIES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Satyaki Kanjilal

2019

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Satyaki Kanjilal, and entitled *The Dancing Policeman and Other Stories*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

John Dufresne

Maneck Daruwala

Lynne Barrett , Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 5, 2019

The thesis of Satyaki Kanjilal is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences, and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2019

DEDICATION

For

Santwana Kanjilal

&

Samir Kumar Kanjilal

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Lynne Barrett for her constant guidance and support. I could not have finished this project without her.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
THE DANCING POLICEMAN AND OTHER STORIES

by

Satyaki Kanjilal

Florida International University, 2019

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

The Dancing Policeman and Other Stories depicts characters facing challenges in societies undergoing economic and social change.

“Faithful Naren” is set in early 20th century West Bengal, while “Sabotage” shows the situation of a teenager there in the 1960s. Others take place in a present India where past practices persist, including official corruption in “Shit Gibbon” and the selling of a daughter into prostitution in “Road to Gede.”

Crossing cultural and national lines leads to conflicting expectations. In “Bloom,” an Indian student in Reno, Nevada learns lessons about empathy and how to face shame, while the American-born protagonist of “Rob, the Savior” confronts the religious ritual of animal sacrifice in his ancestors’ home village.

Whether struggling to survive in a changing hometown or learning the ways of a distant new one, the characters in The Dancing Policeman and Other Stories explore the boundaries of what it means to be human.

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Road to Gede

12 January 2017

21 Atul Sen Road
Kamurpur Village
West Bengal,
India.

Dear Mr. S.K. Das,

You don't know me. I want to make sure you'll get this letter in time. It will cost me over five hundred rupees to send you this letter through speed post. I write this letter because I believe that you must know a girl. Maybe you're even related to her. Her name was Kaberi Das. I don't know how old she was, but I guess she was in her twenties. She is dead. I don't know when she died, but she is dead. I know that for sure. It is urgent that you get to the provincial town of Barrackpore. Her body is in the district morgue. It will be there for fourteen days. If no one claims her body, it will be cremated without proper funeral rites. Those bodies are burnt in the district incinerators without priests reciting the final hymns over the dead. No one deserves that. Not even prostitutes. Yes, I know that she used to work in Natihati's red light quarters. Even prostitutes deserve proper cremation when they die. So please claim her body and see to it that she gets proper cremation.

Yours faithfully,

A good wisher

15 January 2017

21 Atul Sen Road

Kamurpur Village
West Bengal,
India.

Dear Mr. S.K. Das,

I heard that you hadn't claimed the body yet. I sent you the letter three days ago, and I spent good money on that postage. Do you really want her body to stay in that awful morgue? I've heard that no matter how many disinfectants you use, you can't get rid of the smell of the rotting corpses. The dead bodies there are either bruised, or burned, or bloated, or stitched up. No one deserves to rot in a morgue like that. Don't you know a stranger can't cremate her? Her soul would keep wandering and won't find peace if a relative does not cremate her. I'm sure you must know this. If you don't claim her body, you'll regret that for the rest of your life. Trust me, I know it.

If you are wondering who I am, it won't do you any good to know my identity. Just so that you know, I think it was 5 am in the morning on January 11. Maybe it was 4 am. I'm not sure about the time. The time doesn't matter anyways. I was out on my morning walk by the river Ganges that morning. I like watching the sun rise behind the huge high rises of town Chinsurah. That's on the side of the river Ganges. I like to walk before the din and bustle of the town picks up. Before hawkers start to peddle their wares in the streets and commuters rush to take a ferry, a train or a bus to get to their office. Before laborers curse at those who get in their way while they heave and huff with heavy loads on their back. I love to just walk by the river and breathe the air before I start my day. My day is full with listening to nagging customers at my grocery store who keep asking for more credits.

It's weird at home too. You see, my wife and I don't talk much. Are you married, Mr. Das? If you are, you know how painful it is when a couple is married but don't love each other. My wife and I just tolerate each other. The happiest moment of my life is when I go out for a walk in the morning.

There's hardly people in streets, very few solitary souls like me walk by the river that early in the morning. I hear sparrows chirp, doves coo, and maybe crows caw in my walks.

But I heard no such thing on the morning of January 11.

It was a foggy morning, and even early birds were silent that day. I could barely see what lay two yards ahead of me. You see, there is this soccer field where I used to play as a kid. I used to be quite popular in school and college as a soccer player. I was so good that I had a shot at becoming a professional soccer player for a club in the Indian super league. I tore a ligament during a college soccer match, and that was the end of my dreams. That soccer field reminds me of my good times as a soccer player in high school. So I was walking on the morning of January 11. I was wearing a monkey cap and a gray sweater.

My wife hates that sweater, so I wear it whenever I get a chance. You know, just to make her mad.

As I walked on the soccer field by the river bank, I thought I saw someone lying down. It was odd because the drunks in the town usually sleep on the main street. It gets cold by the river at night. When I bent over, I could see that it was the body of a girl and she was dead. Her eyes seemed to have bulged out of her sockets. Her hair was unkempt, and her red saree was disheveled. I almost screamed out loud, but I just couldn't. I found

my throat dry, and my stomach churned. I had seen her last week. She was waiting for the customers on the streets in the red light area. Now she had a gold chain with a locket on it. There was a jute sack lying close to her body. I don't know what got into me, but I searched it. I found a sealed transparent plastic packet that contained a bunch of unopened letters.

I know how the police work in the town. I have to pay them "protection" money every month. They extort from all common businessfolk and are in cahoots with the politicians. I knew they wouldn't care about a whore and would dump her body in the morgue. Someone should take care of her body. I noticed those letters. I thought if I informed someone perhaps her body would be taken care of. I looked around. No one was in sight. I took the chain from her neck and the packet of letters with me and hurried home. I kept looking back to make sure no one spotted me. The fog helped, and I didn't hear anyone raise the alarm.

My wife and our maid servant were still sleeping when I got back. I turned on the light and slumped down in a chair. I noticed your name and address on the first letter in the packet and wrote you my letter. I haven't read any of those letters. I will mail you the gold chain and the packet after you have claimed her body. Her body was found later that day by a fisherman. I heard she was strangled and the police have written off her death as a random act of violence.

Please, you have got to claim her body from the morgue before they dispose of her without proper funeral rites. You cannot let her soul wander in the afterlife without finding peace.

Yours sincerely,

A good wisher

P.S. I wonder why you didn't open her letters. For Kaberi's sake, I hope you open my letter. Her soul needs to find some peace. In this town, life as a prostitute is very hard.

18 January 2017

21 Atul Sen Road
Kamurpur Village
West Bengal,
India.

Mr. Sucharan K. Das,

Kaberi's body is still in the district morgue. If you are wondering about me, then I'll have you know that I am a resident of Natihati. Some of our town whores buy their supplies from me. Some of my other customers have objected and complained that I shouldn't have them as customers. But business is business. Besides, even prostitutes are human. We can't just treat them like dirt. Some of the prostitutes who visit my grocery store knew Kaberi. I have been able to gather bits and pieces of information. They say that Kaberi was from a village near the border town of Bongaon, and she was tricked into this business. She didn't become a prostitute by choice. Well, none of them come to this line of work out of choice. They are either tricked or forced into whoring.

I was close with a prostitute. Her name was Sneha. She was eight years older than me and was in this business for about ten years. From what I hear Kaberi was nothing like Sneha. Sneha was wise. Kaberi was impetuous. Sneha never tried to escape from the red light quarters. She knew better. She knew they would find her. She knew that the pimps and madams pay "protection money" to the cops, so it is was no use to go