

Two excerpts from *Omigod* by Varuna Mohite

From: Chapter 3. The Vanishing of Priests

The strangeness of finding themselves on a lonely hilltop severed from all that was familiar was so crushing that for a long while the plump Oondu priests simply sat and gaped at the desolate hills stretching on all sides, at the blue sky so ordinary in daylight, at the oddity of the gathering. They noted the quality of silence, the hush undisturbed by temple bells, by grunting pigs, by cackling geese, by a hundred ordinary sounds of whose existence they had never until this moment been aware. No cow moored asking to be milked. Not even a bird was in sight.

There was a sudden loud rumbling, as of drums rolling during the big Oondu festival. The priests looked at half-brother Tuktuk, a thin youth and the youngest among them, who had only recently left his home in village Ambawadi to become an apprentice priest. Blushing red and trying to suppress the rumbling in his belly, he asked timidly. 'Should we not be praying brothers, so that we can break our fast?'

The plump priests looked hopefully to brother Ladoo, fattest of the priests, who usually led the morning prayers in the Oondu temple on the hill. 'And how can we begin our worship with neither ghee nor incense nor flowers, pray tell me half-brother Tuktuk? And how do we recall the attention of papa Oondu without temple bells, eh? Or do you think the rumble in your stomach will be enough?' He spoke crossly, hungry himself but knowing it was useless to think of food on this strange morning.

The others mulled over the dilemma. Unless they rang the temple bell to draw the attention of papa Oondu and invited him to grace their humble company there was no point in praying. Yet it was unthinkable for an Oondu priest to eat before offering prayers. At the same time how could they not eat? On the other hand what was there to eat on this desolate hillside?

The unhappy priests sighed at their predicament.

Hesitantly, but made bold by the hollow rumble in his stomach, half-brother Tuktuk asked: 'Brother Ladoo, is it only the temple bell we must ring to recall papa Oondu's attention?'

Again the priests looked expectantly at brother Ladoo. 'It is all we have ever used, though I don't know brothers why it should be so for I must confess to you I sometimes suffer terribly from the clanging. Oh sweet papa Oondu, the throbbing it causes to my migraine. I have thought sometimes that if papa Oondu suffers from the same malady what torture it must be for him to hear us toll the bell! Dong dong dong dong—'

'What foolishness you talk,' the grizzled custodian of the blessed chillum muttered, waking up suddenly. 'The peal of the temple bell is so pure and so sharp it is the only sound in the world that can be carried high into the heavens and into the ears of papa Oondu without losing any of its sweetness or clarity.'

‘Maybe if we sang loudly, sang in clean and sharp tones, papa Oondu would hear us?’ brother Pokai offered tentatively.

‘Only the goddess Moonita has her ear attuned to the sound of singing. Papa Oondu does not care much for song, as you know quite well, brother Pokai,’ brother Chamcha said reprovingly. ‘But maybe if we whistle,’ he added wistfully. ‘A whistle is sharp and clear.’

‘Whatever it is we must eat mustn’t we?’ half-brother Tuktuk whined, adding cunningly, ‘Because if we don’t eat we would be like the Myneemos, fasting or doing penance or some such austerity. And papa Oondu won’t like that, will he?’

‘It’s all very puzzling,’ brother Ladoo said, rubbing his fat belly wistfully and recalling the sweet milky gruel he would normally be eating for his morning meal, followed by fruits – mango, chikoo, banana, papaya – whatever was in season. ‘We must wait for his holiness to finish his meditation. He alone can tell us what we should do.’

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From: Chapter 5. The Certainty of Doom

ABOUT ten years after the priests vanished people in Bhakta started to notice a phenomenon that chilled them far more than anything that had occurred so far.

Fewer and fewer babies were being born in Bhakta. Of those who were born a great many died before they were able to crawl, often even before they smiled lopsidedly upon the world.

There came a year when a single child was born, who died shortly after. The following year no child was born throughout the kingdom. Four more long years passed, and yet no woman gave birth. Ten years passed, and then somehow it was fifteen. During these years a small number of children were born, but each died quickly, eagerly, almost as if the little souls had strayed into the womb of the mother by an oversight, almost as if they recoiled in horror from their awaited destiny, almost as if both place and person were to be shunned.

The intimation of doom awaiting them, which had haunted Bhakta all these long years, now became a bitter certainty.

What will happen now? the people asked each other hopelessly. But their hearts knew what their tongues feared to say. It was the beginning of the end of their story on earth.

And not knowing what else to do while waiting for the end which must come, they passed the time telling stories. For what else can doomed people do but spin tales in which all is still possible?

THE ancient one, sitting in the shade of the great banyan, wondered why the idea of complete annihilation, of an end to the living world, should cause so much anguish, so much terror in the

hearts of mortals. They do not know, he told himself mournfully, they do not what it is to live endlessly, to go on and on.

They would die, all the people of the world, but for him there would be no reprieve, no end to suffering. He would still be there when the world was no more, existing as a smudge of life in the nothingness, forgotten even by god. And thinking this, great sobs shook the ancient one's body.

I will be all that exists in the end, as once god was all there was in the beginning, before he created the world.

The ancient one's mind began to wander. It roamed the skies. It meandered confusedly in time.

Listen, he said to the children who played in the shade of the great banyan.

And the children gathered round him eagerly, with wide eyes, wondering what strange tale the ancient one would tell them.

Listen. It is a terrible thing to live countless years, to repeat endlessly variations of the same old story. Tell them, tell them all that the immortal one must surely be old and tired, so old and so tired. His hair has not turned white and fine lines do not crease the radiant ageless face. His eyes clearly reflect the sky, the earth, the ocean, and all of creation. They glitter still like stars, dazzle like sunlight on water. Yet he is old now and tired, so very tired.

His mind wanders, and sometimes he forgets beginnings and endings. He forgets that mangoes should grow on mango trees, that the sun must rise in the east, that cats do not bray like donkeys. And what does it matter, what does it all matter in the end? In the end what difference will it make? That is what the immortal one says.

He howls it to the wind, but who is there to listen? Who is there to see when his pain lashes the oceans, churns the storm that floods the earth? When he bleeds tears and the trees die who among his creation can understand?

Listen to me and understand why it had to come to this.

Once he stood firm in the centre of the empty universe, and he formed the primal word, the circle, the sound.

It was strange and wonderful and he laughed like a child.

From the word, the circle, the sound he created the world. He drew out a hill and then a mountain. Then valleys thick with forests, rivers running through them, oceans silver in the sun. Fantastic beings who roared and swam, who soared in the sky, who crawled upon the earth. There was sweetness and bitterness. And he created colours: red, yellow, blue, which blended one into the other and formed more colours and yet more colours, endlessly.

And he laughed with joy.

He should have stopped there. Ah if only he had stopped there it might have ended so differently, might not even have ended.

But he was possessed now by the need to know himself in one who was like his own self; to see, to touch, to feel such a being. And so he conceived man and woman. They will be noble and graceful and wise, he cried to the birds and the animals. I will imbue them with grace of feeling, invent for them a whole range of subtle emotions. I will pour into them all my longing for beauty and truth and wisdom.

But alas. Alas and alas. Between the conception and the creation, the shadow fell, the shadow that falls always between dream and reality, god's own shadow which has existed since the beginning of time.

And the immortal one wept, knowing at last that the other existed, his self and yet not his self, a part of him and yet a counterpart. He wept like a child knowing that when all things are whole, where there is beauty there must be ugliness, that wisdom and folly exist side by side, hate and love thrive together.

He wept, the ancient one told the children. As I weep now for myself, all alone and forgotten.

He wept in anguish and pain and in bitter disillusionment.

How do you know such things, ancient one? – the listening children asked.

The ancient shook his head as if to clear it of all the words. And he sighed. I don't know – he said. I have forgotten why I know it and how I know it. It is the curse of being as old as I am.