

Voices in the Wind

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I.

I met a madman today who told me that all the stories in the world are whispered in the wind. Listen! He said – and the wind will blow a story into your head.

There are many stories in this house. I can hear the wind stirring them.

Which one is my story – the one that I alone can tell?

Listen.

The writer raised his head. The wind changed and he was aware of the stories that shuffled and shifted and whispered in the house. It was an old house and its roof had sheltered many decades, countless generations and endless tales. He could feel them crowding around him, nudging to be told. Tales of all shapes and sizes. Sad tales, happy tales, unguessed at mysteries, tightly knotted enigmas. He had stumbled over them all day in his wanderings around the house.

In the dining room he had found a grand tale of adventure, spanning several generations and spilling over a series of black and white photographs on the walls. A little bald headed Indian posed among tall blacks in full tribal regalia in Africa. Indian women in flowered dresses smiled among household servants who proudly displayed their breasts. Two solemn Indians posed with their guns beside a dead lion.

Under his bed he discovered a small poignant tale wrapped around a decaying music box that opened to disclose a porcelain doll. Her clothes were richly embroidered – edged with the smallest sequins he had ever seen. Her head was missing.

A tale of desperate want and devotion was rubbed into the rosary laid on the sooty altar in the kitchen – the beads worn down to different shapes with supplications.

A household mystery was locked into the kitchen cupboard that creaked open to display three tarnished spoons tied together with red silk thread.

In the centre of the house was a forgotten courtyard. The mermaid combing dead wisteria from her hair hid a wistful story. Laid carefully in her tail were a scatter of sea shells and two blue marbles.

Letters scratched into the headboard of the bed where the old lady who last lived in the house had died read 'Jube Domne Benedicere'. Had he but understood the words 'Pray Sir, a blessing' he would have known it to be an aching tale.

But the most haunting story came to him in snatches on the wind. Standing in a corridor breached by a large banyan growing right through a wall serried with black and white photographs, he had struggled to place the sounds. A windup musical box playing on insanely in the house? ...Music?... no... too scattered... random. Music, perhaps a child would play on made up instruments...

Now sitting in candlelight, he heard another phrase drip in broken bits through the silence, and recognition flared.

Wind chimes.

The wind was stirring them desultorily somewhere in the house. Chimes that didn't ring cleanly but sounded discordant. Distorted and warped. Oddly appropriate to the house.

The Caretaker who has rented me the house told me that the old lady who owned it died in her bed and all her heirs are in Portugal. He seems to be permanently drunk and requires a bribe to do the smallest thing. He has already charged me for the three plates and a teacup that he has loaned me and hinted significantly on putting down my luggage that it was heavy. I ignored him. I mean to make my money last the length of my labours, and who knows how long that will be. It is the first time I am writing a novel.

The house is an old Portuguese one with clay tiles on the roof and dark timbers. The walls are massively thick and no door less than twenty feet in height. The windows do not have glass in them but are faced with sea shells. The toilet is a ruin. Water has to be drawn from the wells of which there are two – one beside the toilet and another in the kitchen.

The Caretaker stopped at one locked door and informed me that part of the house was forbidden. I could do what I liked with the rest. Immediately of course the forbidden territory became irresistible, but there are so many locks upon the door that it is impossible to even think of breaching it.

There are no end of rooms and no end of things scattered through this house. I first thought I would clear several of them, having grand plans for a living room, study, library etc. But within half an hour of wallowing in dust and fetching cobwebs from my hair I gave up and cleaned only two rooms – what will be my bedroom and a nice cheerful room to work in. My working room is perfectly circular and has eight windows. They give a full view of the hills below me and the little lane that runs below this house. The effect is of floating on a sea of tree tops. One could be forgiven for thinking that one is all alone in this little part of the world. But I deduced the existence of a school and a church nearby. The church bells resound from time to time, and all day long I have heard children at their lessons. All the time I was cleaning I could hear them on their lunch break, laughing and calling and playing. I have had no lunch and the cleaning is not even half through.

Tired of dust I went for a walk.

His bedroom window had opened with reluctance to reveal a breathtaking view across the valley. Down below him, rising through the trees, was a single stone tower – gapped and broken, the arched belfry empty. The broken finger beckoned. He followed it through the thick stand of trees, finding a small worn path. At one point the trees fell away and he stopped in surprise.

It wasn't just a tower. A whole church lay in ruins below him. Flying buttresses had crumbled mid leap. Arches stood empty

and broken. The roof was gone and rain and wind had long washed the floor. The walls were breached by banyan and tamarind. Gulmohaur showered red petals on the ruined altar in benediction.

He heard the whoop of monkeys and a troop of them crashed into the trees overhead, and then across the hall, leaping from arch to arch, some scampering across the floor, others pausing on the altar to stare at the man who watched them. The tamarind was what the monkeys had come for. They chattered in the branches, their voices ricocheting about the ruins.

There were still a few saints in niches, their faces ground down to nubs. A scatter of candles burnt down to the sockets showed that the faithful still recognized them.

The writer walked up what would have been the chancel. The higher platforms where once the aristocrats sat were overgrown with grass. Crumbling stairs led up the side of a wall and then ended mid step. The choir stall stood remote and unreachable now above the heads of the faithful.

He looked down. The blocks of stone he was walking on had names and dates incised on them. Gravestones of the faithful. It gave him an eerie feeling to realize he was walking on someone's grave.

The whoop and crash of monkeys faded in the distance. He could hear something else now. A child's voice. Tired with shouting. Edged with panic. Calling – 'Sara! *Saaa...rah!*'

The sound was haunting in this place, drifting through the broken walls.

He walked out to where the sound was, climbing down broken levels, over heaps of toppled stone.

'Stop! *Statue!*'

He stopped where he was, the command surfacing out of his childhood to arrest him.

'You'll fall in!'

It was only then that he looked down. His feet were one step away from a gaping maw in the stone flags. It was an old well, overgrown with plants, bearded with grass and almost invisible.

He backed away carefully. A few stones loosened by his retreat went tumbling into the darkness. He heard the sounds of them hitting water a long way down.

A small girl stood regarding him across the well. It was her call that had stopped him. 'It's very deep' she said 'if you fall in you won't come out again. We're not allowed to play here.' She must have been about nine years old and the miasma of neglect hung about her. She had a patched and ragged uniform, her hair was uncombed, and she displayed the eternal badge of the urchin – a runny nose. The girl wiped her nose on the back of her hand and said confidently 'I'm looking for Sara. Have you seen her?' 'No. I haven't seen anyone but you.'

The girl sighed and turned away. One leg was in a polio brace. It clicked and clacked against the stones as she limped away, leaving a fading spoor of sound. He could hear her raised voice again 'Sara! Sa - rah!'

The little girl saved me. I might have fallen in. I should have thanked her.

Mindful of snakes and more pitfalls for the unwary, I picked my way through the ruins. God knows what has brought them to this state. Most of the churches are well maintained in Goa. Even the little roadside chapels are whitewashed.

A little further down behind the church there was a graveyard.

Like the church it was long abandoned. Graves had sunk into the ground, weeping angels knelt in waist high grass, their marble urns spilling weeds. Crosses had shattered and fallen, gravestones caved in with the weight of many monsoons. A serene Madonna held up the stumps of her hands to heaven.

He picked his way carefully, wary of more sudden fissures. Slowly the riot of plant and destruction gave way to more order, neater borders, the dates on the graves creeping closer to the nineteenth century.

Another tiny wall with a gate that stood open – and he was in the modern part of the cemetery. Behind him an overgrown jungle, before him neat rows of whitewashed graves and lines of crosses painted in enamel.

Someone was sitting on a grave.

Here I came upon my madman.

He did not strike me as one at first sight, being most respectfully dressed in a black suit and wearing a tie that was covered in moldy spots. An old man with sparse white hair. He asked me who I was and what I did.

'I am a writer' said the writer, the words coming out sticky and new, since it was the first time he had actually described himself this way. 'I am here for some peace and quiet to write my new novel.'

The old man leaned over and looked carefully into his eyes 'Can you listen?'

'Listen?'

The old man nodded 'To be a writer first one must learn to listen. All the stories in the world are blown around in the wind – and you have to listen for the story that the wind will blow into your head.'

His eyes were intent on mine. Each pupil had a cobweb in it. So mesmeric was his aspect that I found myself listening. The churchyard was drowsy with the drone of insects, and the rustling of the wind through the grass. Carrying on the breeze was the voice of the little girl who saved me. She was still calling for Sara. Her voice piped wistfully through the silent afternoon. 'Saaa – ra!'

The old man nodded. 'I come here every day to listen. They all tell me their stories.' He waved a hand at the graves around him. 'This is a sleepy place and most of the time they sleep. But sometimes they wake and whisper. I come to spend the day with her. She likes to know I am near and to talk to me sometimes.' He pointed to the grave he was sitting on. The inscription read

Helga Monteiro
Beloved wife of
Augustus Cajetan Monteiro.
Born 1870
Died 1918
'Dearly beloved and always missed'.

The writer realized with a start that Augustus has been talking to his wife for over twenty years.

Completely and utterly mad. No wonder the wind blows about inside his head. He looked as if he was about to introduce me to his wife. I suddenly remembered the three inches of dust still on the bedroom floor, and headed back hastily to the house.

But the madman's words have stayed with me. And here I am.

Listening.

Once again he hears the broken voices shaken loose by the wind somewhere in the house.

Sleep does not come easy. He falls asleep puzzling over the sounds. Funny. He doesn't remember seeing wind chimes anywhere in the house. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he'll find the chimes... find his story... write his novel... tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...