



## A Breath of Lucifer

*sam was the perfect nurse: ubiquitous, solicitous, indispensable—and invisible*

*fiction* By R. K. NARAYAN SAM WAS only a voice to me, a rich, reverberating baritone. His whispers themselves possessed a solid, rumbling quality. I often speculated, judging from his voice, what he might look like: The possessor of such a voice could be statuesque, with curls falling on his nape, Roman nose, long legs able to cover the distance from my bed to the bathroom in three strides, although to me it seemed an endless journey. I asked him on the very first day, "What do you look like?"

"How can I say? Several years since I looked at a mirror."

"Why so?"

"The women at home do not give us a chance, that is all. I even have to shave without a mirror." He added, "Except once when I came up against a large looking glass at a tailor's and cried out absent-mindedly, 'Ah, Errol Flynn in town!'"

"You admired Errol Flynn?"

"Who wouldn't? As Robin Hood, unforgettable; I saw the picture fifty times."

"Do you have a nice line of mustache?" I asked.

He paused and answered, "Next week this time, you will see for yourself: be patient till the bandages are taken off. . . ."

Sam had taken charge of my bodily self the moment I was wheeled out of the operation theater (at the Malgudi Eye Clinic in New Extension), with my eyes padded, bandaged and sealed. I was to remain blindfolded for nearly a week in bed. During this confinement, Sam was engaged for eight rupees a day to act as my eyes.

He was supposed to be a trained "male nurse," a term that

he abhorred, convinced that nursing was a man's job and that the female in the profession was an impostor. He assumed a defiant and challenging pose whenever the sister at the nursing home came into my room. When she left, he always had a remark to make. "Let this lady take charge of a skull-injury case, I will bet the patient will never see his home again."

Sam had not started life as a male nurse, if one might judge from his references. He constantly alluded to military matters, commands and campaigns, and fatigue duties and parades. Actually, what he did in the army was never clear to me. Perhaps if I could have watched his facial expressions and gestures, I might have understood or interpreted his words differently; but in my present unseeing state, I had to accept literally whatever I heard. He often spoke of a colonel who had discovered his talent and had encouraged him and trained him in nursing. That happened somewhere on the Burma border, Indochina or somewhere, when their company was cut off, with the medical units completely destroyed. The colonel had to manage with a small band of survivors, the most active among them being Sam, who repaired and rehabilitated the wounded and helped them return home almost intact when the war ended. Which war was it? Where was it fought? Against whom? I could never get an answer to those questions. He always spoke of the enemy, but I never understood who it was, since Sam's fluency could not be interrupted for a clarification. I had to accept what I heard without question. Before they parted, the colonel composed a certificate



that helped Sam in his career. "I have framed it and hung it in my house beside that of Jesus," he said. At various theaters of war (again, which war, I could never know), his services were in demand, mainly in surgical cases. Sam was not much interested in the physician's job. He had mostly been a surgeon's man. He spoke only of incidents where he had to hold up the guts of someone until the surgeon arrived, of necks half severed, arms amputated and all aspects of human disjointedness and pain handled without hesitancy or failure. He asserted, "My two hands and ten fingers are at the disposal of anyone who needs them in war or peace."

"What do you earn out of such service?" I asked.

He replied, "Sometimes ten rupees a day, five, two or nothing. I have eight children, my wife and two sisters and a niece depending on me, and all of them have to be fed, clothed, sent to schools and provided with books and medicines. We somehow carry on. God gives me enough. The greater thing for me is the relief that I am able to give anyone in pain. . . . Oh, no, do not get up so fast. Not good for you. Don't try to swat that mosquito buzzing at your ear. You may jam your eye. I am here to deal with that mosquito. Hands down, don't take your hand near your eyes."

He constantly admonished me, ever anxious lest I should, by some careless act, suffer a setback. He slept in my room, a few feet away from my bed, on a mat. He said that he woke up at five in the morning, but it could be any time, since I had no means of verifying his claim with a watch or by observing the light on the walls. Night and day and all days of the week were the same to me. Sam explained that although he woke up early, he lay still, without making the slightest noise, until I stirred in bed and called, "Sam!"

"Good morning, sir," he answered with alacrity, and added, "Do not try to get up yet." Presently, he came over and tucked up the mosquito net with scrupulous care. "Don't get up yet," he ordered and moved off. I could hear him open the bathroom door. Then I noticed his steps move farther off, as he went in to make sure that the window shutters were secure and would not fly open and hit me in the face when I got in and fumbled about. After clearing all possible impediments in my way, he came back and said, "Right-o, sir, now, that place is yours, you may go in safely. Get up slowly. Where is the hurry? Now edge out of your bed, the floor is only four inches below your feet. Slide down gently, hold my hand, here it is. . . ." Holding both my hands in his, he walked backward and led me triumphantly to the bathroom, remarking all along the way, "The ground is level and plain, walk fearlessly. . . ."

With all the assurance that he attempted to give me, the covering over my eyes subjected me to strange tricks of equilibrium and made me nervous at every step. I had a feeling of passing through alien geological formations, chasms and canyons or billowing mounds of cotton wool, tarpaulin or heaps of smithy junk or an endless array of baffle walls, one beside another. I had to move with caution. When he reached the threshold of the bathroom, he gave me precise directions: "Now move up a little to your left. Raise your right foot and there you are. Now you do anything here. Only don't step back. Turn on your heel, if you must. That will be fine."

Presently, when I called, he re-entered the bathroom with a ready compliment on his lips: "Ah, how careful and clean! I wish some people supposed to be endowed with full vision could leave a w.c. as tidy! Often, after they have been in, the place will be fit to be burned down! However, my business in life is not to complain but to serve." He then propelled me to the washbasin and handed me the toothbrush. "Do not brush so fast. May not be good for your eyes. Now stop. I will wash the brush. Here is the water for rinsing. Ready to go back?"

"Yes, Sam!" He turned me round and led me back toward my bed.

"You want to sit on your bed or in the chair?" he asked at the end of our expedition. While I took time to decide, he suggested, "Why not the chair? You have been in bed all night. Sometimes, I had to mind the casualties until the stretcher-bearers arrived and I always said to the boys, 'Lying in bed makes a man sick; sit up, sit up as long as you can hold yourselves together.' While we had no sofas in the jungle, I made them sit and feel comfortable on anything, even on a snake hole once, after flattening the top."

"Where did it happen? Did you say Burma?" I asked as he guided me to the cane chair beside the window.

He at once became cautious and said, "Burma? Did I say Burma? If I mentioned Burma, I must have meant it, and not the desert—"

"Which campaign was it?"

"Campaign?! Oh, so many, I may not remember. Anyway, it was a campaign and we were there. Suppose I fetch you my diary tomorrow? You can look through it when your eyes are all right again, and you will find in it all the answers."

"Oh, that will be very nice, indeed!"

"The colonel gave me such a fat leather-bound diary, which cost him a hundred rupees in England, before he left, saying, 'Sam, put your thoughts into it and all that you see and do and someday your children will read the pages and feel proud of you.' How could I tell the colonel that I could not write or read too well? My father stopped my education

when I was that high and he devoted more time to teach me how to know good toddy from bad one."

"Oh, you drink?" I asked.

"Not now. The colonel whipped me once when he saw me drunk and I vowed I'd never touch it again," he added as an afterthought while he poured coffee for me from the Thermos flask (which he filled by dashing out to a coffeehouse in the neighborhood; it was amazing with what speed he executed these exits and entrances, although to reach the coffeehouse he had to run down a flight of steps, past a veranda on the ground floor, through a gate beyond a drive and down the street. I didn't understand how he managed it all, as he always was present when I called him and always had my coffee ready when I wanted it.). He handed me the cup with great care, guiding my fingers around the handle with precision.

While I sipped the coffee, I could hear him move around the bed, tidying it up. "When the doctor comes, he must find everything neat. Otherwise, he will think that a donkey has been in attendance in this ward." He swept and dusted. He took away the coffee cup, washed it at the sink and put it away, and kept the toilet flush hissing and roaring by repeated pulling of the chain. Thus he set the stage for the doctor's arrival. When the sound of the wheels of the bandage trolley was heard far off, he helped me back to my bed and stationed himself at the door. When footsteps approached, the baritone greeted: "Good morning, doctor, sir."

The doctor asked, "How is he today?"

"Slept well. Relished his food. No temperature. Conditions normal, doctor, sir." I felt the doctor's touch on my brow, as he untied the bandage, affording me, for a tenth of a second, a blurred view of assorted faces over me; he examined my eye, applied drops, bandaged again and left. Sam followed him out as an act of courtesy and came back to say, "Doctor is satisfied with your progress. I am happy it is so."

Occasionally, I thumbed a little transistor radio, hoping for some music, but turned it off the moment a certain shrill voice came on the air rendering "film hits"; but I always found the tune continuing in a sort of hum, for a minute or two after the radio was put away. Unable to judge the direction of the voice or its source, I used to feel puzzled at first. When I understood, I asked, "Sam, do you sing?"

The humming ceased: "I lost practice long ago," he said, and added, "When I was at Don Bosco's, the bishop used to encourage me. I sang in the church choir and also played the harmonium at concerts. We had our dramatic troupe, too, and I played Lucifer. With my eyebrows painted and turned up and with a fork

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at my tail, the bishop often said that never a better Lucifer was seen anywhere, and the public appreciated my performance. In our story, the king was a good man, but I had to get inside him and poison his nature. The princess was also pure, but I had to spoil her heart and make her commit sins." He chuckled at the memory of those days.

He disliked the nurse, who came on alternate days to give me a sponge bath. Sam never approved of the idea; he said: "Why can't I do it? I have bathed typhoid patients running a hundred and seven degrees—"

"Oh, yes, of course," I had to pacify him. "But this is different; a very special training is necessary for handling an eye patient."

When the nurse arrived with hot water and towels, he would linger on until she said unceremoniously, "Out you go. I am in a hurry." He left reluctantly. She bolted the door, seated me in a chair, helped me off with my clothes and ran a steaming towel over my body, talking all the time of herself, her ambition in life to visit her brother in East Africa, of her three children in school, and so forth.

When she left, I asked Sam, "What does she look like?"

"Looks like herself, all right. Why do you want to bother about her? Leave her alone. I know her kind very well."

"Is she pretty?" I asked persistently, and added, "At any rate, I can swear that her voice is sweet and her touch silken."

"Oh! Oh!" he cried. "Take care!"

"Even the faint garlic flavor in her breath is very pleasant, although, normally, I hate garlic."

"These are not women you should encourage," he said. "Before you know where you are, things will have happened. When I played Lucifer, Marie, who took the part of the king's daughter, made constant attempts to entice me whenever she got a chance. I resisted her stoutly, of course; but once, when our troupe was camping out, I found that she had crept into my bed at night. I tried to push her off, but she whispered a threat that she would yell at the top of her voice that I had abducted her. What could I do with such a one?" There was a pause and he added, "Even after we returned home from the camp, she pursued me, until one day my wife saw what was happening and gashed her face with her fingernails. That taught the slut a lesson."

"Where is Marie these days?" I asked.

He said, "Oh, she is married to a fellow who sells raffle tickets, but I ignore her whenever I see her at the market gate helping her husband."

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When the sound of my car was heard outside, he ran to the window to an-

nounce. "Yes, sir, they have come." This would be the evening visit from my family, who brought me my supper. Sam would cry from the window. "Your brother is there and that good lady his wife, also. Your daughter is there and her little son. Oh! What a genius he is going to be! I can see it in him now. Yes, yes, they will be here in a minute, now. Let me keep the door open." He arranged the chairs. Voices outside my door, Sam's voice overwhelming the rest with, "Good evening, madam, good evening, sir. Oh, you little man! Come to see your grandfather! Come, come nearer and say hello to him. You must not shy away from him." Addressing me, he would say, "He is terrified of your beard, sir," and turning back to the boy, "He will be all right when the bandage is taken off. Then he is going to have a shave and a nice bath, not the sponge bath he is now having, and then you will see how grand your grandfather can be!" He would then give the visitors an up-to-the-minute account of the state of my recovery. He would also throw in a faint complaint, "He is not very cooperative. Lifts his hands to his eyes constantly and will not listen to my advice not to exert."

His listeners would comment on it, which would provoke a further comment in the great baritone, the babble maddening to one not able to watch faces and sort out the speakers, until one implored, "Sam, you can retire for a while and leave us. I will call you later," thus giving oneself a chance to have a word with the visitors.

I had to assume that he took my advice and departed. At least, I did not hear him again until they were ready to leave, when he said, "Please do not fail to bring the washed clothes tomorrow. Also, the doctor has asked him to eat fruits. If you could find apples. . . ." He carried to the car the vessels brought by them and saw them off.

After their departure, he would come and say, "Your brother, sir, looks a mighty officer; no one can fool him; very strict he must be, and I dare not talk to him. Your daughter is devoted to you; no wonder, if she was motherless and brought up by you. That grandson; watch my words, someday he is going to be like Nehru. He has that bearing now. Do you know what he said when I took him out for a walk? 'If my grandfather does not get well soon, I will shoot you,'" and he laughed at the memory of that pugnacious remark.

We anticipated with the greatest thrill the day on which the bandages would be taken off my eyes. On the evening before that memorable day, Sam said, "If you don't mind, I will arrange a small celebration. This is very much like the New Year Eve. You must sanction a small

budget for the ceremony, about ten rupees will do. With your permission. . . ." He put his hand in and extracted the purse from under my pillow. He asked for an hour off and left. When he returned, I heard him place bottles on the table.

"What have you there?" I asked.

"Soft drinks, orange, cola; this also happens to be my birthday. I have bought cake and candles, my humble contribution for this grand evening." He was silent and busy for a while, and then began a running commentary: "I'm now cutting the cake, blowing out the candles—"

"How many?"

"I couldn't get more than a dozen, the nearby shop did not have more."

"Are you only twelve years old?"

He laughed, handed me a glass, "To your health. May you open your eyes on a happy bright world—"

"And also on your face!" I said. He kept filling my glass and toasting to the health of all humanity. I could hear him gulp down his drink again and again.

"What are you drinking?"

"Orange, of course."

"What is the smell?"

"Oh, that smell! Someone broke the spirit lamp in the next ward."

"I heard them leave this evening!"

"Yes, yes, but just before they left, they broke the lamp. I assured them, 'Don't worry, I'll clean up.' That's the smell of my hands. After all, we must help each other." Presently, he distributed the cake and burst into a song or two.

"He's a jolly good fellow. . . ."

"The more we are together."

He sang in a stentorian voice. I could also hear his feet tapping away a dance. After a while, I felt tired and said, "Sam, give me supper. I feel sleepy."

After the first spell of sleep, I awoke and called, "Sam."

"Yes, sir," he said with alacrity.

"Will you lead me to the bathroom?"

"Yes, sir." The next moment, he was at my bed, saying, "Sit up, edge forward, two inches down to your feet; now left, right, left, march, left, right, right turn." He helped me onto my feet. Normally, whenever I described the fantastic things that floated before my bandaged eyes, he would reply, "No, no, no wall, nor a pillar. No junk, either, trust me and walk on."

But today, when I said, "You know why I have to walk so slowly?" he said:

"I know, I know. I don't blame you. The place is cluttered."

"I see an immense pillar in my way," I said.

"With carvings," he added. "Those lovers again. These two figures! I see them. She is pouting her lips and he is trying to chew them off, with his arm under her thigh. A sinful spectacle, 155



that's why I have given up looking at sculptures!"

I tried to laugh it off and said, "The bath."

"The bath, the bath, that is the problem. The place is on fire."

"What do you mean, on fire?"

"I know my fire when I see one. I was Lucifer once. When I came on stage with fire in my nostrils, children screamed in the auditorium and the women fainted. Lucifer has been breathing around. Let us go." He took me by the hand and hurried me out in some direction.

At the veranda, I felt the cold air of the night in my face and asked, "Are we going out—"

He would not let me finish my sentence. "This is no place for us. Hurry up. I have a responsibility, I cannot let you perish in the fire."

That was the first time I had taken a step outside the bedroom, and I really felt frightened and cried, "Oh! I feel we are on the edge of a chasm or a cavern, I can't walk."

And he said, "Softly, softly. Do not make all that noise. I see the tiger's tail sticking out of the cave."

"Are you joking?" He didn't answer, but gripped my shoulder and led me on. I did not know where we were going.

At the stairhead, he commanded, "Halt, we are descending, now your right foot down, there, there, good, now bring the left one, only twenty steps to go." When I had managed it without stumbling, he complimented me on my smartness. Now a cold wind blew in my face and I shivered.

I asked, "Are we inside or outside?" I heard the rustle of tree leaves. I felt the

gravel under my bare feet. He did not care to answer my question. I was taken through a maze of garden paths and steps. I felt bewildered and exhausted. I suddenly stopped dead in my tracks and demanded, "Where are you taking me?" Again, he did not answer. I said, "Had we better not go back to my bed?"

He remained silent for a while to consider my proposal and agreed, "That might be a good idea, but dangerous. They have mined the whole area. Don't touch anything you see, stay here, don't move, I will go and find out how we can get back safely, I have lost the chart. I will be back."

He moved off. I was seized with panic when I heard his voice recede. I heard him sing, "He is a jolly good fellow. He is a jolly good fellow," followed by "Has she got lovely cheeks? Yes, she has lovely cheeks," which was reassuring, as it meant that he was still somewhere around.

I called out, "Sam."

He answered from afar, "Coming, but don't get up yet."

"Sam, Sam," I pleaded, "let me get back to my bed. Is it really on fire?"

He answered, "Oh, no, who has been putting ideas into your head? I will take you back to your bed, but please give me time to find the way back. There has been foul play and our retreat is cut off, but please stay still and no one will spot you." His voice still sounded far off.

I pleaded desperately, "Come nearer." I had a feeling of being poised over a void. I heard his approaching steps.

"Yes, sir, what is your command?"

"Why have you brought me here?" I asked.

He whispered, "Marie, she had promised to come, should be here any minute." He suddenly cried out, "Marie, where are you?" and mumbled, "She came into your room last night and the night before, almost every night. Did she disturb you? No. She is such a quiet sort, you would never have known. She came in when I put out the light and left at sunrise. You are a good officer, have her, if you like."

I could not help remarking, "Didn't your wife drive her away?"

Promptly came his reply: "None of her business. How dare she interfere in my affairs? If she tries—" He could not complete the sentence, the thought of his wife having infuriated him. He said, "That woman is no good. All my troubles are due to her."

I pleaded, "Sam, take me to my bed."

"Yes, sir," he said with alacrity, took my hand and led me a few steps and said, "Here is your bed," and gave me a gentle push down, until I sank to one knee, then sat on the ground. The stones jabbed me, but that seemed better than standing on my feet. He said, "Well, blanket at your feet. Call out 'Sam,' I am really not far, not really sleeping. . . . Good night, good night, I generally pray and then sleep; no, I won't really sleep. Sam, one word will do, one word will do . . . will do. . . ." I heard him snore, he was sound asleep somewhere in that enormous void. I resigned myself to my fate. I put out my hand and realized that I was beside a bush, and I only hoped that some poisonous insect would not sting me. I was seized with numerous fears. The night was spent thus. I must have fallen into a drowse, awakened at dawn by the bird noises around.

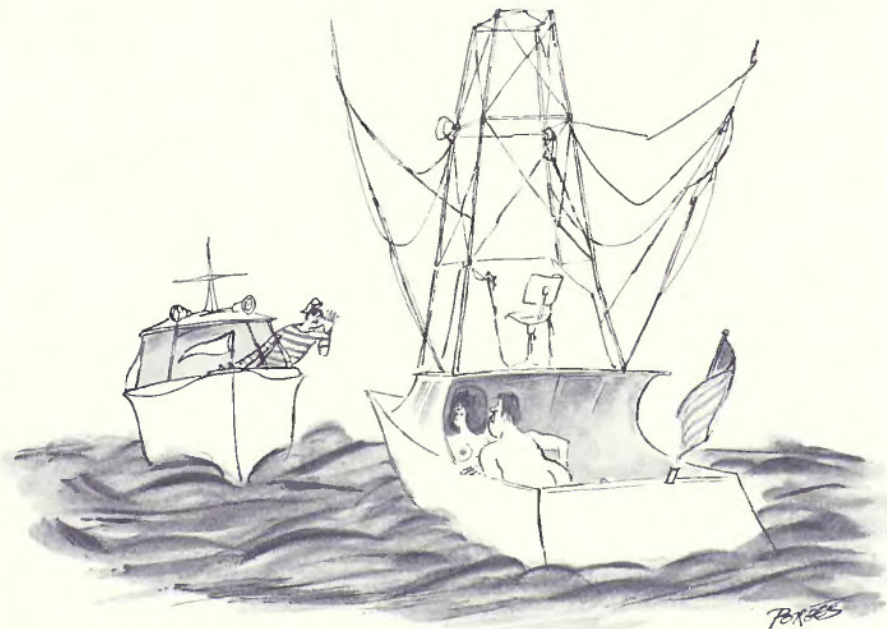
A woman took my hand and said, "Why are you here?"

"Marie?" I asked.

"No, I sweep and clean your room every morning, before others come."

I only said, "Lead me to my bed." She did not waste time on questions. After an endless journey, she said, "Here is your bed, sir, lie down."

I suffered a setback and the unbandaging was postponed. The doctor struggled to treat the ailments produced by shock and exposure. A fortnight later, the bandages were taken off, but I never saw Sam. Only a postcard addressed to the clinic several days later: "I wish you a speedy recovery. I do not know what happened that night. Some foul play, somewhere. That rogue who brought me the cola must have drugged the drink. I will deal with him yet. I pray that you get well. After you go home, if you please, send me a money order for Rs. 48/-. I am charging you for only six days and not for the last day. I wish I could meet you, but my colonel has summoned me to Madras to attend on a leg amputation. Sam."



"Ahoy! Do you need a tow?"

