

Silent Night

a short story

by

Will Coxon MA

SILENT NIGHT

After the first roundabout leaving Margao railway station - where we brushed the side of a tuk-tuk - I closed my eyes and kept them that way for the rest of the journey. Motorbikes should not be put in the hands of young Indian boys for any reason and especially in the form of a taxi service. I would not normally have used this dangerous mode of transport only I was late - very late - two days late. So you may be wondering why, when I was so late, whether it mattered at all if I was a further 10 or 15 mins late. Believe me, it did, because it was Christmas Eve and I was staying with an Old Portuguese family in Goa, who were in expectation of more than just my arrival.

I finally opened my eyes when we hit the dirt track leading to the football pitch. Soon we were across the pitch dodging the older kids in the middle of a game. Pulling up outside of Renaldo's hotel I dispensed some advice of the fatherly kind to go along with the fare. He just laughed at my concern for his driving skills and then handed me his card - his business card: Peter's Taxi service. On the Wings of a Dove - On the Wings of a Valkyrie more like.

Entering the garden the family's house was in front - two stories with balconies. Off to the left the three storied L-shaped hotel also balconied and off to the right the thatched roofed circular restaurant with open sides. I walked onto the veranda and knocked on the open door - nothing. I could see someone in the restaurant but couldn't make out if it was a guest or a family member for they were reading a newspaper.

I made it onto the raised floor of the restaurant before the paper came down to reveal Marie - my old friends' Renaldo and Rosario's 17-year-old daughter. I hadn't seen her for 5 years but she was instantly recognizable. The beautiful face with its cheeky expression had been transferred seamlessly onto a body now more woman than child. She was up and out of her seat and rapped around my neck and waist before she even had time to think how her mid-teen status should affect her behaviour. Dropping down she flew into a faked rage.

'And where do you think you're going to sleep?' She didn't wait for a reply but launched into 'On the beach, that's where!'

She crossed to the entrance and in a voice that would wake the deaf she shouted, 'Mama! Will's here! Come and tell him off!' 'Thanks Marie.' Was my only comment.

'Don't mention it. I suppose you would like some breakfast?'

'Now you mention it, coffee, a couple of fried eggs and some toast would be fine.'

Rosario appeared on the first floor balcony of the house and stared down in anger - puffing out her cheeks and gritting her teeth. There was, however, no sound. She suddenly disappeared inside with purpose.

Marie turned to me 'See, see what you have done, you have rendered Mama speechless. And for that I will burn your eggs and burn your toast too.'

Grinning, she minced across the restaurant floor out through the rear entrance and disappeared into the kitchen hut next door, but not before sticking out her bottom and poking out her tongue. Then she was back, 'What do you think of my new jeans?'

'Well, your bottom certainly fills them out.'

Contorting herself she tried to look at her bottom and ended up spinning around like one of those dogs that like to chase their own tail.

It was my turn to grin and seeing my mirth as I sat down at a table she came back and twisted my ear until it hurt.

'And for that I will burn your coffee as well.' She retreated to the kitchen just as Rosario stormed from the rear of the house to confront me from outside the restaurant.

'So where are you going to sleep? I've rented out your room and the hotel is full.' She didn't wait for an answer but stormed off towards a small detached bungalow 20 metres off into the corner of the garden. This was where Sati and her family lived. This Hindu family had worked for the de Silvers for 30 years and more and were more family than employees. The de Silvers had even paid for Sati's son Vijay to go to private school, where, as I was to find out he had excelled. He and Maria had been inseparable throughout childhood being the same age and just as he went to the Christian services at the school so she went to the temple on Hindu festivals. The wonderful complexity of Indian life never ceases to amaze me. Nor was it to deny me now for I was summoned.

Sati, as thin as Rosario was plump, eyed me with stoic calm as she switched the unlit bed from one side of her mouth to the other. After the pair had looked at me with distaste and had ascertained that I truly was a source of great annoyance they went inside without a word - obviously communicating by some esoteric or clairvoyant means.

They reappeared carrying an old mattress, which they carried around to the rear of the bungalow setting it down on the veranda. After further noxious looks they disappeared inside once more.

Marie appeared in the kitchen door and shouted, 'Do you want your burnt eggs on your burnt toast or do you want them separately?' I wandered back to the restaurant glancing in at the kitchen as I passed. Clouds of smoke didn't auger well for breakfast. Soon I was sitting opposite a grinning face held in position by hands that had fingers drumming her cheeks.

'How have you managed to burn the bottoms of the eggs and still have the whites uncooked?'

'Years of practice on rude tourists.' She ventured this with relish. But before I had time to consider eating this burnt offering it was whisked away from me. As a means of explanation she gloated, 'You haven't time to eat because your bed is ready.' I turned around to see these two middle-aged ladies standing at the corner of the bungalow awaiting my presence. 'He hasn't eaten his burnt breakfast Mama.'

'Put it on his bill anyway.' Rosario shouted back.

Around the corner the bed was now made. Sati nodded towards it and slipping of my clothes down to my shorts I was soon luxuriating in clean sheets and soft pillows. The two ladies tucked me in and stood back to admire their handy work enjoying a chuckle as they left.

'Don't forget to put out the light.' I ventured.

Now it may seem strange that I should have slept on my arrival but after a long journey on an Indian train without a sleeping reservation meant that I had been without sleep for 36 hours. That my hosts were used to this type of behaviour from travellers must be obvious, and their generosity in accommodating me in this manner can only speak of the long friendship that I had enjoyed - as a paying customer of course. I am not unique in benefiting in this manner from a long association with Indians for there are many such relationships and with many nationalities benefiting from their innate hospitality.

I must have slept for a good 4 hours because it was midday when I was roused by Marie. 'Get up you good for nothing! Do you think you can lie in bed when you still have all your Christmas shopping to do.' The thought of Christmas shopping was just entering my consciousness when it was given a boost from Marie's wealth of knowledge concerning my poor

preparation for the season of goodwill. 'While unpacking your bag, out of the goodness of my heart, I was horrified to find not a single present.'

The full weight of my social obligations now bore down on me. 'Of course! It's Christmas Eve!' This was a statement of fact even though it was presented as a shocked revelation.

'Precisely!'

She was gone and I was up and dressed. The restaurant was half full with the usual mix of travellers and ex-pats. I needed coffee and sustenance for my adventure into retail therapy. No sooner was I seated when Marie arrived with a large coffee and a plate of samosa. They were rock hard, which she demonstrated by lifting them up and dropping them onto the plate. As she was now sitting opposite me again and obviously enjoying her role as tormentor there was little I could do but to play along. I dunked one in my coffee and was just about to put it in my mouth when it was whisked away. 'I just took those out of the rubbish bin, you disgusting man.'

'Men are disgusting Marie, it's just part of our nature. In the same way that women are genteel and filled with tender love and kindness.'

We exchanged grins of the theatrical kind while Sati replaced the samosa plate with a large omelette surrounded by a battalion of golden soldiers of buttered toast.

'So are you not going to ask me how I am doing at school?'

'Do I need to?' I said with a bored inflection.

Her response was an angry haughtiness, 'Yes, because I am doing very well, thank you very much.'

'So what are you excelling in?' This conversation has to be imagined as if the speakers have their mouths full. Yes, Marie was helping herself.

'I have a brilliant...!' Here she turned around to see if anyone was listening, continuing in a semi-whisper, 'Physics teacher, a real inspiration. Just like you.'

'Really?'

'Really! She is keeping the class up to speed on the latest developments in theoretical physics.'

'Wow! Any particular theory?'

Marie once more quickly looked around with more than just a glance towards the house, 'It's all just a hologram.'

'Ahh.' I said this with as much knowing gravitas as I could muster with warm butter running down my chin.

Marie had shown an interest in science from an early age, making me wonder if there is something inherent in the fascination the subject engenders. She was, after all, from a family of devoted Christians and with a mother who had become

most upset when I had waylaid her into a philosophical trap regarding St. Augustine's definition of God. My argument had been that I agreed with St. Augustine's definition that God was Omni-potent, Omni-present and Infinite, but that made a God with a character and/or personality impossible, for if God was Infinite then he would need an Infinite mouth to express himself, which would rather put pay to the biblical idea that 'the word was with God'. The word itself having to be Infinite making a nonsense that God could talk to any finite being, let alone express behavioural mannerisms of the verbal kind. The subject had become taboo ever since, hence Marie's furtive reconnaissance's for the presence of her mother.

'Now isn't this what the Buddhist have always said, that it's all but an illusion.'

'Shh,' She pleaded with more furtive glances, 'you know that my mother is not good with the Buddhists.'

'So what is this theory, anyway?'

'You mean to say you don't know?'

'My dear Marie, theoretical physics produces that many theories that it is very difficult to keep up, especially when you are in the deep jungles of the Western Ghats.'

'Well, you know that our universe has an event horizon which is a 2-dimensional surface, they think that the information is encoded in that surface and projected into the 3-dimensional space as a hologram.'

'Mmm.' Was my interested reply.

'Mmm.' She mimicked while pulling a face of annoyance.

'You know, Marie, I have come to the conclusion that metaphysics is now dominating physics, and until someone finally proves one of these theories right we will carry on arguing about them in much the same manner as the philosophers of the middle-ages argued about how many angels could dance on the point of a needle.'

'But that's the point, they think they might be able to prove it.'

'Wow!' I said with real relish.

I could see she was pleased at having bettered me on this subject - a case of the student become the teacher.

'I'm so proud of you.' I said with genuine feeling and to which she added a further blessing to her many great attributes by blushing.

'I've applied to do Mathematics, Computer Science and Physics at university.' She glanced once more over her shoulders before carrying on, 'The Mathematics is for my teachers because they say I'm gifted. The Computer Science is for my mother who thinks it will provide me with a good profession. But the Physics is for me because I love it.'

But that's as far as it went, for Sati reappeared and taking Marie by the hand, as she had done for all of her life, led her out of the restaurant towards her mother waiting on the veranda of the house.

Now this had nothing to do with our conversation but as I was to find out on my way out, it was all to do with something far more mundane.

Having finished brunch and having greeted Marie's brother, Enrique, who took over from Marie in the restaurant and after much banter about my trip to the national park the conversation turned to my trip into town and he soon arranged transport by mobile phone.

I could soon see the bike approaching and on my way out to meet it I could see Marie standing in the hall dressed in a sleeveless sapphire blue evening dress. I just had to take a closer look.

She curtsied and giggled at the same time much to the annoyance of Sati and Rosario, who with mouths full of pins waved me away while slapping Marie on the bottom from their prone position around her feet. I was captivated at this Image of loveliness. Marie broke the spell by relating what her mother could not and that was that I was expected to attend evening mass at the new church, that very evening. Although not a catholic I had been confirmed and had received communion. The memories of which then surfaced being tinged by the emotions they aroused, ones of boring tedium and the folly of meaninglessness.

But this state of mind didn't last for my transport was none other than: The Wings of a Dove. My fatherly advice once more dispensed, then dispensed with, I arrived in Margao in need of sunglasses.

The shopping went well, but having bought Marie a book by William Dalrymple on Mughal India I found myself feeling just a little guilty, as I knew, that with Marie being a fast and voracious reader that I, myself, would no doubt have time to read it before I left Goa. Sitting in Longuihos, where I had retired on the completion of my task, and while sipping a cool drink this feeling of meanness - for in all truth it could be described as nothing else - finally broke through and I began to wonder what I could give her as a supplement.

I had left the presents to be wrapped at one of the local stores and on my way back I passed a toyshop and there in the

window was the most amazing collection of costume jewellery. Now it may be that the reader is by now beginning to get a taste for my mischievous nature so that the purchase of a diamond tiara will not seem so strange when I have just related the fact that Marie was in possession of an evening gown. It cost me several hundred rupees - a small fortune for such a frivolous object, yet it tickled my sides and my cheeks as well.

Perhaps because of this extravagance I decided to get the bus back and save myself not only money but also the chance of being maimed for life.

I passed through the park where I stopped to watch several children putting on an acrobatic performance of great skill. I donated generously to their funds along with everyone else, for we were all filled with the generosity of the season.

Exiting the park I was now confronted with the busiest road in Margao and one that I would have to cross because the buses all had their stops on the other side. It was a strange arrangement as lines of concrete pillars over a foot thick were laid out length ways to form a special lane just for buses. This meant that there was a permanent line of buses each dropping off and picking up passengers as the buses slowly made their way to the exit further down the road.

Two thoughts then crossed my mind, one, I would have to cross what was a very dangerous road, and two, the buses were full to capacity. I retreated to the edge of the park where a small wall played host to a collection of people using its convenient height for a rest - I followed suit. Laden down as I was with shopping the thought of being crushed in the confines of a metal cage on wheels was quickly losing its appeal. But then my attention was captured by what was street theatre of a very special kind.

A street vendor with a basket on his head was selling oranges to people on the buses from the vantage point of the concrete pillar divide. Having split an orange with its skin still attached he passed it into the bus so that people could try his wares by taking a segment. Making a sale he took a square piece of newspaper out from his waistband and forming a cone filled it with oranges then tied it up with thin string he cut with his teeth - all the while walking along the concrete divide with some dexterity. He passed this parcel through to the customer inside who was obviously trying to access their money for he had to walk faster and faster along the concrete pillar as the bus speeded up. I was so caught up in this mini-

drama that I stood up to get a better view and strained to see if he would get his money before the bus left its special lane. The man was falling further and further behind but then I could see the money being passed back through the bus until it reached the last window where a hand extended through the bars and the vendor grasped it just as he left the end of the concrete pillar. Another moment and he would have been too late for the bus now free of its special lane took off at speed.

'Phew!' I gasped. Suddenly realizing that I had moved several feet down the pavement while trying to see the end of this drama I once more retreated to the wall and sat down. Out of the crowd, a man - possibly a clerk, for he had a briefcase - veered off towards me. He bent down so that his head was on the same level as mine and said with little inflection, 'Courtesy of Shiva.'

He didn't wait for a reply but blended back into the moving crowd on the pavement.

He must have seen me watching the unfolding drama and for him, I, because of my movement and reaction, must have become part of that drama from his perspective. The Old God having destroyed corrupt worlds formed new ones out of their material substance so new life can act out new drama in the endless cycle of death and rebirth. And for those aware of this meaning of life, all of life is the theatre of the possible. I was moved - I was moved deeply by his deep insight into the thespian nature of life and was reminded of the Bard's same take on the subject.

Still trying to grasp the full significance of observer and participant in the holistic perspective I wandered down the pavement until I reached the end. Shiva's trident hove into view on the dashboard of a taxi. The driver stopped without a request and I got in without question. We drove off in silence, nothing said until I was back at Renaldo's where he offered, 'You don't remember me, do you?'

Sati's cousin, for the driver was no one else, had been my driver many years before. I felt foolish in not recognising him but of course I could then remember individual journeys he had taken me on and thus rescued the situation by relating them. He wouldn't take payment and offered the journey as a present as it was Christmas.

How glad I was then that I had spent out a small fortune on Sati's present - a sari in her favourite colours, tangerine and purple.

The family had left to visit their relatives but a message had been left reminding me that my presence was expected at midnight mass - there was no hope of escape of what I feared would be an arduous chore.

After freshening up I still had a few hours to kill before fulfilling my obligation, so I decided that I would walk down to the beach and then walk along the beach to Colva. This had been a small fishing village the first time I had visited but was now a package tourist destination with all the accompanying hotels and bars. It did, however, have a number of excellent fish restaurants and having just come from the interior where I had been living on dal bhat with the occasional tali plate when I could get one, the thought of king prawns and sea bass was a tempting enticement. What I was not expecting was the further change that had taken place since my last visit - it had become a tourist destination for the children of rich Bombayans.

Arriving in the large square just back from the beach, a place once filled with convivial cafes I was horrified to find a scene not unfamiliar from any town centre on a Saturday night in dear old blighty. There were drunken young Indians everywhere, throwing up and picking fights with the locals and with themselves. This foreign import was most distressing to a sensitive soul such as myself and I retreated back to the beach and headed back down to Benaullim. The 3-mile journey was pleasant enough but arriving at the beach restaurants I was assailed by that nightmare of entertainment that only the Japanese could have invented - yes, you guessed, karaoke. Picking the very end table at the restaurant furthest away from the ghastly strains of dying cats I suffered a terrible meal of over cooked frozen prawns that were covered in a chilli sauce that killed whatever taste those crustaceans might once have had.

Having had to wait for almost an hour to be served I was now running late. There was only one thing for it and borrowing a mobile I ordered to be transported on the Wings of a Dove. Walking back up the road to meet my lift I was witness to a couple of westerners having sex just off the road. I felt that I must be getting old, for once I would have found this most hilarious of human acts, amusing, but at that moment I was disgusted at this European display of exhibitionism where the

customs and sensibilities of their host country were not even considered.

Peter arrived and whisked me away to paradise.

The church was new and built like a fairy castle with towers and a belfry all in glowing white. It was lit up by perfectly placed lighting that enhanced the spatial quality of ascending spires pointing to heaven. It stood in a large open space surrounded by a low wall and wrought iron railings. This area was filled to capacity - the men were all wearing dark suits but of every variety imaginable and the women dressed in the most colourful assortment of materials were either in evening gowns or saris. I was star struck and my pace slowed as I saw Peter enter the crowds within the grounds. I became terribly self-conscious dressed in rags as I was in comparison to these Lords and Ladies of a future era. I retreated then first back to the road then across the road and finally onto a small wall in the shadow of trees.

The music from a live orchestra within the church was soon joined by a full choir in perfect voice and perfectly conveyed by the very highest quality PA system to those outside. Such was the effect that the music seemed to emanate from the heavens and a thousand voices singing as one began Silent Night in Portuguese. It was all too much and I was unable to stop the welling tears.

The service over I was in a quandary of what to do and having walked back onto the road I mingled with the crowds now emerging from the church.

'Will, Will!' came the voice, and there she was waving to me from inside the grounds. 'Wait there.' She came bounding up to me glowing with an inner light looking like a fairy princess. It was then that I noticed the diamond tiara a perfect match for the shimmering blue of her gown.

'You've opened your present.' I chided. Taking my arm she pulled me along. 'But how could I not?' She chided me back. 'Would it not have been a waste not to have worn it on this night of all nights.'

'Taking of course that your mindscape had adopted the holistic perspective?' I queried. 'To get over the problem of the fore knowledge of what your present consisted of.'

'Precisely! The very same one that Einstein had adopted when he pointed out that the past, present and future is just a persistent illusion. It was you that told me that, so you

can't argue.' She grinned with a superior knowledge born of a superior intelligence way beyond her years.

I could have kissed her then but said instead, 'You look wonderful. Had I been even 20 years younger I would marry you.'

'And I you.' She looked me in the eye with affection and we gave each other a hug. 'Come on, you have to meet the family or they won't believe that you came.'

I was introduced to the extended family some of which I had met and others I had not. They ignored my rags as good taste begets. After relating my emotional reaction to the service I was freed to walk home with Marie on her request.

We were soon accosted by a gaggle of young women all dressed in evening gowns - these were Marie's fellow members of the school's hockey team. There soon developed a fight over the diamond tiara that had become the fashion statement of the moment. Watching this melee of princesses battling for the crown would not normally have been the most edifying of spectacles, but here, with its good-humoured edge it was enjoyed by all.

Finally wrestling it back Marie made me promise not to tell them where I had bought it and after adjusting it on her head from the rakish angle that she had placed it we were left to perambulate.

Now it was not just a coincidence that she had taken my arm for she then related that this was one of the few occasions that the boys could ask to escort the girls of their romantic attachments home, thus signalling their intentions and the girls reactions. This was a custom left over from a rural Portugal long since extinct in the west. Marie then related how Vijay was planning to ask for this privilege, a one she could not accept, as she had no romantic feelings for him but only ones of sisterly love. Not wanting to embarrass him in front of his friends she had found the perfect solution in my good self. I played my role to perfection greeting him like a long lost brother and presenting miss perfect as my future bride. Some of Vijay's friends began to make remarks only to get a verbal lashing from the Queen of the hour that soon had them hiding their faces.

The rest of the journey back was one long exchange of Christmas greetings and sweet conversations.

A fortnight later I was reading the paper after breakfast when the curved end of a hockey stick pulled the pages down. I hardly recognised her with a straw hat on her head and a shirt and tie beneath. I stretched over the table to see what she was wearing from the waist down and burst out laughing on seeing her short pleated skirt and long socks that left her knees bare. She was not amused.

Looking down she queried, 'Is there something wrong with my legs?'

'No Marie, it's just I haven't seen you in a school uniform.'

'But of course you have seen me in a school uniform.'

'Yes, but not for many a long year.'

My continued laughter just annoyed her more and she proceeded to view her legs by bending over and moving her head from side to side.

'There is nothing wrong with your legs, perhaps they are a little plump with puppy fat but this is normal.'

Her school friends calling her from the gate saved me from serious injury. She left threatening me with the hockey stick and arriving at the gate proceeded to tell her friends of what she thought I had said. Her friends then examined her knees with intense concentration then examined each other's. I shouted out, 'There's nothing wrong with your legs!' But this just inflamed the situation and Marie was on her way back with violent intent when I was rescued by the sound of a horn - it was the school bus. The girls ran with athletic speed across the football pitch with Marie turning around midway to shake her stick at me one last time.

It was then that I decided to leave that day before she returned. The thought of saying goodbye to this girl who had become the very symbol of India to me - with her intelligence, her grace and her beauty - it was an unnecessary pain at that time I felt I could not bear. I prayed at that moment, that in achieving full womanhood that she would still hold the child within.

*