

The Archivist

- Short Fiction by Dileep V. Reddy

Imtiaz ran like the brown desert wind. His tiny feet marked a thin ant-trail across the sandscape, stretching all the way back to the City. His body could not keep up with his speed. His heart pounded on his ribs, the hot air parched his throat dry, and the Sun showed no mercy. But Imtiaz defied them all. He ran because he was afraid. Afraid that Nani was right. About everything. That every single story she ever told, every fable, every tale she relayed to him at bedtime, that kept him awake and dreaming all night, were all true. As if it had all really happened, and will happen, just as the tales foretold. How could it not? After all, he had seen them with his own eyes! The signs of Doom. As real as the dust clinging to his sweat. They were here, and he had witnessed their arrival. And if they were real, then so was everything else! And so he ran home, to confirm with Nani. He dived into the front door and blurred past Ammi like she didn't exist. "Imti! Did they close the schools again?!" He couldn't spare an answer. He dropped the bag, and ran up the stairs, all the way up to the last room of the house. A private space for senile old Nani to meditate in, bothering no one else. His remarkable momentum bashed the door open, and he finally stood still, panting. There sat Nani on the bed, over her folded legs. Her tired old eyes drifted up to catch his view, and his face brightened. "Tell me again Grandma!", he demanded. "Tell me again about the End of Days."

The old shopkeeper was stubborn. "Please ask him again, slowly.", Carlos requested. The interpreter grew impatient. He was beginning to regret ever offering Carlos his services. "Aap khana bundh nahi karenge? Baaki saare tho chale gaye." "Aren't you considering closing the shutters on your shop? All the rest have." The old man closed his eyes as he slowly nodded his head from side-to-side. "Qyonn? Main qyonn daronn? Ye sab bahuth saal pahele bhi huwa tha.", he replied. The interpreter look at Carlos with unease, having just about exhausted his English vocabulary in trying to put this in as many different words as he could. "Same answer", he shrugged. Carlos smirked, and thanked the old man for his time. As he fished for some currency to pay the interpreter, he sensed every local around him steal a glance behind his shoulder, thus signalling Boris's arrival. They stood out easily. "Shopping for souvenirs, my friend?", Boris chirped. They were at the last open stall in the market, and people thronged to stock-up supplies. There was no telling when this one would suddenly close as well. "I think it has finally dawned upon them. That things are going to get rough." The interpreter took his bow, and morphed into the scenery. "Everyone looks nervous. Everyone except the old folk. They simply

don't care. Like the owner of this store here." Boris understood. "This city has been through a lot. And yet it stands." Carlos was unconvinced. "Historically, cities have outlived nations, religions, and people. But what stands isn't the same city anymore. Merely structures and geography, to be reinhabited and reinterpreted. All of what we see today, might be lost." "Well, that's why we are here, aren't we, my friend!" Carlos picked up his equipment as Boris lead them out of the busy market-district. They wore their signature black uniforms, heavy luggage and foreign strides like a bubble that could traverse through any fearful crowd. They had to meet up with the others, and begin shooting soon.

Grandmothers are the Keepers of the Tales. Since the earliest matriarchies, they have preserved wisdom by passing it on orally. They have weaved many a narrative, and taught countless generations about the Heavens and the Earth. They keep alive what was once learnt the hard way, and must never be forgotten. As eons pass, the meanings suffer from that human flaw: Transmission Loss. In a cosmic game of Chinese Whispers, the tales become distorted, twisted and mutilated until all resonance with reality is lost, and they become cryptic and seemingly irrelevant. But besides words, a far more powerful knowledge has been secretly passed on. The skill of delivery. Nani had a way, like her ancestral sisterhood, to capture and entrall Imtiaz for hours on end. Much to his parent's chagrin, who'd rather Imti spent his time studying, he would steal his way into Nani's chambers at odd hours, just to listen to her speak. And she spoke now as Imti listened. Of the legend of the Harbingers of Doom. She described their black appearance, and strange mannerisms. Of all the countless times they had appeared in history, sometimes as a tailed star in the night sky, other times as a mere scent in the air. And rarer still, in the subtle guise of human form. Shades that foreshadow death and destruction. "Are they evil Grandma?", he asked as he gulped. But like all good tales, the answer was ambiguous, "Who knows such things?! They are neither good, nor evil. They simply are. Like the black clouds that herald the rains." This emboldened him, "What do they want, Grandma?" "Who knows? Are they here to warn us? Do they cause what is to follow? Do they plant the seeds of continuity? Or to trap the essence of what is now, and will soon be gone? Who knows?" Nani broke into tears. She closed her eyes and rocked back-and-forth, perturbed by some distant memory. "Don't worry Grandma! I'll find out!!" Imtiaz bolted out the door with the same swiftness of his arrival. Ammi sighed as he blurred past the hallway, and out the door, once again, towards the City.

Carlos gave the press conference a miss. The authorities assigned to keep watch on him treated him like a member of the press. But confident officials spouting prepared statements into microphones were of little interest to his ilk. He belonged to a more timeless creed. He made his way through the back alleys, taking note of all the locations where the armed forces were deploying sandbags. Places best avoided once the fighting breaks loose.

Local kids couldn't resist playing with wooden "guns". From a far highway, he could hear the loud instruments from a marriage procession. It seemed like everyone insisted on living in denial. Some sort of defense mechanism against chaos and insanity. Or were they just battle hardened? Carlos headed in the general direction of the playful screams of children. He needed more shots with kids in them. He was experienced enough to know that twenty years from now, no one will remember all the muddy details and the adult reasons for this war. Every pair of eyes will look at his images anew, with child-like innocence and ignorance. It is their mood he'd need to immortalize.

He finally found the source of all the noise. A big rubble filled field, remnant of the previous war, that has since been converted into a playground. "Reinterpreted", he thought. It'd be dusk soon, so he went to work, snapping as many shots as he could. Younglings laughing, swinging, posing for the camera, chasing after each other. Not a care for the morrow. Except for one boy seated at the edge. He didn't smile. He just stared at Carlos with intent. Carlos was amused, and drawn to him. "What's your name?", Carlos asked, forgetting that Imti could be less than fluent in English. No answer. Just a blank stare. "Why aren't you playing with the others?" Imtiaz's eyes finally moved. "Is that the mark of your kind?", Imti pointed to the yellow rectangle stitched onto Carlos's breast pocket. "You could say that.", Carlos chimed. "Are you here to destroy us?", Imti demanded. Carlos tried his best not to react. "No!", he said, smilingly, "Not at all. Whatever gave you that idea?" "Then you are here to trap that which is now, and will soon be gone?" Carlos realised that these words were not Imti's own. That someone wiser was speaking through him. "Yes. You could say that.", he quipped. "Is the End near then?", Imti worried out loud, with furrows on his forehead. Carlos knelt and took his dark shades off, so he could stare into Imtiaz as he said, "Never give up on those fighting for peace. A solution will be found soon. And all of this, will feel like a bad dream. Okay?" Imtiaz stood up and walked away into the Sunset. He could always tell when adults lied. But then, he stopped mid-stride, turned and shouted, "Maybe,... maybe you aren't all that evil!" before breaking into a run once again, leaving Carlos standing stunned, in a children's playground as the setting Sun gleamed on the camera hanging by his neck. The Harbinger of Doom.