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An extract from *Thunder Demon*

How do people deal with the loss of a child, surely the most terrible grief on earth?

When I lost my firstborn, a son, I couldn't see it as a celebration of cosmic renewal: Just as a body sheds its clothes, so the soul sheds its body to take on a new one ... The soul is timeless, infinite. What use was such Vedic wisdom in the face of such intolerable grief?

I think I lost my mind. I knew what I had to do, and I did it everyday. I set the table for the child and fed his portrait the food, and with every morsel I reiterated my grief. My home became a museum as his gaze peered out from every wall, a macabre wallpaper that covered every bit of space. I sang to the child, I scolded him--all with a passion that left me spent.

Until the day Shanti came out of the mists of a turbulent monsoon morning. This was at

dawn, when I was visiting the grave of my child by the sea.

We, too, have our immaculate conceptions.

In Malay folklore, rich with the animism of treespirits and waterwizards and bolsterghosts, long before Islam and the suppression of things originally Malay, there were spirits called toyols. These little beings were stillborns, exhumed in the dead hours of the night, and brought back to life with incantations and the sacrificial blood of a pure white rooster. Emerging out of graveyards, they had to be whisked into genie bottles so that they could work their black magic, masked by the scent of incense to cover the smell of death.

I had heard about these beings, for in Malaya the spirits have as much presence as mortals. Houses are haunted, ghosts rise from graves shrouded in their deathcloth, and thieves still use black magic to put a spell on a home.

So when my Malay friend, Siti, offered me a toyol, I clutched at the lifeline.

'There are rules for this,' Siti warned, digging her nails deeply into my skin. 'This one, it can really kill you.'

That is how I happened to be in the graveyard, at four o'clock in the morning, as the mist hung heavy and floated past the vision in a dreamworld. What else could I do but weep in front of the earthen mound of what I had carried in my womb for nine months that now was no more?

But then, out of the mist, out of that lifeless mound, there was a sound. A single syllable that rose like a breath from the ground and froze my blood.

Ma.

Uttered the child. Then again, Ma.

The breath of the morning was so sweet. A hint of damp rain fell on my hands and I squinted at the moisture, willing it to be real so that the child would be, and I wouldn't find myself waking in an empty bed, the bolster damp with tears. I looked up and there was a child, gazing at me, and I knew it was a girl-child, not my son, though in the mist they looked the same. I knew then that my son had come back in a different body, but he had come. He was there, and so I hugged the child to my parched breast, squeezing out a sound of pain.



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