

Three Mornings

Neil Deuchar

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About the author

Rev Dr Neil Deuchar is an inter-spiritual minister, musician, writer, and editor. Born of Scottish ancestry in London in 1960 and a father of three children, Neil's career was in the National Health Service as a consultant psychiatrist, medical director, and senior health and social care advisor. After retiring, he became involved in local politics and social entrepreneurialism and also served as a hospice trustee while training to become an end-of-life companion. Neil holds master's degrees in medical science, theology & religion, and creative writing. He has three children and divides his time between the U.K., where he's developing a Council of Elders, and India, where he offers voluntary services for palliative care and participates in transformative education. He likes running, reading, cooking, and spending time in monasteries and ashrams.

Preface

The idea for this novelette came to me from a ghost inhabiting my flat in India. I thought I was going mad, but as soon as I realised the place could be haunted, I checked in with a friend who's very grounded, definitely not going mad, and knows about such things. She listened seriously and suggested that there might be a spirit in the flat that wanted someone to tell their story. She said it was important to receive and then write whatever was being asked for.

I started learning some basic techniques of psychography (sometimes called channeling, or automatic writing); these included meditating before writing, noticing signs and prompts occurring to or around me, and journaling dreams before I forgot them.

I had to learn to get out of the way and allow the narrative to flow through me rather than from me. Once I'd got the hang of it, the first draft burst onto the page in less than a week. I don't clearly remember writing it. I then added my own thoughts and edited it to make the copy more accessible and coherent. The book therefore represents a mix of received material which is, or might be, authentic, and a first-person narrative of a post-war Indian teenager portrayed through the lens of an Englishman born in 1960, which probably wouldn't be.

Ghosts, however, like the living, presumably have to take their chances while they can. The novelette contains passages from the outset that are disturbing. But I didn't argue with the source: it wasn't for me to dumb down their experience nor doctor what was apparently needing to be said.

To sacrifice what you are ... that is a fate more terrible than dying.
Joan of Arc, Orleans, France, 1428

3rd morning, dawn

My father is shouting with anger and anguish, and my mother and aunty are wailing. My in-laws are staring, grotesquely fascinated. The robed *pujari* priest stands with arms and eyes stretched wide, chanting in Hindi. The neighbours are intent in determined stance. The parish priest stands behind the crowd with arms folded over his cassock. And the villagers, all the villagers who have come out this morning to see it. They are snarling and baying and hurling ghee and camphor onto the fire, pushing and shoving me, then running back from the heat to goad me on. Sneering, with grotesque gestures and lips taut with hate and horror.

As the heat and cinders land on my face, a strong stench is rising from my burning husband. I stumble on the first few sticks, hands stinging, looking for an instant at the sky and roaring at the futility of the prayer for rain this morning. Then comes the panicky intention to get it over with and scramble up swiftly, but instead I hesitate, scream, urine and faeces slide between my legs, stones are on my back and bottom, then the sticks give way beneath my feet. Sparks and ashes burn my thighs, my breasts, choking with acrid smoke, the searing pain everywhere. Shame in my baldness, shame in tearing off the white sari to stop it from burning me, shame in my nakedness, I reach for a tethered foot. Frantically flailing into the flames, his smouldering body appears for an instant under me. Me, hunched, cowering, my hands instinctively in Namaste, then swiping at the flames to keep them off.

Unable to bear the stabbing pain on the soles of my feet, or breathe the scorching air, or scream for coughing, or see for stinging, a last disgrace compels me to get away, and I stumble and slip now across his body. I glimpse an eye

socket and teeth in a smiling jaw, marks still visible on a charred neck. I recoil, retch and choke. I lose my footing and tumble down through scorching sticks, poking and scraping and burning, as I howl and scramble on all fours, away from the sparks and ashes and red-hot embers of the collapsing pyre.

I grope towards the river, towards survival, always that, as I hear cries of disappointment and derision, finally back on my feet. But I fall again with the pain, my pubic hair still burning, burning my crotch, crawling now towards the river, people screeching prayers for forgiveness and abundance and beating my backside with hot poker. The water is surely near my fingers now, wanting to feel it, drink it, I slither across the mud. Crawling. Groping for water.

Aware only of shouting and barking, and dogs with sad faces. Their teeth are in my legs, in my arms, in my cheek. I have a flash of astonishment that blood can still be flowing through me, out of me, from gashes into snarling mouths, onto mud.

The sweet sickly smell of my own death reaches me, through slits I see a dog shake itself dry. Showers of drops glinting in the morning sun, then straining again for water, slithering in, steam hissing and sizzling and, sinking, a cry bubbles. Then suddenly something in my throat burns and quenches and there's a shocking fullness in my chest. Silent gasping, heaving. Panic again, but this time dulled, a muffled splash and shouts. Feral barking from somewhere, one arm reaching for the surface, but there is blackness and I don't know where I am. Finally something slippery on my outstretched hand. Still now, resisting until the end. Never give in. Giving in now. Falling gently, over. Closing my eyes. Mourning my life.

After

If I had thoughts, I could carry on. But I don't. Others with thoughts carry on. Think it. Write it. Tell it. What is happening? In whatever state I am in now, I can't really remember; memory needs thoughts, thoughts need memory. I would find this odd, this not having thoughts. But now I don't — or can't. It's like being in fog. You don't know which way is up or down or left or right or in front or behind.

I want to go home but I don't know where or what that is. I feel maybe once it is in something, in something loving, but it's as if that something is gone, or is no longer able to accommodate what I am. It's like I'm homeless. Wandering, but with something to do. Something vital. But I can't think what it is that needs to be done. Or why.

I try to attract attention. The more futile, the more I try. I don't know how I would know if it were no longer futile and I could stop, unless I get a sign that couldn't be missed or mistaken, that means I can stop searching for the something I don't know exists anymore.

All I really know is what I feel. I feel angry and enraged and out for something and not prepared to rest until something is done to meet it, meet the source of it. I need to act, to be again, to make something happen, but I don't have the means to do anything other than try to attract attention.

If the feeling were to stop, there would be a reason to assume that whatever it is that needs doing is done. I won't know that until I am without needing to know, not needing to know any knowing or feel any feeling. Then the feeling might stop, the feeling could stop, the feeling would stop.