

FICTION WINNER

SRUTHI NARAYANAN

*A Meal For Violets*

At 107, the deceased—a sixty-year-old woman—had been allergic to coriander. Subsequently, the daughter-in-law had scattered copious amounts on top of all the food: on the idlis, on the string bean sabji, on the two types of rice, even strewn atop the milk sweets like herbaceous confetti.

“Let her choke,” she’d muttered, placing the heaped trays in front of the Spirit Eaters.

The men ignored this; they commenced with the show. The third Eater had the most pathetic voice, and so he warbled out the practiced lines: “Please pay us a fair fee. We have come a long way, and we are so very hungry.”

107 was prepared—the eldest son spoke, following the script: “What is the amount that will appease our dead?” He stood at the threshold with two brothers, the daughter-in-law, and two tiny girls in matching pink outfits, all flanked by aunties and servants and neighbors.

The second Eater was cheeky and started the negotiations exorbitantly high. “Give us your house! Then we will eat.” The Spirit Eaters sat in a row in the courtyard with their backs to the road, pretending not to notice the crowd gathering on the other side of the front gate.

The eldest son replied as planned: “That is far too much. Have a heart.”

The second Eater tried again, taking their demands down a tier: “Give us your motorcycle! Then we will eat.”

Again, from the son: “That is far too much. Have a heart.”

By the time they arrived at the Spirit Eaters’ standard fee—moving from the motorcycle, to one lakh for each Eater, all the way down to a mere fraction split three ways—genuine hunger had set in. A rumbling growl escaped from the third Eater’s stomach.

The first Eater was skilled at mimicry, and he pitched his voice into an old woman’s croak, signaling the end of the negotiations: “Darling, I will not eat. Do not send me away.” The gasps from 107—twin squeaks from the little girls, a “Hai Bhagwan!”

from the maid—answered any questions about the impression’s accuracy.

The daughter-in-law emerged from the house with three steel plates, which she placed on the ground in front of the Eaters, one by one. The moment she stepped away, they began. The men scooped portions of food from the trays onto their plates and started eating, steadily and unflaggingly. Grains of tamarind rice skittered down the Spirit Eaters’ chins, landing in their laps; the mounds of curd rice stayed intact in their hands, snowy mountain-tops dotted through with lentils and mustard seeds and the ubiquitous coriander. In between bites, the first Eater cried out in the same grandmotherly bleat, his mouth full: “I am not hungry! Do not send me away! I will not eat!”

The crowd watched, with fascination and horror, as the Spirit Eaters consumed more food than seemed humanly possible; the trays were piled high, enough to comfortably feed a family of ten. The men tucked idlis into their cheeks, swallowed entire milk sweets whole, allowed residue to collect around their lips and dry in their beards. They wiped their hands along their plates to sop up the dregs of curd, sucking noisily on their cupped palms.

After nearly an hour, their fingers began scraping the bottoms of the trays. The first Eater cried out, one final time, “Do not send me away! I will not eat!” At this point, the third Eater responded, his voice thick: “Eat, Mother, eat. If you do not eat your fill, your soul will wander the earth forever as a ghost. Please eat.”

107 joined along, as scripted: “Eat, Mother, eat.” With these words, the Spirit Eaters accelerated their pace. They began shoveling the last of the food into their mouths, yanking it straight from the trays. They reached across and stole food off one another’s plates, as if in uncontrollable frenzy. They gulped and chewed and huffed, deliberately eating messily in this final stretch, paying no mind to the stains forming on their shirts; there was no risking any amount of etiquette, any restraint or holding back that might act as a barrier for the soul’s crossing.

After the last plate had been licked clean, the men sat in silence, looking at 107 with punch-drunk eyes. Their lips were nearly invisible under a layer of curd and oil.

The first Eater took a deep breath, opened his mouth as if to say some final words, and instead forced out a watery belch.

They hoped 108 would be the last death of the year.

“Only three days left, we might make it,” the second Eater said. He’d donned gold-rimmed reading glasses and was counting the money they’d collected from 107. “And how amazing would it be, ending the year on such an auspicious number?”

“We can’t do these two-a-day appointments anymore.” The first Eater sipped water from their shared flask, droplets collecting in his graying beard. “My acid is acting up.”

The third Eater stopped walking. “Slow down, it’s paining. The tamarind rice wasn’t bad, no?” He lifted his dhoti and began massaging his left knee.

The first Eater scoffed, leading them towards a telephone pole. “Too oily.”

They’d considered taking the train—they could afford the tickets—but 108 was only a half-day’s walk from 107 and traveling on foot would allow them to work up an appetite between houses. They walked along the edge of the deserted road, keeping an eye out for trucks and carts.

The third Eater moaned with relief when they arrived at the telephone pole. He planted his left foot against the pole’s base, then slowly inched it upward, stretching out the muscle.

The second Eater began walking away from the road, deeper into the grassy fields, still wearing his glasses. The third Eater called after him: “You need your spectacles to take a piss?”

“He needs them to find his pecker.” The first Eater sat down with a hard thud on the other side of the pole. “Is the pain very bad?”

The third Eater leaned forward, testing the joint, his chest touching his knee. “It’s okay. Give me ten minutes.”

Households made appointments with the Spirit Eaters on either the fourth or the tenth day of their mourning period. Two deaths a week was their typical rate: enough food to tide them over for almost a full day post-show, and the fees filled in the gaps. Within those gaps, when they weren’t traveling to appointments, the men would make a temporary home wherever they could—the walled perimeter of a temple, the covered hut at a bus depot, the biggest tree in the quietest park.

That year, the food had been the best at 57 (buttery and saucy, the kind of selection one might find at a wedding banquet) and the worst at 26 (the cook hadn’t realized that the yogurt had

spoiled, or hadn't cared). 84 ran a roadside snack stand, and they'd included a dozen packets of Magic Masala Lay's chips with the other dishes. 33 had put far too much chili powder in the curry, and the Eaters had needed to concentrate while they ate to avoid choking.

The Spirit Eaters' count reset with the calendar; soon there would be a new 107, a new 108. A new 2. They always skipped 1.

A truck rumbled up the road, decorated with technicolor paint; the truck's body was burnt-orange, the grill and hubcaps a brilliant turquoise, the truck bed the color of daffodils, with red-and-white bandhani designs festooning the frame. The driver honked cheerfully as he passed, and the first and third Eaters read the words "HORN OK PLEASE" emblazoned on the back of the truck, each letter painted in the colors of the Indian flag.

The second Eater emerged from the field, putting his glasses into a tubular case. "If you need to shit go here, it's so peaceful."

"Still digesting," the third Eater said sadly. He dropped his leg from the pole, then cracked his back with a sharp flex. "We can keep walking. I need to get hungry again."

The Spirit Eaters were required to finish everything in front of them when visiting a home, to ensure that the soul of the deceased was satiated. They had several techniques to make this part of their profession easier. They stomach-trained with large amounts of water, cabbage, and coconut. They integrated jaw exercises into their morning meditations and stuck their fingers down their throats to practice suppressing their gag reflexes. They marketed themselves as Brahmin vegetarians, not because they actually were but because meat was significantly more filling than rice and vegetables. When one Eater lagged during a performance, the other two picked up his slack, staying attuned to one another's signals of approaching fullness: the first Eater's heavy breathing, the second Eater's tendency to start whispering between bites, the third Eater staring off into space as he ate instead of down at his plate.

"The streets will be dirty when we're closer to the city," the second Eater insisted.

The first and third Eaters walked into the field, respectively veering to the left and to the right, to avoid whatever spot the second Eater had freshly occupied.

90 had been the most musical criers. Their wails were full-bodied, pitched in triads and quatrains, individual moans weaving in and out of the din. It had been like eating on a concert stage.

11 was stingy during negotiations, and it took nearly thirty minutes of back-and-forth before the food was eventually brought out.

Only one person was present at 62: a woman wearing an absolutely mammoth round bindi and heavy gold jewelry. She sat directly across from the Spirit Eaters for the duration of the performance, her eyes closed and a serene smile pulsing on her face.

108 was at the very end of a long dirt road, and the setting sun showily underscored this; burnished gold and red rays burst out from behind the house like the thousand arms of a goddess.

“This is too much,” the first Eater scowled, as a sunbeam hit him straight in the face. “It’s the actual light at the end of the tunnel.”

The men walked directly into the light, passing a rickshaw stand, a beauty parlor, and a women’s health clinic with peeling pink walls. The sounds of the street gradually quieted as they got closer to the house, and they felt the air cooling around them as the sun continued its descent.

The first thing they noticed at 108 was the plant life: banana leaves shading the property, stray mangoes littering the ground, neem fronds stroking the roof. More remarkable, however, were the innumerable terracotta pots crowding the front courtyard: all in varying sizes and shapes, all filled with the same purple flowers. They didn’t appear to be arranged with particular reason, nor did they seem to have been there for long; the ground under the pots was fresh with scattered dust.

“Jungle,” the third Eater remarked in non sequitur.

“Potted jungle,” the second Eater clarified.

The Spirit Eaters approached the front gate. They could see directly inside the entrance foyer, surrounded on three sides by black wrought-iron; more potted violets filled this space, lined up on the floor and along the top of a shoe shelf. Several marigold garlands were draped over the house’s main door, indication of a recent death.

The first Eater called out, beginning the script: “We are here

to eat!”

After a few moments, a girl in a pastel salwar opened the main door. She looked the men up and down, then beckoned them forward. “Madam said you should come inside.”

The first Eater frowned and repeated his words, trying a different emphasis: “We are here to *eat*.” The second and third Eaters squinted at her. “There’s a fee, Sister,” the second Eater added.

The girl was already crossing the cage-like foyer, unlocking the wrought-iron entrance. “I know who you are. But Madam said to come into the house.”

They paused, then the second Eater pushed open the gate and the Spirit Eaters entered, carefully tiptoeing around the potted violets.

41 had a house that was cartoonishly palatial, the courtyard festooned with candy-colored lawn ornaments. The men had sat on an expanse of artificial green grass as they ate, while tamed white rabbits hopped around them.

100 lived in a second-floor apartment; rather than conduct the ceremony in the shared courtyard, they’d opted to stand on the balcony while the Eaters performed two stories below.

22 marked the Spirit Eaters’ first-ever appointment in the slums. After accepting their fee, the men sat outside the entrance of a scrap metal shack, prolonging the consumption of several small vadai for the benefit of a child who peered at them from behind a sari-draped clothesline.

The widow explained, with neither pride nor apology, that her husband had been a flower enthusiast: “especially violets, as you can clearly see.” She was tall, with sharp features and an iron-gray braid that swung to her waist.

The Spirit Eaters had been escorted to the back courtyard of 108. They’d first entered the main room of the house, where a number of people were sitting on sofas, heads bowed and voices low; they were then led down a long hallway, passing a bedroom and a powder room and a mint-green box of a kitchen before exiting through the back of the house. The back courtyard was an expanse of poured concrete, with a well and a bathhouse and a single

step creating two levels on the ground. The house-girl approached the well, where the widow waited for the Spirit Eaters.

“Madam, they’ve come.”

“Check the rice, please.” The widow sent the girl away, then nodded at the Eaters. “Thank you for being here. Please come, we’ll be eating shortly.”

Two rows of woven mats were on the ground, with a small length of banana leaf placed in front of each one; the banana trees closest to the well had had the tips of their leaves hacked off. There was enough seating for a dozen people, and the Spirit Eaters shifted in irritation. The success of their ceremony—and their ability to satisfy the deceased—hinged entirely on them being the only ones eating, and each household was made aware of this upon booking an appointment. The disregard of the script was throwing everything off; the Eaters felt intercepted, almost deliberately disadvantaged by 108.

Even more potted violets hugged the circumference of the well and the perimeter of the house; the first Eater asked, redirecting his frustration by letting a note of irritation creep into his voice: “How many do you have?!”

The widow sighed. “Far too many. But my husband has written in his will that anyone who might mourn him in the future should take a pot of violets for their own. Which is fine with me—I’m not watering all of these.” She smiled as she said these final words and bent down to pick up one of the pots.

The Spirit Eaters had learned, before arriving at 108, that the deceased had been the local pharmacist. He’d been beloved in his profession for being both generous and straightforward; he was up-front with clientele about which drugs would work effectively, he offered his hopes for speedy recovery when he felt he could afford to hope, and he didn’t sugarcoat any bad news he needed to deliver. The Eaters had also learned that he’d died peacefully in his sleep; it wasn’t hard to imagine him now, surrounded by his flowers in his last moments.

Now, the widow hefted the pot she held higher in her arms, tilting it towards the Eaters with some difficulty. “It was the smell that fascinated him—he *loved* the smell. Here.”

The Spirit Eaters obediently leaned forward, taking a whiff one by one. The violets’ scent was in turns powdery and aquatic, a green lushness paired with a spun-sugar sweetness that

simultaneously hit the nose and the tongue and the back of the throat — exotic not because it was unfamiliar but because it offered a kind of intimacy in its fragrance, a sense of inherently knowing the scent and merely having it confirmed.

“Smells lovely.” The second Eater absently took his glasses case out of his shirt pocket and began toying with it.

“You’ll each take a pot, when you go.” The widow turned around, as if considering placing the pot on the well’s ledge, then seemingly deciding against it.

The Eaters began to protest. The third Eater said, “Oh no, we travel quite a lot.” The second Eater dropped the glasses case, his hands shaking. “We eat for more than flowers, Madam. The negotiations. . . We thought you were made aware.”

The first Eater added, more firmly: “This isn’t how we’re to begin.”

At this moment, the girl reappeared. “Food is ready, Madam.”

“Oh, beautiful. Send everyone out.” The woman smiled at the Spirit Eaters, either ignoring their protests or not having heard them at all. “Something Rajesh told me, when he first began growing the violets — their chemical makeup makes it impossible for us to remember their scent for more than a few minutes.” She held the pot towards them again. “See.”

The Eaters sighed, then did as they were told: the second Eater widened his eyes, the first Eater squinted, then sniffed again. The third Eater said, “I can still smell it.”

The widow shook the pot. “Give it time. After a few whiffs they’ll literally steal your memory of the fragrance.”

The first Eater said, just as the third Eater’s brow furrowed from his next inhale, “We can’t take any of the flowers with us, Madam, we’re not supposed to touch anything.” The third Eater peered into the flower’s canary-yellow center.

“Suit yourself. But it’s his request, and you’re here to mourn with us.” The woman appraised the well’s ledge a second time, then placed the pot gingerly on its narrow width.

“Does the smell come back?” The second Eater had his fingers on his temples.

The woman nodded. “Eventually. Once your mind has forgotten to forget it.”



The food that 108 served was simple: rice with ghee, vegetable curry, a beetroot sambar that stained their fingers pink, then curd and pickle to finish. As the house-girl brought the food out, the people that the Spirit Eaters had seen in the main room filed out as well; each of them held a potted violet, and as they sat down they placed the pots on the other side of the banana leaves they would be eating off, creating an unintentional floral runner that separated the two rows. They brightened upon seeing the Spirit Eaters.

“We didn’t notice you, welcome, welcome!”

“We were looking at Rajesh’s albums, have you seen —”

“The sun is already setting, we’ll have to finish quickly.”

Someone handed each Eater a tumbler of water, another person directed them to their places at the very end of the rows, the first Eater seated across from the second and third. The widow handed the second Eater a plate of roti as he made his way to his place. “Can you take this? Put it next to the rice.”

With the crowd of people, the Spirit Eaters were unable to follow their script, and they gave up trying to do so; they looked at one another, then the third Eater shrugged, scowling slightly. This happened occasionally—households insisting that the men eat first, then claiming to have forgotten to pay, or claiming to be too miserable to think about money, or even turning hostile, demanding to know how the men could be so cruel—and it only meant a bit of ugliness at the end of the performance, the Eaters arguing until they were given their fee, though they didn’t like to conclude on such a sour note. The men took their seats alongside the guests, folding their legs, splashing a bit of water out of their tumblers to clean the banana leaves.

The widow served the food herself, waving away her guests’ complaints. “All of you be quiet. This is how I want to feed you. Let me do this.”

The guests ate each item as it was served, and the Spirit Eaters followed suit, looking down the rows for a cue. The guests turned out to be a combination of family and friends: the sister of the deceased, neighbors from down the road, a cousin visiting from Besant Nagar. The conversation focused as much on the deceased as it did on other topics—on memories of Rajesh, on family gossip, on history and mythology, on a Bollywood movie that had been released that week. The house-girl ate alongside them, chatting comfortably and chiming in with her own opinions.

The Spirit Eaters were largely silent, even when questions were directed at them — they smiled with closed mouths, trying to be polite, but they felt out of their element, carried along by an unseen current. When the first Eater began eating quickly out of habit, pushing food into his mouth, the widow placed a hand on his shoulder: “Slowly, Brother, take your time.” She was standing over him with a serving bowl. “Do you want more rice?”

The first Eater did slow down, but he found this difficult, as did the second and third Eaters; eating without urgency felt incorrect, and they found themselves gathering speed in bursts, then having to force themselves to pull back.

As the light fell further and dusk turned to dark, 108 concluded the meal. The guests placed their banana leaves in a pile, took turns washing their hands and rinsing their mouths at a tap along the side of the house. After the guests washed their hands, they returned to the courtyard to retrieve their violets. They pressed their noses to the blossoms, placed the tips of their fingers on the surface of the soil. They bade the Spirit Eaters farewell, but casually so, as if they’d happened to meet at a party or had spent a long time side by side in a hospital waiting room. “Have a good night, brothers.” “Best of luck with everything.”

When the last guest had departed, the widow came back to the courtyard through the house, holding three stainless steel tiffin boxes stacked one on top of the other. “Please take some food with you, for your meal tomorrow. There’s still so much left.” Balanced on the topmost tiffin box was a padded white envelope: their fee.

The men hesitated, and then the second Eater stepped forward to take the containers and the envelope. “Thank you, Madam.” He cleared his throat.

“And take the violets.” The widow smoothed out the front of her sari. “I know you said you travel,” she added hastily, as the first Eater opened his mouth. “But you can leave them at your homes, with your families. Leave them wherever you return to.”

The Eaters were silent. The widow paused, and she added, her voice cracking in sorrow for the first time: “Give them to someone who will mourn you.”

As the Eaters departed, each one holding a pot, they held their faces over the flowers and breathed deeply. The scent was back.

55 had been unnervingly silent through the entire show, their eyes trained on the Eaters' hands and mouths and on the dwindling piles of food. When they'd discussed it later that night, the Spirit Eaters had eventually realized that 55 didn't seem to be scrutinizing as much as they appeared to be manifesting—as if, by sheer willpower, one could personally guide their beloved into a world free of suffering, erecting a wall between heaven and Earth, acting as a conduit into the next life.

It wasn't the silence that bothered the men as much as it was the labor-sharing. The Spirit Eaters made spectacle of mourning in some small way to take a bit of burden off those suffering the true loss, monetizing death to give the function a bit more form. It was the second Eater who was eventually able to put clear words to their discomfort: "They're diluting our purpose by watching like that. Why call us, if they can grieve their families sufficiently?"

It was past midnight by the time the Eaters stopped walking. They'd decided not to look for lodging that night, nor did they try to find a bus or a train station or even a truck like the one they'd seen earlier. They walked silently, each one holding their flowerpot, the three tiffin containers in the second Eater's shoulder bag.

As they crested a hill, a peepal tree at the edge of the road became visible, its leaves like a canopy of crows' wings. The first Eater abruptly changed course, leading them towards the tree.

The third Eater tried to speak. "Are we sure we should sleep under the peepal? . . . Bad luck?" The first Eater said nothing; the second Eater turned around and glared.

The men settled under the tree, placing the violets against the base of the tree before sitting in a circle. As promised, the scent had disappeared and reappeared over the course of their journey, and at different intervals for each Eater; they'd been diligently reporting to one another on the scent's frequency, until suddenly they weren't, walking in silence for several pitch-dark miles.

None of them felt hungry, but the second Eater distributed the tiffin boxes regardless. The men opened the containers, finding smaller portions of the meal they'd been served at 108: compact portions of rice and curry, a folded roti, and a dollop of pickle on top, like a schoolboy's lunch. They began to eat, relaxing into the

messiness that they knew—the careless mouthfuls, the wayward bits of food falling every which way.

As they ate, something opened up inside each of them. It started as soft sniffing, then graduated to trembling hiccups. The first Eater exhaled repeatedly, the second Eater wiped his eyes on a dirty sleeve and took another bite. The third Eater, in an effort to remain silent, did exactly the opposite; he emitted a tight, compressed cry. Soon the Spirit Eaters were bawling, tears streaming through their curd-stained cheeks, dampening the rotis, salting the pickle. They turned their bodies out from the circle, looking away from one another as they wept.

The third Eater thought briefly about the night he'd found his mother: fingertip-shaped bruises at her throat, her face bloodied. 1.

The second Eater remembered the boy he'd loved in his village, the boy who'd been killed after they'd been caught together, after the second Eater had fled. 1.

The first Eater would never forget his sister's eyes, only just visible under the surface of the murky water. 1.

The men didn't stop eating as they cried, and they sobbed through bites, filling their mouths to muffle the sounds, pressing their left hands to their chests to quiet the ache as they continued eating with their right hands. Eventually, when the containers were empty, the Spirit Eaters turned back into the circle and held one another, weeping for the memory of being remembered.