

VIKRAM AND THE VAMPIRE

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For Anita Roy, my fellow traveler in ickiness,
squiggleness and spookiness. Thank you for prodding,
poking and giddy-upping me from the very beginning
of my writing journey.

And for Sidhant, Antara and all little readers. May you
always have a devilishly good time with books.

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A MATTER OF TRANSPORT

The question that foxes me is: How does one deliver a vampire?

If you need to take a vampire from place A and deliver it to someone at place B, how would you go about doing that?

Here are a few things that come to mind:

You could courier the vampire. Convincing the postal department to allow a vampire to be put into mail would take some work. They would ask you a whole bunch of questions that would be rather difficult to answer:

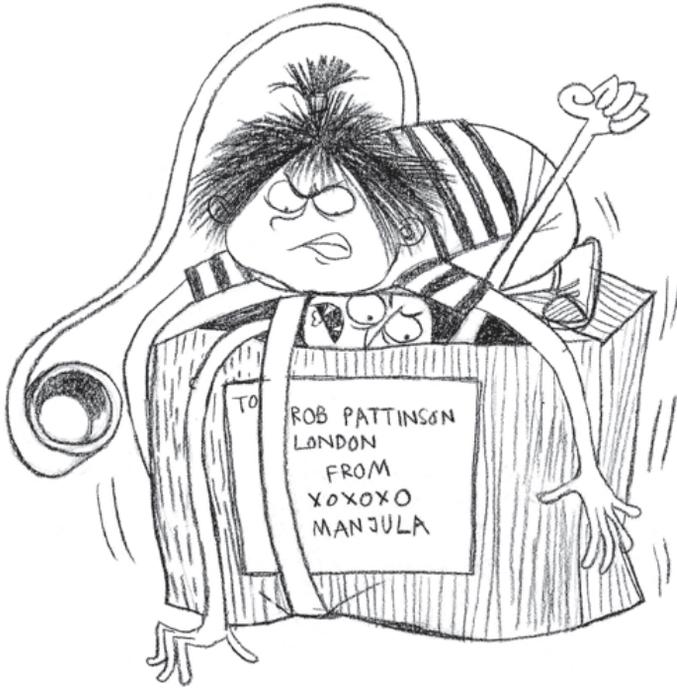
‘How will you ensure the vampire stays in the box?’

‘What if it rears up and bites the delivery guy?’

‘Will it be de-clawed and de-fanged before packing?’

And then of course, there is the tiny little problem of having to stuff the vampire into a box to begin with.

Booking the vampire onto a train could be a possibility. But a day train would have sunlight streaming through and bratty kids running around. Sunlight is quite



disagreeable to a vampire. Bratty kids in a train, yelling their heads off, kicking your chair from behind and being their annoying little selves can be disagreeable to the gentlest of souls – let alone a vampire. I shudder to think of a vampire with a headache.

A night train, on the other hand, would have the vampire in much too happy a mood. He'd amuse himself by showing off his fangs and cooing on about blood. Passengers on overnight trains are often scaredy-cats,



likely to jump out at the sight of a vampire however entertaining he might attempt to be.

An airplane may pose a similar problem, though one sincerely hopes that no one leaps out (at least not without their parachute).

That leaves a sea voyage or road transport, but I have heard that vampires are prone to seasickness and carsickness. That would never do. Can you imagine what might come out if a vampire threw up?

The only option seems to be good old manual labour. Get hold of the vampire, throw him over your back and hike across to the delivery address. However, this can be done only if the vampire is willing to be thrown across like a sack of potatoes, and is pleasant enough not to bite you in the neck.

Thus it was that long, long ago, King Vikramaditya came to be carrying Betal, a vampire who had taken residence in a corpse, on his back. In any case, most of the options we have explored above would not have been available to the king. In those days, pigeons served as couriers, dreadfully bumpy horse carts or even bumpier elephant rides were the only way to traverse across land and, of course, air travel was still unheard of.

This is the story of why a king acted as a courier service and his exasperating journey as he ensured the delivery of a vampire-infested corpse. Ah, I almost forgot! It also has a whole bunch of maddening riddles that Betal posed to the king along the way, in exchange for Betal's cooperation to be a willing parcel.



Preview shows limited pages.



THE DELICATE DARLINGS

There once lived a king with his three marvelously delicate queens. Strange as it may seem, that is the way things were – wishy-washy fainting fits amongst ladies was a treasured quality in some kingdoms.

These three queens – their names? Let's just call them Queen Touchmenot, Queen Itsratherhot and Queen Oohmyhead – were famed to be the daintiest in the whole land. A sheet that had the teeniest, tiniest bit of lint would have Queen Touchmenot complaining of soreness in the morning. A fresh, fluffy roti handed to Queen Itsratherhot had her screeching with pain. And a cat mewing too loud had Queen Oohmyhead wrapping her head tight in bandages. Quite a troublesome threesome, as you can imagine! However, the King doted on them and was in awe of their daintiness.

It was the time of the year when buds were blooming everywhere, the trees had on a bright green cover and nights were particularly delightful with a pleasant breeze

blowing. The king invited Queen Touchmenot to a picnic one evening. As they strolled in the palace gardens, they stopped by a pond to admire the lotus blossoms floating on its surface. Being a romantic sort, the king stretched out to the centre of the pond despite his achkan dipping into the murky water and plucked the lotus. As he was handing it to his Queen Touchmenot, it slipped from his fingers and landed on her foot with the faintest *'plop'*.

'Ow! Ow! Ow!' screamed Queen Touchmenot as a gash appeared on her foot where the petals had grazed her skin. *'Call the vaidya!'* yelled the king, horrified at having hurt his wife and yet wonderstruck by how delicate a lady she was.

Leaving the vaidya to attend to the Queen Touchmenot and the picnic still untouched, the king invited Queen Itsratherhot to join him for the rest of the evening ... actually night now, for the sun had already set amidst all the commotion. As they sat there eating and playing a game of Pachisi, it became clear that the Queen Itsratherhot was going to lose terribly. The king gleefully rubbed the cowrie shells and threw them down just as the queen clutched her ankle and shrieked, *'Ouch! Ouch! Ouch!'*

'Come now, Rani dearest, don't be such a bad loser,' said the king. But the queen began to sob uncontrollably. Seeing his queen become a blubbering mess, the king said, *'Oh all right, you can say you won.'*

As he leaned in to comfort her, the queen whimpered,

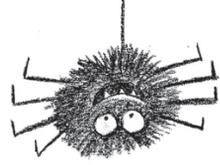


'It's my ankle. The moonlight has made my skin break into blisters. Call the vaidya quick.' The king stared at her in amazement. 'But I have still won the game,' she added as the king jumped up to call for help.

However dainty your queens may be, it can get rather lonely dining by yourself while the lovely ladies lie in bed unwell. The king asked his third wife, Queen Oohmyhead, to join him for dinner. As the queen delicately tiptoed to dinner, the sound of wheat being pounded in the far distance reached her ears. The palace staff often rocked their babies to sleep to this soothing rhythm. Queen Oohmyhead, however, was overcome with pain. She clutched her head, swooned back and forth and landed with a terrific *THUD!* in the corridor. The king, aghast but strangely still marvelling, lifted the queen and deposited her with the (by now rather exhausted) vaidya.

'Well, I will leave the three wishy-washy queens to the king and now ask my question,' said Betal to King Vikram. 'Which of the three queens is the most delicate?'

King Vikram may have been the sort who took time figuring out things like flying corpses, but he was obsessed with solving riddles. Without thinking for a moment about the condition Betal had set earlier, he answered, 'Aha! That would be Queen Oohmyhead. The other two were affected when something touched them. For Queen Touchmenot, it was the flower and in Queen



Its rather hot's case, her skin was touched by moonlight. However, Queen Oohmyhead keeled over with just a distant sound. It must be her for sure.'

'You are right, oh most wise king in all the land,' giggled Betal gleefully. 'And since you answered, I must be off! That was our agreement!' And he slipped off the king's back and whooshed back to his perch on the tree. King Vikram realised that he had been tricked. Most annoyed with himself and with Betal, the king yelled after him, 'At least try and remember their names next time, or think up some better ones!'