

The Winding Sheet

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At the door of the thatched hut, father and son sat beside a smoldering fire pit in silence. Inside, the son's young wife Buddya was tossing and turning in labor pains, letting out agonizing moans that made the two of them cringe. It was a cold winter night, a deathlike silence hung in the air, and the entire village was shrouded in darkness.

"Sounds like she's not gonna make it," said Gheesu, the father. "This has been going on all day! Why don't you go take a look at her?"

"What's there to see?" muttered Mahdo despondently. "If she's going to die, why can't she just get it over with quickly?"

"What an ungrateful wretch! How can you share life's sorrows with the woman a whole year, then just turn your back on her?"

"Why don't *you* go, if you want to see her thrashing around in pain like that?"

The men were from the lowest Hindu caste and had a bad reputation throughout the village for their negligence. For every day Gheesu worked, he gave himself a three-day vacation. Mahdo was just as much of a loafer, rewarding every hour of work with an hour to smoke his pipe. This was why no one would hire them. Even as much as a handful of grain in the house served as an excuse not to work. When they came to the brink of starvation, Gheesu would climb trees and break off branches for firewood and Mahdo would sell them in the market, and as long as the money lasted, they would wander around doing nothing. When they found themselves starving again, they would collect more firewood to sell or look for manual labor. Because they lived in a farming village, there was always a demand for labor – any hard-working person could find dozens of jobs. But Gheesu and Mahdo were only hired when someone had no alternative but to be content with getting the services of one man for the price of two.

If only they had been ascetics! Being content with their lot and trusting in providence came naturally to them—it was in their nature. They certainly lived a strange kind of life. With nothing to their name but a couple of clay pots and rags to cover their bodies, they entertained no delusions about themselves. Their unpaid debts made them the object of reproach in the village, but they didn't mind – they were able to evoke such pity that even though there was no hope of repayment, people were willing to lend them money. They filled their stomachs by stealing peas and potatoes from farmers' fields and roasting them for dinner or simply breaking off stalks of sugar cane to gnaw on at night. Gheesu had lived this type of hand-to-mouth existence for sixty years, and Mahdo, as an obedient son, had simply been following in his father's footsteps, bringing him even greater notoriety.

Just now, in fact, sitting beside the fire pit, they were roasting potatoes which they had dug up from somebody's field. Gheesu's wife had died long ago, but Mahdo had been married for only a year. Since then, his wife had been trying to get the men to live together as a family. Grinding grain or cutting grass for other people, she would earn enough to buy a couple of pounds of flour for the two shameless rats to keep their bellies full. Yet as a result, the men had become not only lazier, but vain as well. If anyone wanted to hire them, they would nonchalantly demand twice the wages. They showed the same carelessness for poor Buddya, who had been struggling to deliver her baby since

morning. They were only waiting for her to get on with it and die so they could sleep in peace.

Ghesu took a potato from the fire and began to peel it. “Go on, take a look and see how she is,” he said. “She must have some kind of a demon or something.” He snorted. “In this town, even the witch doctor charges a rupee! Who has that kind of money?”

Mahdo was afraid that if he went into the hut, Ghesu would wolf down most of the potatoes. “I’m scared to go in there,” he said.

“What are you scared of? I’ll be sitting right here!”

“Why don’t *you* go take a look then?”

“Listen, when my woman died, I didn’t leave her bedside for three days. Your wife’ll just be embarrassed if I go in there. I’ve never even seen her face! How can I walk in now to stare at her swollen belly? She won’t know what to do! If she sees me, she sure won’t feel free to keep thrashing around on the bed like that!”

“All I can think about is, what’ll we do if she has the kid? No sugar, no spices, no oil—we’ve got nothing to feed him!”

“We’ll get what we need – If God gives us a child, those people who can’t scrounge up a penny for us now’ll come running to help us! I had nine kids, and we never had a thing in the house—that’s how I got by every time.”

In a society where the condition of those who worked day and night was not much better than their own, and those who knew how to take advantage of hard-working farmers were better off than the farmers themselves, this way of thinking was not surprising. One might even say that Ghesu was smarter than the rest because he had chosen to join ranks with the trouble-makers and crooks instead of the dim-witted farmers. Unfortunately, because he was unable to cover up his foul play as they were, people had labeled him the village scoundrel, while others of his type had gone on to become headmen and village leaders. He did have the satisfaction of knowing that although he was poor, at least he wasn’t doing the same kind of back-breaking labor as the farmers and nobody was taking advantage of his naiveté and helplessness.

The two started to grab potatoes from the coals, peel them, and wolf them down scalding hot. Having not eaten all day, they didn’t even have enough patience to let them cool off first. Again and again they burned their tongues. The potatoes didn’t feel so hot when they removed the skins, but if they bit into them, their tongues and the roofs of their mouths were scorched. It was better just to gulp the fireballs down and let their stomachs do the work! They swallowed so quickly that it made their eyes water.

Ghesu remembered with fondness the marriage festival of the village chief which he had attended twenty years ago. He had never been treated to such a feast in all his life and to this day the memory was fresh. “I’ll never forget that feast,” he said. “I haven’t been treated to food like that since. The bride’s family had crêpes for everybody – we were all eating it, young and old, the finest crêpes – seasoning, dips, all kinds of juicy vegetables, each one better than the last – yogurt, seasoning, pastries – I can’t tell you how delicious it was. There was no end to it! We just asked for whatever we wanted and ate our fill! We ate so much that there wasn’t even room for a glass of water to wash it down! And the waiters! Right in front of us loading our plates with hot, bulging, luscious pastries – we’re telling them no, we can’t eat any more, holding up our hands to stop them – but they keep on serving! Then when we all finished and wiped our mouths, we each got a leaf-packet of tobacco. How was I going to take the time to chew tobacco? I could

barely stand up! I just went straight to my blanket and lay down for a rest. That's how generous the chief was!"

"If only we could have that kind of a feast again!" said Mahdo, relishing every detail of the story. "Now what's a man to eat? That was a different age. These days all people think about is saving. Forget about spending their money on a wedding, they just save it all for the funeral! They steal from the poor, but where does the money go? They just keep on robbing and cheating – but when it comes to spending, what a bunch of misers! Boy, you must have eaten twenty servings of bread at that feast."

"I ate more than twenty!" said Gheesu.

"I would have eaten fifty."

"I ate at *least* fifty," said Gheesu. "After all, I was young and strong. You're not half the size I was!"

After finishing off the potatoes they drank some water and, using their skirts as sheets, curled up near the fire pit to sleep like a couple of coiled serpents. Buddya was still moaning inside the hut.

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In the morning Mahdo entered the hut and saw that his wife's body was cold. Flies were buzzing around her face. Her lifeless eyes were turned up inside her head and her body was covered with dust. The child had died in her womb.

Mahdo ran to his father. Both of them began wailing in loud voices and beating their breasts. When the neighbors heard the noise, they came running and, according to custom, gave their condolences to the bereaved.

But this was not a time for weeping and wailing. There was a need to arrange for the winding sheet and wood for burning the body. Unfortunately, money had vanished from the house like meat in a hawk's nest.

Father and son went in tears to the house of the village landowner, in spite of the fact that the landowner couldn't stand the sight of them and had himself beaten them several times with his own hands for stealing and not showing up for work.

"What's the matter, you bums? What's all the blubbering about?" said the landowner. "When was the last time you came to pay respects? I ought to kick you out of town!"

Bowing his head to the ground, his eyes full of tears, Gheesu said, "My lord, there's been a terrible tragedy – my daughter-in-law passed away during the night. She was suffering all day, my lord –we sat by her bedside half the night! We gave her all the medicines we could, but she got away from us. Now there's no one to take care of us – all is lost, our family is ruined! I'm at your mercy. Who else can help us perform the funeral rites? Everything we had was spent on the medicine. My lord, if you could just help us, the woman can have a proper funeral. Who else's door can I come to but yours?"

Now the landowner was a compassionate man, but he knew there was no point in doing anything nice for Gheesu – he would never change. The landowner was tempted to say, "Go on, get out of here! Let the body rot in your house! When I hire you to work, you don't turn up, but when you have troubles of your own, look where you come! Here to kiss up to me, you lazy cheating son-of-a-bitch!"

But this was not a time for anger or revenge. He managed to fish out a couple of rupees and throw them at the men as if relieving himself of a burden, unable to utter a single word of consolation or even bear to look at them.

When the biggest landowner in the village had given them two rupees, how could the shopkeepers and moneylenders refuse to contribute? Gheesu certainly knew how to use this to his advantage. Little by little, the money started trickling in, and within an hour he had collected a full five rupees. Some people gave grain, others wood, and in the afternoon Gheesu and Mahdo went to the market to look for a winding sheet.

Meanwhile, others had started to cut bamboo stalks for a stretcher to place the body in the fire. The tender-hearted village women came to see the body and, shedding a few tears over Buddya's untimely end, went their way.

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When he got to the market, Gheesu said, "Look at all the wood here, plenty for burning the body – see what I mean, Mahdo?"

"Sure, there's lots of wood—now all we need is a winding sheet!"

"Why don't we just get a cheap one?"

"Good idea! It'll be dark by the time the funeral begins –who'll be able to see a winding sheet in the dark?"

"What a lousy custom! Someone who can't hardly scrounge up a pile of rags to wear during her life, she needs a brand new winding sheet to burn her dead body!"

"And for what? Just to go up in smoke!"

"Yeah, then what's left?" said Gheesu. "You know, if we'd had these five rupees yesterday, we could've gotten her some medicine."

Both of them knew very well what was going on in each other's heart. They continued to wander around the market until evening. Whether by chance or by intention, they came at last to an alehouse and, as if by a previous agreement, went inside. There for some time they stood in a state of uncertainty. Finally Gheesu bought a bottle of liquor and some snacks, and the two of them took seats on the porch outside and started to drink.

After several drinks the men began to feel tipsy. "What's the use of a winding sheet?" said Gheesu. "In the end it just goes up in smoke. The girl can't take anything with her!"

Mahdo, looking to the heavens as though to justify his actions, said, "It's just the way things are in this world! For instance, why do rich people give thousands of rupees in charity to the upper caste? Who can say whether they'll get any reward for it in the afterlife or not?"

"Those millionaires have money to burn," said Gheesu. "What do we have?"

"But what will you tell everybody?" Mahdo asked. "They'll ask where's the winding sheet, you know."

Gheesu laughed. "We'll just tell them the money slipped out of our pocket and we looked all over but couldn't find it!"

Mahdo also laughed, delighted that they'd come up with such a clever way to beat the system. "What a good woman she was, the poor thing!" he said. "Even when she died she didn't go without giving us a feast!"

More than half the bottle was finished. Gheesu ordered five pounds of crêpes, meat with curry, spicy liver, and fried fish from the store across from the tavern. Mahdo rushed off to bring their order back, wrapped in leaves. Fully one and a half rupees were spent, leaving only a small bit of change.

The two of them sat at their feast with the smugness of lions devouring their prey in the jungle, untroubled by any fear of having to answer for their actions or concern for their reputation. They had left such petty scruples behind long ago. Pausing to think for a moment, Gheesu said, "If we're enjoying ourselves so much, don't you think she'll get a reward in the afterlife?"

"Definitely, sure she will." Mahdo nodded his head in agreement. "O God, you know all things! Take her to heaven! We pray for her with all our hearts. We haven't eaten food like this in our whole lives!"

After a moment, a thought occurred to Mahdo. "You know, father, one of these days, won't we also have to die?"

Gheesu, frowning at him, gave no response to this childish question.

"If she asks us why we didn't give her a winding sheet, what will you say?" Mahdo asked.

"We'll say, 'That's none of your damn business!'"

"Well she *will* ask, you know."

"And what makes you so certain she won't get a winding sheet? What kind of an idiot do you think I am? Do you think I've been digging ditches for the past sixty years? She'll get a winding sheet, all right, and a better one than what we had in mind to give her!"

Mahdo had his doubts. "Who will get it for her?" he asked. "You used up all the money!"

"I'm telling you, she'll get the winding sheet!" said Gheesu, losing his temper. "Why don't you believe me?"

"So why can't you tell me who will get her one?"

"The same people who gave us this money to buy one!" shouted Gheesu. "Of course, they won't give us the money again, they'll buy it themselves. But if they do give us the money, we'll sit here the same way and drink to our heart's content, then they'll just have to go and buy us another one!"

As darkness fell and the stars shone more brightly, the atmosphere in the bar also became more festive. People sang and caroused; friends embraced and poured drinks into each other's mouths. There was an air of exhilaration, a mood which was itself intoxicating, so that many became drunk on nothing more than a few sips. The reason people came here was just to forget themselves; moreso than by drinking, they became cheered by the atmosphere. Driven here by the hard knocks of life, for a short time they didn't know if they were alive, dead, or somewhere in between.

Father and son continued to enjoy themselves, sipping at their drinks. All eyes had fallen upon them. How lucky they were to have a whole bottle to themselves!

When he had finished eating, Mahdo gathered the leftover bread in the leaf wrapping and gave it to a beggar who was staring at them with hungry eyes. For the first time in his life, he felt the pride, joy, and excitement of giving.

"Take all you want!" Gheesu said to the beggar. "And say a prayer for the lady who earned it, because she's dead now. Your prayers are sure to help her! Pray with all your heart! It's hard-earned money that bought this."

Looking again to the heavens, Mahdo said, "She'll go to paradise, father. She'll be the queen there!"

Gheesu stood and, brimming with delight, said, "Yes, my son, she will go to heaven. She never hurt a soul. When she died, she fulfilled our greatest wish. If she doesn't go to heaven, do you think these rich snobs will? These filthy rich pigs who rob the poor with

both hands and then just bathe in the Ganges and pour out water for the gods in the temple to wash away their sins?”

With this the mood of optimism suddenly changed, as is common when drinking, and was followed by a round of despair. “But father!” wept Mahdo. “The poor woman suffered so much in her life! She even died in pain and anguish!” Covering his face with his hands, he broke into sobs.

“Why are you crying, son?” said Gheesu. “Be happy that she was set free from the delusions of this world. She left all these troubles behind. She must have been a real saint to die so young!”

With that the two of them stood and began to sing:

*O you deceitful seductress!
Why do you beguile us with your charms?*

Everyone in the bar was captivated by the spectacle as the two men went on singing in a drunken stupor. They began first to dance, acting out every detail of the song by their gestures, then to jump and cavort, then to stagger and stumble until finally they collapsed dead-drunk on the floor.