

WINNER  
ENGLISH PEN  
AWARD



# THE WANDERING

INTAN PARAMADITHA

## Prologue: Demon Lover

Beware the gifts you accept, or so said your elders. But it's too late. You ask for the package: a present that comes with a curse. Demon Lover has granted you a pair of red shoes.

Demon Lover arrives as you're desperately contemplating flight. It's a night just like all those nights before, when you felt as if your limbs were lashed to the bed. Those nights when your mouth was sealed tight, though it was your ears that you wished were plugged. But, alas!, far from fighting the racket, they funnelled it into your eardrums, cramming, jamming noise into networks of blood vessels that slowly hardened to the onslaught: the buzz of televisions, the cries of street vendors, roaring motorbikes, blaring car horns, the clack-clack-clack of trains. Distorted by mosque loudspeakers, raucous calls to prayer marked the passage of time. Occasionally, you'd get a bonus – Islamic singing from frenzied matrons or a sultry dangdut performance on Independence Day. The scorching weather had grown claws and was raking them across a blackboard.

All this chaos mocks those who place hope in a dynamic rhythm. Some cities move faster than others, forever reminding you to board quickly as they won't stop for long: a train, a train, you're looking for a train. But here, you know, you're going nowhere.

You've grown roots, you're gathering moss.

You believe that certain settings can lure people into suicide. Reading teaches you that such places tend to be beautiful and

bewitching: the River Seine, the Golden Gate Bridge. Jakarta, though, is so hot, so dull, so ugly, its face too foul to provoke action. But Jakarta is where you live, in this city full of thwarted suicidal urges.

You can't move. Perhaps this is what it means to be possessed by the devil. On those earlier nights, you'd close your eyes and pray to anyone who would listen. You'd count, hoping your life would change when you uttered *three*. But nothing changed. Bursting with rage, you'd rail at the universe. If a demon wanted to devour you, so be it, you thought – at least you wouldn't be so bored.

Maybe demons need an explicit invitation. And so, tonight you go to bed naked, and start to count. Before you reach three, the light in your room flickers and goes out. The window opens.

And there he stands, at the foot of your bed.

Gaunt, stooped and aged, his body abounds in scars so fresh that he reminds you of a child covered in itchy scabs, the result of falling again and again from his bike. Haphazard tufts of feathers adorn the creature – they sprout from his chest, his cheeks, his ears. His eyes glow crimson, radiating hunger. You hold your breath. Feeling a chill, you pull the covers up to your neck.

Are you going to rape me?

He grins, displaying rows of browning teeth, some sharp, others rotting. His slobber wets your big toe.

Or maybe you want to eat me?

He doesn't move. His crimson eyes merely fix themselves on your body in a passionless stare. He is neither a rapist nor a devourer of flesh.

Come here.

You are in command, so he obeys, and lies down beside you. You don't know why you're doing this. Perhaps you're possessed; perhaps you simply don't want to stay here, to live this life. You caress his long fingers, drawing them to your neck. His lips are cold, rough. As your tongue hooks his, his

scrawny frame writhes in a state between pain and arousal, startling you.

Once you have coupled, you know that he worships you. You look at him in amazement as you wipe the sweat from your brow. The night is stiflingly hot. He lavishes kisses upon your feet, then draws near to your face again, to your ear, whispering in a foreign tongue. Yet you understand his words.

Make me your slave.

It's too cramped in here, you say. I don't have space for a demon.

Then I'll visit every night, he promises. I'll give you anything you ask for.

*Anything?*

Every night from then on, you hope and pray for this devil to slip into your rented room, eager to know the magic of his charms. His adulation makes him a formidable lover. You're famished, and nibble at him like a rat gnaws on bread.

You're not sure if he is some random shaitan or the Great Iblis himself, but you have a demon to call your own. What pet name shall you bestow upon him? Devil Dearest? Beelzebaby? You settle on Demon Lover.

He courts you like a suitor from days gone by, regaling you with roses and chocolates. Not the most useful gifts, you think, but sweet, because you're addicted to the lovemaking. Being as ancient as he is, he has many tales to tell. You've heard most of his stories but still he beats his chest proudly when you ask about everything from the slaying of Abel to his involvement in the First and Second World Wars. When it comes to the temptation of Joseph by Potiphar's wife, however, he denies involvement.

'Sorry,' he objects, 'but women have been demons since the dawn of time.'

You fuck him like crazy but soon tire of his presents. Before a month passes, you discard the drawerful of dried roses and

complain that his chocolates are making you fat. Demon Lover prefers a curvy, voluptuous body, but you don't care. You want a more substantial display of his devotion.

'Are you really going to grant whatever I desire?'

Demon Lover nods, then returns to lavishing kisses upon your feet.

'OK,' you decide. 'My sole wish is to get the hell away from here. I want adventure. Give me money, visas and a one-way ticket. I don't want to come back.'

With a vaguely condescending smirk, he shakes his head.

'What's the problem?' you ask.

'Your wish is too specific. Ask for something more abstract, like success, or happiness.'

'Sorry, I can't. You and I might interpret them differently.'

You pull your feet away. Reclining on the bed, you take a slender volume from the bedside table and use it to fan your face. Screwing in the tropics requires negotiation with heat and humidity.

You grumble to him: 'I'm bored.'

Demon Lover flashes a knowing smile.

'I've realised that from the start. That's how women are. From Madame Bovary to Palupi.'

'Palupi?'

'Yes – a remarkable character from a famous film. An Indonesian classic from the sixties.'

'Why was she bored?'

'She married a poor author with integrity.'

'Ah. That would have bored her senseless all right.'

You study your neatly trimmed toenails. You've already done everything there is to do. Cut your nails, have sex, fan yourself.

'You're a little different. Palupi didn't have her very own devil.'

'But I'm still bored.'

'You've never been overseas?'

Of course, the new low-cost airlines mean that anyone can go to Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, even Manila, after saving up a little. But those cities are too close. It wouldn't be all that different from visiting Jogja.

'I want to go further, to stay away longer. I don't want to be just a tourist. I want to live in Paris. Or New York. I'm almost twenty-eight and I've never been to New York. It's a tragedy.'

Demon Lover squints and then snaps at you. His voice is slow and raspy.

'What a sad, spoiled brat!' He pauses, as if his words have led him to an epiphany. 'I'm sorry, but you're pathetic. Twenty-seven is a sacred age.'

'Oh, please. Stop. Don't tell me you're going to start blathering about Jim Morrison and the Twenty-Seven Club. How clichéd can you get.'

He looks at you with pity in his eyes.

'If you haven't accomplished anything by the age of twenty-seven, give up. Accept your fate.'

You glare, and order him out. Demon Lover doesn't want to quarrel. He refuses to go but makes another offer: 'How about a round-trip ticket?'

'I already told you – I don't want to come back.'

'That complicates matters.'

'How? Why? You're a prince of darkness, aren't you?'

'We'll need a contract.'

'Fine.'

Demon Lover snorts, annoyed, then lectures you. Don't you realise you're bargaining with a devil? Didn't you learn anything from the story of Faust and Mephistopheles?

The jagged contours of his face become even sharper. You understand now that he has been reluctant to grant your wish because he doesn't want you to leave. There's no place like home for nailing someone down.

'Don't get all moralistic on me. Just grant my wish.'

His face changes, saddens. Demon Lover grows pensive.

'Don't I satisfy you?'

'Baby, when it comes to sex, I'd give you a nine out of ten.'

As you say this, you feel surprised that a devil can be so lacking in self-esteem. But hasn't this always been true, since the beginning of time? Arrogance has served to disguise low self-esteem – the catalyst for envy, the root of evil.

'How will I be able to reach you while you're travelling?' asks Demon Lover. He looks despondent.

You stare at him, stupefied.

'For God's sake! Stop snivelling. Since when does a devil need a visa?'

You wake the next morning at 10.30 to recorded Quranic recitation blaring from mosque loudspeakers. It's Friday, so you can be sure that the chanting will carry on until the afternoon prayers, and that there's no telling where the verses will begin or end. The rumble of passing motorcycles continues its assault on your ears. You massage your forehead. Your skin feels oily. At that moment you make a discovery: a pair of glittering red shoes beside your bed.

It's absurd to come upon such elegance in the harsh glare of day, amid the surrounding din. You get up from the bed, and kneel beside it to study the shoes closely. There you find a letter:

*Darling,*

*As you wished, I'm giving you a pair of magical shoes  
that will take you on an adventure.*

*Their owner was a witch, but she is long dead.*

'Second-hand shoes?' you grumble. But no matter. It seems this witch had a pretty badass sense of style, and after all, lots of adventure stories start off with an heirloom from someone who's passed on.

The letter continues:

*I warn you, these shoes are cursed.*

*Adventure, or more precisely, wandering, will be your eternal lot. You will find shelter, but never home. Where you come from, wandering spirits can only rest peacefully after a dukun chants mantras or a kiai pronounces the Sūrat al-Fātibah. But let me emphasise that no dukun or kiai can help you – I'm running this show, and I'm cursed too.*

*Perhaps all this is what you're after. You've got your one-way ticket.*

*You'll hear many stories, and you'll collect gifts. One gift per story, more or less. You can choose your gifts and your storyline as you see fit.*

*Sometimes you may ask yourself how you got to a particular destination. Maybe it will be the result of magic, but during a long journey, one often asks such questions.*

*I've enclosed our contract. I recommend that you read it.*

You put the letter down to look at a sheet of paper dense with rows and rows of print so fine it's barely legible. Of course, you don't read through it, no more than anyone reads the terms and conditions of a website. You can't even decipher what language the contract is in – Indonesian? Arabic? Hebrew?

*I hope you're happy with your choice. If you want to go home you'll lose everything. Your home will not be what it was. There will no longer be a place for you here. Regrettably, there will be no place for you there either. If you return home, our contract will be null and void, and, in accordance with my own destiny, I'll wander hell until I find a new heir for the red shoes.*

*If you accept this contract, put the shoes on, which will indicate that you've signed on the dotted line.*



*Truly, I adore you. But I am Iblis – Devil – so any gifts I give are cursed. I cannot love you any other way.*

Will you put them on?

Unfortunately, you've already made your choice – you'd decided even before the contract was drawn up.

You slide your feet into the shoes. First the left, then the right. They're a bit tight. But you see your reflection in the mirror and admire how the shoes flatter your legs. Suddenly you feel a terrible pain in your head. Your body shakes, your chest pounds. You feel faint. Everything goes black.

### The Wandering: A Red Shoes Adventure

You find yourself in a taxi. You're no longer wearing a night-gown but a leather jacket, and a scarf wreathes your neck. Enthusiastic drumming from the car stereo assails you, making sleep impossible. The music – not dangdut but a Hindi song – urges you to sway along in time. The cab is stuffy, pungent with the aroma of cooked onions, making you snuffle. You lower the window for air and peer out at the avenues and concrete overpasses whizzing by. Occasional rows of red- or brown-brick buildings catch your attention. You have a feeling you're not in Jakarta any more.

Actually, you're en route to John F. Kennedy Airport, ready to leave New York.

Where have you been until now? Why are you in this taxi? What are you leaving behind? And where are you going? You don't remember arriving in New York. Damned Devil. He didn't even give you a chance to enjoy the city.

You rummage in your bag to look for a passport. You find a little green booklet stamped Indonesia. Shit. Couldn't he at least have given you a new nationality?

A Schengen visa, issued by the German consulate in New York, is affixed to one page. The previous page holds a visa for the United States, category J1: 'exchange visitor', valid until November 2008, exactly one year from when you put on the shoes. And then after that?

You note the name of your visa's sponsor. Mirrodoor Cultural Council. Mirrodoor? Sounds more like a Tolkien character than a legitimate organisation.

'Heading overseas?' the driver asks in a thick Indian accent.

You nod.

'Berlin,' you say, surprising yourself with your answer.

'What time's your flight?'

'Nine o'clock,' you respond automatically.

'It's already seven. You'll be late.'

The driver steps on the gas, the rapid acceleration making you feel carsick. If he keeps going at this speed, you'll land in hell for sure. He moves to pass a 1970s Jaguar with faded green paint and rust holes filled with putty. A sticker in the rear window reads *Good girls go to heaven, bad girls go everywhere*. As you hurtle past, the cabbie glances at its driver, an elderly woman whose curls are flying about in the wind.

'Ha, Granny ... ' His long sigh expresses a mixture of annoyance and empathy. 'I hope she makes it to heaven.'

*Good girls go to heaven.*

Good girls go to heaven, bad girls –

Go wandering?

A haunted spirit roams from place to place, accepted neither in heaven nor on earth, neither here nor there. Where is your home now? Maybe, like a ghost, you can only find shelter.

You strain to recall what you have been doing in New York, but can't come up with a single clue. No images are present in your head. No voices. Your memories falter after your discovery of the glittering red shoes and the letter from Demon Lover. Everything beyond that is dark. Is this what they call amnesia? You can trace events up to that particular morning. You remember how you came to know Demon Lover and much that occurred beforehand.

You can recall your childhood.

Everything is happening too fast. You need time to stop, to breathe and put your story in order.

So, let's pause. Let's go over why you insisted on leaving, though a justification isn't really necessary. Travelling is the

most ancient human desire. Just ask Odysseus. Just ask your mariner ancestors.

1990: a black model train set became your favourite plaything. In fourth grade you loved playing with toy cars, miniature buses and trucks, hand-me-downs from your cousins, but trains were the coolest type of transport. Your parents thought you'd turn out to be a tomboy, but you liked dolls too. In your made-up stories, trains and dolls always went together. Your dolls – Barbie knock-offs bought at the morning market – wore nice dresses and nice shoes to board the train; only on rare occasions did you imagine your passenger as a moustachioed gentleman. You called your favourite train the Orient Express. You plucked the name from the title of one of your mother's books that you read on the sly. When you grew up, you thought, the Orient Express would take you on adventures to uncommon places.

But, in fact, everything about you is common. You come from a common family that live like the majority of common folk. Your father and mother met in Jogja, while studying at Gadjah Mada University. Your father is a Sumatran migrant from Lahat, whereas your mother is Javanese through and through, raised in Sleman. Although born in Jogja, you speak little Javanese. Your family moved to Jakarta when you were barely a year old. Your father worked for a private company, and your mother dropped out of university to become a housewife. They boasted of their prestigious alma mater, because studying there was their sole achievement. They lived in Jakarta as common people, with two kids who would grow into common people, doing whatever common people do.

1994: the term 'abroad' evoked luxury. At your junior high, only the children of executives could go 'abroad'. Some of your friends belonged to this bourgeois elite, and had visited Singapore several times. Back then everyone was crazy about brand names, and members of the bourgeois clique dressed from head to toe in what were seen as sophisticated labels: Levi's, Doc Martens, LA Gear, Baby G, Ocean Pacific.

Meanwhile, you felt content enough with an Osella shirt with a frog logo, and unbranded jeans from Cibaduyut purchased at the end of Ramadan, the time for a new outfit. Nobody gives a rat's ass about some of those brands now, but back then collecting items from abroad with labels in English mattered to that clique. They said that white people were used to holidays. Australians visited Europe, Americans went to Asia, and so on. Your parents didn't go abroad. Neither did your aunts and uncles, nor your neighbours. Back then, you'd bitch without bothering to reflect: Indonesia, we're really a pathetic nation.

Until you graduated from high school you were convinced you could escape the prison of mediocrity. You studied hard, you scrimped and saved. You imagined that every now and then you'd go to Singapore, just like the elite kids. Yes, of course, Singapore. Your imagination got stuck there. Japan? Too expensive. Cambodia? Inconceivable. America only existed on TV.

You latched on to the illusion that you weren't common when you became quiz champion of your elementary school and were selected for a capital-wide competition. Your father and mother were so proud. A dozen years later, as your circle of acquaintances expanded, you discovered that your achievement was in no way remarkable. Several of your friends had been champions and attended top Jakarta high schools, just like you. But their lives were entirely common. The older you were, the more obvious it became that you weren't special. You began to suspect that your failure to transcend mediocrity stemmed from a wrong turn in your life, when you didn't get into a top state university.

1998: your final year of high school. Students demonstrated, clamouring for Suharto to step down. Political turmoil set the country aflame, but you faced a different upheaval: your parents were moving back to Jogja. The financial crisis had spawned mass lay-offs, and your father did not escape. You didn't want to leave with them, so you studied desperately in

order to be accepted to the University of Indonesia. Though hardly wealthy, you couldn't envision a life without the blessing of trips to Plaza Indonesia and Pondok Indah Mall, those monuments that defined the meaning of 1990s modernity. Our high school conceptions of cool really can be pathetic.

You applied for programmes in international relations and English literature. Your father and mother had studied engineering and didn't value the social sciences or humanities, but at your cram school you'd heard that graduates in those fields often found jobs in the Department of Foreign Affairs. You dreamed of becoming a diplomat so you could travel; your father supported the decision because it sounded impressive. International: global, not provincial. English literature, on the other hand ... 'English' sounded important, just like 'international', but 'literature' made him uneasy. He didn't want his daughter to turn into some dreadlocked poet declaiming at Taman Ismail Marzuki. Mother defended you. She was convinced you could become an English teacher, or open your own school.

'It's a good choice,' she said. 'It'll give you options when you have a kid.'

In the end, Father agreed. But he also thought that someone with a certificate from the Juliana Jaya Sewing Academy could open a school just as easily.

Some friends, no smarter than you, passed the entrance exam. When you learned that you hadn't been successful, your mother held you tight and comforted you. 'Lots of smart kids don't get into UI.' Her sweet words did nothing to make you feel better. Even today when you think about your failure, you obsess over the details in your head: had you been careless in working through the questions? Had your exam sheet become so damp with sweat that your answers were illegible? Were you so overconfident that your responses were reckless? What hurt the most was that your older sister had been accepted to the prestigious Bandung Institute of Technology. She was one of a select few women who – to borrow your

father's words – 'broke into engineering at Bandung'. Unstated, of course, was his assumption that mechanical engineering would prove too difficult for the female brain to grasp.

Instead, you ended up at an expensive private university and majored in Teaching English as a Second Language. Your father sold off inherited land to cover your tuition.

No miracle arrived to rescue you. Some of your friends continued their studies abroad, but your family wasn't rich. You taught at EGW, English for the Global World, a prominent language institute in Jakarta. You didn't open your own school, as your mother had hoped, but at least you brought home a decent pay cheque. Every year you applied for scholarships; every year you were knocked back. You could only look on enviously when Abidah, a fellow teacher, announced that she'd won a scholarship to Kangaroo Country (or, as you called it, Kylie Minogue Country). You'd never spoken to Abidah, but you couldn't restrain yourself when you ran into her straightening her hijab in the ladies' room.

'Hey, do you have any tips on winning a scholarship?'

She looked at you sympathetically.

'Strive and seek. Yes, sister,' she said, '*man jadda wajada*. Inshallah.'

Abidah truly was successful, at least within fixed parameters. When she returned from Australia she wrote a book called *Follow Your Dreams*, which achieved minor renown. She focused on *pesantren* students who made their way to overseas universities by repeating the mantra *man jadda wajada*: the earnest will succeed. The bountiful love of Allah, however, evidently extended only to the earnest, not the envious.

To add spice to your life you looked for a lover, but the guys you dated were all losers. You wanted a boyfriend like Marcus Werner, an English teacher and manager at EGW. You didn't get why everyone called him a 'native speaker', like the instructors from America and England, given that he was from Germany. All the female teachers angled for his attention,

either because of his blue-eyed good looks or because of his expat status, which meant he earned much more than local staff. Later you and your friends learned he was dating a former student. One gossipy colleague couldn't hold her tongue. 'Now, that's one damn lucky chick. She didn't even pass basic-level English but she managed to rope herself an expat.'

After failing to snag a handsome expat of your own, you scouted other available options. From a trash heap composed of men in professions ranging from civil servant to Internet cafe proprietor, you eventually found one whose eccentricities set him apart. Yudi, a philosopher, or rather a wannabe philosopher, read books and name-dropped thinkers and artists unknown to you. At first you found this appealing, but before long you realised that his only ambition was having time to read and write. He was a little younger than you and, despite seven years of study, he hadn't graduated from university. After a quarrel with his parents, he refused to accept any more money from them and began to borrow from you instead. In time, he ended up staying with you in your boarding house, polishing off your bread and milk, and slipping packs of *kretek* into your shopping basket even though you didn't smoke. He quoted Marx, and in his company you felt exploited enough to have discovered your own personal form of Marxist alienation. You had to rise up and revolt.

The next stage of development after that Marxist's exploitation was, naturally, socialising. You hung out with friends and went about life without a boyfriend. But you were soon complaining once more about the monotony of your boarding-house existence. A tedious story, and it was yours.

You didn't know what you wanted, apart from not wanting to be yourself. You didn't want to live like your friends, your boss or your sister. Especially your sister. Immediately after finishing her degree she married a fellow graduate and became involved in a Muslimah fashion business (bye-bye, mechanical engineering!). Maybe there was nothing wrong with your sister.



Her husband held a good job with a multinational automobile corporation, and they had a mortgage, a car and a pair of sweet kids. The older, a girl, is named Nazwa Salsabila Azzahra. You keep forgetting her son's name. Naufal? Or is it Raihan? But you always remember the name Nazwa, at any rate. Maybe it should have been Nazwa Fatima Zakiyya. Or Nazwa Syifa Arrahma. Whatever. Such are kids' names in contemporary Indonesia.

Your sister looked happy, but you didn't want her life. There was no one you knew whose life you aspired to. You had lost interest in becoming a diplomat.

You wanted adventure.

'We're here.'

You gawk.

'Here's the terminal, ma'am.'

Ma'am? Why does he call you ma'am? Do you look old or something? You're not even twenty-eight yet.

The taxi driver pulls over without turning off the engine and hurries to open the door. His agile movements make you realise that you have no time to dawdle and daydream. Your past is too cumbersome to schlep around. Bye-bye, past, you say quietly. Happy rotting in hell.

You tip the driver. You don't know if two dollars is too little or too much, but you hope it's enough to show your gratitude for being shuttled to the airport in time. The driver says curtly: 'OK, thanks, have a good trip.'

As you drag your suitcase towards the doors of the terminal, you sense something odd, something amiss. You glance down. You're wearing black stockings and a red shoe given to you by Demon Lover. A single red shoe.

Shit. Did you leave the other one in the taxi? Impossible. It couldn't come off that easily.

Please don't let it be back in Indonesia.

You feel weak as you struggle to recall where you left the shoe.

Do you want to find out where you left it and what happened to you in New York? You might have to cancel your ticket and go back to the city (New York, not Jakarta). Maybe you should go to the police station and report the loss first, because who knows? Your shoe could be in the cab and the driver may be kind enough to turn it in. Or maybe you need to accept that Demon Lover was telling the truth. Sometimes we forget how we came to be where we are. Maybe you just need to keep walking with the one remaining shoe. No need to feel too regretful. You can always pick up a new pair in duty-free.

If you want to cancel your trip and return to your home (wherever that may be) in New York, turn to the next page.

If you want to report your loss to the police, turn to page 25.

If you want to continue your journey to Berlin, turn to page 29.