

I SPEAK THE MASTER'S WILL

Suzanne Vincent

I'm in Hell. That must be what this is. I can't fathom a god who would possibly interpret this as heaven, crammed in this damned steamer trunk; me and twenty-three other Wayang Kulit shadow puppets, entombed with the smell of ox hide and musty bamboo.

I dream of a life before this one. A life in which I spoke a language other than the one the Master speaks for me. A life in which I could move my own vulgar arms, speak my own profane will, make my own damning decisions. I've been here so long I can't remember what I did to deserve damnation, but a shadow of that life tells me I do.

I can remember the freedom to speak and move and live. It's embedded in my memory as if to torment me.

We're traveling today, the trunk jouncing around in the back of an ancient flat-bed pickup, following a circuitous route from backwater village to backwater village. When we stop, the Master sets things up. He takes Kali out first and talks to her like a lover, caressing the hair that's glued to her head, fixing her dress, touching her all over.

"I think we'll perform Rama and Sinta tonight," he might say to her. "You will be the lovely Sinta, of course. I'll dress you in green and gold and red. Put bells in your hair." He kisses her painted face.

Does he know what we are? Does he know of the fallen souls that inhabit his puppets?

Sometimes I think he does.

The rest of us stay where we are, stacked one atop the other, cushioned with dozens of colorful silk costumes – costumes that the audience will see only in silhouette, simple shadows of what we really are. We listen and wait for Master to set up his screen and position his lanterns.



*Does he know what we are?
Does he know of the fallen souls that inhabit his puppets?
Sometimes I think he does.*

Only then does he take us out, but only those he needs. Sometimes five, sometimes twelve. Sometimes I wait weeks between the nights he chooses me, but every time he opens the trunks I hope for a glimpse of sky or stars. Otherwise I pass the hours and days praying. It's fruitless, I know. I've long

since spent every opportunity I had to redeem myself. But what else is there to do? Fret over the dark or the damp? Seethe over Bung Ok's elbow jammed against my nose?

Bung can't help it, of course. Poor bastard. He's no more capable of independent movement than I. Only at the Master's bidding do we waggle our arms about and shiver and shake and make horrible war with one another behind the old water-stained silk screen, our shadows telling one of a hundred tales that the Master carries in his memory, all to the delight of villagers who might throw the Master a coin or two or feed him a supper of rice and vegetables.

The villagers see the same stories, endlessly repeated. I know them all by heart. I could shriek out my own lines if I but had a mouth to utter them.

But the Master speaks for me. For us all.

"Rama – my lover and lord – will come for me, oh, Rahwana the Evil One!" he says for Kali.

And I, dressed in spikes of bamboo that shoot out from my head like a devil's halo,

play Rahwana. Master laughs and holds me high and shakes my puppet body with terrible joy. "Rama! Bah!" the Master says for me. "Rama will die with my dagger in his heart, Little Sinta. And you will be my bride!"

Kali trembles and shrinks low on the screen while I tower over her, until Bung Ok comes dressed as Rama, the majestic prince of Thai fables. Rama shakes his sword, he commands me to be gone. But I will not. Rather Rahwana will not. Rather the Master will not. So Rama beats me with his sword. He hits me again and again, so hard sometimes that my bamboo frame shudders and aches.

One day he'll break me. It has happened before. Then my pieces will be tossed into a box, there to wait until Master can fix me, until my ox hide flesh can be rejoined with my bamboo bones, and then I will speak again because my Master makes it so.

The truck is stopping.

Perhaps tonight we will perform Rama and Sinta, and I will be Rahwana. Perhaps tonight I will see the stars. 🌀

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Suzanne Vincent—an old fat lady from the heart of Mormondom—ekes out a little spare time to crank out the occasional interesting story, usually with a somewhat deranged bent, but softened by an undercurrent of spirituality. She writes about her interests, which range far and wide: history, "low" fantasy, really good psychological horror, tattoos, Indonesian puppets, fortune cookies, mirrors, and a particular soft spot for old and/or unfamiliar fairy tales, myths, and legends. A 2005 graduate of Orson Scott Card's Literary Boot Camp, she regrets not having begun her study of the writing craft while in her youth. "I Speak The Master's Will" is her second published story; look for her work at anotherrealm.com.

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It was published as FLASH 12/2007 #2 on Flash Fiction Online (flashfictiononline.com)