

T. Ramanathan

## The Biggest Census in the World

HE WAS waiting for me at the door, the little door that was the entrance to my cubby-hole, which for convenience I used to call my "room." If someone asked me, "Where are you going?" I would say, "I am going to my room." However, I rarely invited anybody to come to my room.

Yet, here was this tall stranger waiting for me. I knew he would come some hour of the day. There was no avoiding him. He was reading the little encomiums written in my name by the boys of the street (scribbled in pencil).

"Boys in the street are a nuisance," I said, by way of conversation, "Give them a piece of charcoal and they become vandals."

The census man was not interested. I opened the door and let him in. He was tallish, so he had to stoop down to let himself in. I hoped against hope that my dirty clothes would be somehow arranged and my few books in order.

He seemed to take in everything at a glance. "It is nearly seven," I said, "do you have to work late into the night?" My idea was to attract his attention to a beautiful Queen Anne pocket watch hung by a silver chain on the wall. It was my most prized possession, the one thing that in the eyes of the children next door gave me an air of opulence. But the census man seemed hardly to notice the importance of the pocket watch on the wall.

"Who lives next door?" he asked me casually.

"The landlord and his family."

"Anybody else?"

"Well, he has rented his backyard to three other families."

"Your room is also part of the house?"

"Yes."

"Your occupation?"

"Writer."

"Which means 'journalist,'" he said, half to himself.

"If you like it that way," I smiled.

"Your age?"

"Thirty-five."

"Married?"

"Yes."

"Monthly income?"

"Supposed to be ninety rupees."

"What do you mean, 'supposed'?" he interposed.

"That doesn't come in the census," I said irritably. "My pay is 90 rupees, but I haven't seen the colour of a green note in ages."

"You are Indian, of course?"

"Do you doubt it?" I snapped.

He ignored my irritation.

"You and your wife occupy this room?" I nodded my head. I knew he was thinking something pretty nasty.

"Any children?"

"None."

Well. That settled him. He closed his notebook.

"Do you have to ask all these questions at every house you go into?"

"It is not easy," explained the census man, "but we are determined to do our best."

"What about all these people sleeping on the roads, in parks—the beggars, the lepers...?"

"Every one is taken count of," he said. "They belong to the 350 million free people of India—that is—Bharat."

**T**HE CENSUS man stooped low to get out of the room again. Just then my wife, who had gone next door to knead the flour paste, came in. I shut the door in the face of the census man once my wife came in.

"Have these people no other work?" my wife complained. "They come into houses uninvited. They have no respect for women-folk nowadays."

"They have their jobs to do," I protested. "Anyway, he won't come again."

"I hear they are kidnapping children into Hyderabad," she went on chattering.

"We have no children," I said absent-mindedly.

My wife looked at me curiously. Perhaps she thought I was daft. She proceeded to lay out my meal. I proceeded to gobble my food. I am used to that too. Then with an "I shall be late. Keep the door open," I walked out. She knew, of course, that I was going to the cinema. She never grudged me the four and

three-quarter annas. Force of habit. If you persist in a habit, wives of course get worried if you don't keep on persisting.

Luckily for me, there were only two persons in the gallery, so I could stretch my limbs comfortably on the seat opposite. The hall was darkened and soon I was listening to the voice of Mr. Berkely Hill. I sat up and took notice when he began: "The biggest census in the world." Mr. Hill led the audience around the busy streets of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras.

"When the census man comes to your door..." purred Mr. Hill, "... whether you are a city worker or a day labourer, or drive a bullock cart..." Well, I didn't drive a bullock cart and I had already faced the census man. There had been nothing exciting about it. I lost all interest in the census and fell into a snooze.

When I woke up, my legs were touching the ground. Someone had shifted my feet off the front seat. There were whispers. The screen was a blaze of colour. Somewhere in Mexico... Aztec civilisation... Fitzpatrick... snooze....

When I woke up again, I heard someone say: "Now he will die." I sat up with a start to watch an action-packed drama (a man-hunt in the Wild West) drawing to a close.

"Come out before I blow your brains out," shouts the hero.

"Come and get me," says the villain.

Bang! and the barn door opens, and the villain lies dead, shot through the heart. A horse rears off and leaves the saddle behind... I make for the exit.

**O**UTSIDE, it is a beautiful night. There are no lights in the street. The moon comes up out of a medley of wool and lights up my alley. I light a beedi and, like a tight-rope walker, tip-toe gingerly over the sleeping bodies of men, women, and children. For many years now, I have walked through this alley. It is in the heart of the town, and yet so removed and hedged between the rows of inscrutable doorways that the stranger might spend many weary hours looking for a num-

ber. The postman is, of course, a wonder. He knows the names of the occupants by rote. The women are his friends. They hardly talk to any other male when their husbands are not at home. But the postman is permitted to be familiar.

On a pitch-dark night, when there is only one street lamp, my alley takes on an air of sadness. When it rains, the people who sleep out disappear, and from end to end, the long labyrinth of gutter and drain looks desolate. On a warm, starry night, or at best on a full moon day, with a gust of sea wind driving the dead leaves in a whirl, the huddle of flesh, lovers, old people, vermin, and rats are transformed into a phantasmagoria of souls in pain.

It is my peculiar pleasure to feast my eyes on this elemental orgy of passion, in a world dead to all life. The turn of a leg in sleep, the arms in the act of embrace, the waking whisper of a lover to his mate.

As usual, I come to the street tap that is turned on and left flowing by some careless person. I wash my legs, turn the tap off as an act of virtue, and walk tip-toe to my door, lest I soil my feet again before I enter my room!

The door is ajar, and the light is burning inside. I become irritated. How often I have warned my wife that she should bolt the door before falling asleep. I push the door open in a temper. Suppose it were some stranger entering as I am doing now? Late as it is, I must wake her and pick a quarrel with her. The room is empty. The mats have been spread and the pillows laid. The little kerosene lamp is burning on a full wick. Yet she is not there. I have a sinking feeling. There is a footstep as she enters. I realise that there is some commotion next door, something afoot at that late hour of the night.

Suddenly my wife bursts into the room. "Oh, you are back," she says, peremptorily digging into an old box and pulling out a bundle of clean rags.

"That will do," she says, "the midwife will be here any minute."

"Here? Where?"

"Next door," she says impatiently. "Janaki is in pains."

"Janaki? Is she the one with varicose veins?" My wife gives me a withering look.

"I have no time to be explaining to you," she shouts, and makes her exit. Evidently Janaki must be the squint-eyed creature with green, bulging veins knotted at the joint of her knees.

"How funny," I say to myself. "Only this morning she was doing her chores. Now she is groaning." Only a thin partition divides Janaki's apartment from ours. The men of the family must have left the women to fend for themselves. I hear my wife's voice amongst the others. Women want men, but in their moment of physical suffering they want to be left alone.

"Ram—Ramchandra—O—Rama——" her groans fall on my soul like a knife. I am like one drugged, unable to move. I roll listlessly on the bare mat on the floor. There is a hush, but not for long. Again the groans start, "Ram—Ram—Ram." My wife comes back.

"It will be any minute now," she says. "The midwife has taken charge."

Across the thin wedge of the boxwood wall, not a yard away, the hushed groan of a woman in pain at grips with death, and a child fighting for breath, creates anew the sense of oppression and awe. A terrible hush, and there is a blind cry of pain and the sudden wail of a child.

It is born, I think. It has chosen this dark alley, these meagre surroundings. Between evening and midnight, a man-child has crept into the home next door. It seems long ago that the census man was in my room. I can hear the slow tick-tick of the Queen Anne watch on the wall. It seems a sort of nightmare, the people sleeping in the alley, the faint rustle of the wind in the gutter, the uncanny stillness next door. I am bathed in perspiration.

There is someone else in the room. She is sleeping, one foot of cold floor dividing our mats. I put out my hand. She rolls over and we are locked in one embrace.

Wayland Young

## The Montesi Affair

### *A Severe Case of Pseudo-Revolution*

ON THE afternoon of 9th April, 1953, Maria Montesi, the wife of a Roman carpenter, and her daughter Wanda, a girl in her early twenties, went together to the cinema. Her other daughter, Wilma, said she didn't like the sound of the film they wanted to see and would stay at home. When they came back, Wilma was not there. At dawn on the morning of the 11th, thirty-six hours after Wilma's disappearance, the partly-clothed body of a girl was found apparently drowned on the beach at a lonely place called Tor Vaianica, about fifteen miles south of Rome on the Tyrrhenian coast. It had no shoes, stockings, or suspender belt on. It was taken to the mortuary and identified as Wilma Montesi by her family. The police made a routine enquiry into her death; on the strength of what the family told them they decided that what happened was this: Wilma had had some sort of sore or chilblain on her heel which she had been treating with iodine. There had been talk in the family about the virtues of sea water for sore heels, and also for removing unsightly iodine stains. She must have taken the opportunity of a few free hours to go to Ostia and bathe her heel in the sea. As she had her period at that time, she had fainted while she was paddling, had fallen in, been drowned, and been carried ten miles down the coast to Tor Vaianica by the wind.

The finding of the girl's body appeared very small on the local page of the Roman papers. When she was identified by her family and it appeared that there was some mystery about the manner of her death, the story got a little bigger, but still on the local page; it rose to, say, half a column. The routine police and judicial enquiries into her death were rather long-drawn-out, and there was a half-hearted attempt to make a mystery out of the lack of an immediate clear announcement. The City of Rome, like Italy itself, was under Christian Democrat government, and anything served the Communist press in those days to raise a passing suspicion of improprieties on the part of the police or local government. A prominent and respected examining magistrate said that he was conducting the enquiry in person. But when the announcement about the presumed manner of her death was finally made, journalistic eyebrows were definitely raised; that was a long way for a body to be washed down the coast in the tideless Mediterranean. Why did she leave her money and jewels behind? And above all, why did she take off her suspender belt to paddle? The suspender belt was what made the biggest impression, and a week or two after the other papers had dropped the story a scurrilous little rag said that the suspender belt had been brought into the police headquarters of Rome by carrier pigeons, and there destroyed. The Italian for