
आशा
(Asha)
By Raymond Howell
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Introduction

आशा (Asha)

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Asha might well be older than the mountains. As old even as her friends the sun and the moon. As for the winds? Yes, she is probably just as old as they are.

She does not look it though. To many who do not see her properly she is just a waif, but there is so much more to Asha than that. She could well be humankind's savour. If only they would listen.
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Section One

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It was yet another relentless summer of dry bones, dying loams, sickening goats, crawling barren soil and ponds without a float, in a land ablaze with physical and social war, a land so empty of hope, a land taken by craze.

Through it all, footsteps firm and strong but soundless fall, heralding a promise of much to all. And will gladly give it to, if those watchers of that approaching her ever care to properly look above their anger to properly note that special she without a shawl. If they could ignore that defiance to their rule and stop awhile to listen with open heart to her sweet melodious voice, they might hear it flow as bright as once waterfalls now sadly dried and lost to nature's pull. If they do ever care to listen well to her non-binding spell, she will gladly bless them all.

Swathed in waifish air, adorned in a simple, plain looking, dusty tunic, Asha appears to those blind in eye and deaf in ear to be little more than a poor starving annoying best ignored, quickly forgotten street child. Or simply another scrawny brat there to be mistreated. One to be sent scurrying with a sharp kick to skulk in the grey shadows cast by hovel homes. Left there to lie like a stray dog denied a bone - as some feet unkindly itch and pitch to unwind and do whenever she nears, sometimes close enough to hear their hailstone moans.

But, oh, no…, I'm not that! Asha's determination to be known and welcomed arises in silent rebel.
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But she does not quiver or rant in nasty angry swells, like soulless men she knows so well, although for those who care to see her properly, there is a yelling tell. One not too dissimilar to the godly giver of presents to the children of a village's poor in all corners of the world, during festivals bright in that time and place when deep snow smothers the failing year. Although not here. Those white flakes never land upon these creeping sands that are seeing off the fertile bands. The difference between that giver's splendid smile and hers, is that Asha speaks not of snow and gifts soon old, but of the spring that arises through the cold.

That smile when it comes in gentle rise is joyful and bright, a bubble escaping a river bed to rush in jittery bob to reach the surface and light. To pop in a showy glittering spray and then dance a while in ripples gay.

To the fancy of some would-be-poets, her smile is as uplifting to a heart and soul stumbling and bumbling through a dark mountain to suddenly fall upon a river of liquid gold surging through seams of pure jet. Such sights that never grow weary or old unless stolen and fashioned into trinkets and sold.

What some creatures, those who care to embrace and roam in muse through their spirit's realm, can feel growing like a glorious orchid amongst the cluttered rubble in their minds, is that her blossoming smile lifts hearts and creates a powerful blessing. One strong enough to change the lives of any who care to accept its empowering message. Sadly to her, those less spiritual and more angry and dominant might resort to spitting scornfully, while their feet twitch in need to kick like an underfed overworked seriously neglected bad-tempered mule.

Other than to release that unforgettable healing smile, Asha does not react to their ignorance, their bad tempers or their simmering violence and scheming wiles. She is far too kind to want to upset humans deliberately. While always being mindful not to reveal her true identity without cause -

lest it is unduly mocked and weakened in the eyes of those in need who would call to her for help. As many do for days and even years on end without pause.

But her spirit's joyful cry, "I am Asha. I am wiser and older than any other life form roaming this planet," is there in that smile for those who care to see it. Along with the deep laying hints in her liquid almond eyes of life much older than those planets known to be forming in the astrological cradle of life. Older even than the very sun whose magical end-of-day-journey is just bursting to explode in a crescendo of colour onto the day's watery blue canvas. Her special tribute to what spirits roaming the endless ether know in their adore, or awe, as the Asha effect.

Section Two

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To those who might watch Asha pass along a sun-dried red-dirt path that leads to the first of many villages she intends to visit once night has descended, she gives no sign that she has noted the day's changing tempo.

Unlike the fidgety roosting birds.

Passing by a cluster of water-starved stunted trees, she smiles as the bird’s sweet duets and duels erupt in tuneful clamour from the thin canopies. Her harmonising whispered, “Sing well and true my beauties,” joins with their age-old battle to win the honour of being the one whose notes will wave off the glorious day. While beckoning in the night with its unimaginative palette of silver, greys and blacks - along with those little squirts it carries of just-in-case-its-needed midnight blue. Or as Asha calls the moment when night takes ownership of the day’s easel - the rising of the dying time.

As if reading her mind, a slight chill suddenly touched the air, to warn the living of night’s advance. But the unperturbed sun pulled out her palette for she still had that burst of artwork to gift the cloudless sky and Asha.

The first delicate slightly tentative brush strokes enlivened the canvas with a pale peach wash, which Asha duly noted with a fond smile. As she does and has every sunset since humans evolved and all those occurring before. And she had no wish to miss this one either.

With a slight expectant thrill, her light but determined steps slowed
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before stopping by a patch of sparse, goat-cropped grass, struggling to grow in the hard-baked water-forgotten soil that rings the village like the bitterly scolding ghost of a once proud moat. She settled to watch the spectacle of the cooling sun saying her goodbye to all those still living beneath the fading sky. Especially those who might disappear before she can rise again high in meet and in greet of a butterfly's happy sigh. Or a vulture's welcoming cry as it leaves its loft in swooping fly, to soar upon those new rising thermals in lonely predators spry. To tear, to eat, to fill its crop and sleep, otherwise it lets the living by. Unlike you humans, Asha notes. For mistaken ideas of power or the right to bath in heaven's eternal rivers, or merely for the joy of carnage, you will encourage or watch the women and children and your fellows fry and die.

"They need me all," she whispers in a voice as close to a sigh as she will ever manage in her long enchanting life. Laying back she becomes one with the ever-changing sky's thrilling colourful music - a play and song most humans refuse to see and hear.

"Yes, they do need me," she whispered again, "They do…"

Where that sun, the mother to many and Asha's bonded friend responded in the only way she could.

Section Three

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The sun's majestic strokes splashed the peach-tinted canvas with swirling yellows, delicate streaks of white and casual spots of orange touched with hints of blazing red. All so skilfully laid against those patches of palest cornflower blue naughtily dodging the sun's shrinking reach.

Asha’s spirit did not slump as some of the living do at the passing of day. Nor did she sadden when the sun in a faintly glimmering, *Never mind, I’ll get those cheeky bits tomorrow,* finally laid down her brush and sunk in set.

Neither did Asha close in mourn like a nearby thin clump of wildflowers were doing as night’s grey-loaded brush crept across the canvas to wickedly ruin the sun’s beautiful artwork. Or care to huddle with a nearby troop of monkeys whose daytime chattering faded in time with night’s steady metronomic strokes. She simply sat on the grass wrapped in a soft dreamy smile, her spirit away with the sun as she rose on that other faraway horizon.

“I’m with you,” Asha whispered. “As you burn off the misty chill and wipe away night’s drear and stir and ease the spirits of the living as they arise to count the night’s dead. My heart joins with you too as you shine on the newly-born to properly welcome them in. Do it all well my long-time friend for many there need your care.”

She had no need to add in sigh, the cycle goes on unchanged even though the artwork is never the same. But the message thickly lay around her
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in the hushed expectant air and is one she spreads during her long meandering travels.

“I see no sadness in the cycle of life when it flows unhindered.” Asha gladly tells those she meets. The few brave enough to be out in the early evening who on occasion slow their hurried steps to match hers, long enough to pass their mourn for the day’s end.

“Everything needs a rest and that makes it all so much richer and beautiful the next day, don’t you think?” She suggests soothingly.

“And besides…,” she adds with a sudden smile that is as healing as a warming sun.

“...sadness has no part of me. But if I was ever sad it would be for the ignorance and wickedness I see in every new night, placed there not by gods to punish you all, but men. So…,” she offers brightly. “...It is not nature you fear, because you know what to expect from it. It’s the erratic behaviour of men and I promise you, you can change all that if you have heart.”

After waiting patiently for the expanding shadows to touch and merge until black finally washes over the mix, Asha clambered up eagerly. The moment has come to confront men in the dying time. Following the dirt track into the village and with hair boldly flowing and without pausing nervously, as soldiers might to check weapons, with firm steps she passed the first few dwellings.

“Don’t worry, my sword is not easily blunted,” she lightly reminds the teasing pleasing breeze who in play flicks her long hair. While naughtily lifting the hem of her tunic to show it was there with her, before settling peacefully at her side. A place from where it has witnessed the best and worst she has endured over the centuries.

“Be settled my restless wind, remember my sword cannot be lost or taken from me unless I give it up. And that I will never do, not for any reason. That includes joining with you on your wide travels, you naughty wind… And please leave my tunic be, for no one here has need to see my knees.”

But the wind as it uneasily settled knew many monsters of the night would gladly see her knees and more. The very ones she will confront in this dark corrupted village of broken wills and imprisoned hearts. The very place where lives so often start with a piteous yearning cry.

“Don’t let my baby girl suffer all this. Let her end come swiftly and painlessly by.”

Yes, those very cries of fearful broken hearts which the wind will have to bear until it too finally departs all lands.

As fickle-hearted as the wind so often is when it comes to allegiances, it paused its play in respect of her nature and mission while understanding she would die if she ever gave up her weapon. And how often have I loyally carried the sweet sound of her light laughter while she says?

“I have far too much to achieve to allow the silly inconvenience of my death to hinder me.”

There, in a series of little sighs as it hung by Asha’s side, was the wind’s wish it could share just a part of that irrepressible core she spreads like spores amongst all living things. If only… If only… If only… If only I was more than a carrier of nature’s hiss and bliss and sing and herald of summer, autumn, winter and spring’s swing and bringer of hungry tempests. And worse, the spreader of pollution’s sear and sting. And if only I did not have to carry all these terrified frightened desperate cries to Asha. If only I could

carry more sing…

Section Four

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An inquisitive monkey sheltering with the nearby restless troop, although not truly of it, slipped away from her comrade's company. Where keeping to the shadows, she dogged Asha's steps.

It was not the first time she has done so and Asha was fully aware of her presence. And of her good heart. But now is not the time to stop and talk, she reasoned. Although I might later while journeying to the next village, Asha decided with a smile. Knowing full well that the monkey, keen to learn more about her mission, will follow when and where she can.

Some parts of Asha’s story the monkey knew and treasured well. She learnt about Asha years ago when her new baby lay dying in her arms and Asha had come to help her nurse the struggling newborn. Miraculously, it not only survived the night, it went on to have a family of its own and this monkey who has no name other than the one Asha has blessed her with, *my curly-tailed friend*, has been her devoted follower ever since.

“This mission which charmed me when I first became aware of my calling is a simple one.” Asha had told the monkey as they took turns to nurse her ailing baby.

“But the more I strive to achieve its end the greater the task becomes. But I’m not saddened and neither will I stop trying,” she explained.

“If anything the increasing difficulties make me work harder and faster, just as you will through the years to keep your child alive.”
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“If only it was so easy to explain that to men.” She then said but without sadness or a sigh.

When the monkey wondered, “Why are you always happy even when humankind is so bad,” Asha replied with a smile as she took another turn at nursing the baby.

“Because sadness my dear curly-tailed friend blunts my sword and we can’t have that now, can we? It’s bad enough that many humans do not see truly me. Or my sword that causes no cut and leaves no visible scar when it lands. But on contact, it changes hearts, as it did yours, monkey.” She said with that a smile of hers which prises open the hardest of nuts for hungry squirrels. Or encourages robbed birds to lay another clutch of eggs.

“Once upon a time they freely looked for and were gladdened by my arrival, but for humans now its touch is not as dramatic as it was in those earlier days when your kind roamed free, where women and men were counted as equals and their children revered. But not so much now that men have lost their belief in nature and themselves and each other and praise only war.”

She harboured many other such thoughts too, but why worry the monkey who has no concern for human behaviours, other than to learn how best to avoid their poisonous arrows? And survive in these now dry lands whipped harshly by the wind in loud fearsome or mournful howls where the trees that once restrained its temper are gone. And the rains are no longer carried to the hard-baked parched ground I walk over when once it was flower-strewn and green.

And so it will be again, once lessons are learnt, Asha’s spirit rings. While spreading her seeds grown in a womb that knows only the needs, the joys and promises of a spiritual spring.

Section Five

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"The human's disease came with metal." She tells the few remaining majestic swaying trees during her travels across the continents. For they along with human women and children fear the bite of metal axes and saws. In their way so do those cutely nodding flowers which suffer human blades, along with the bright cheerful brooks and lazy lakes polluted by human metal-making outfall which also maims or kills those poor creatures trapped within.

“I ask you,” she wonders of the rabbits and voles and shy little dormouses who call to her regularly as their world and food supply shrinks. “What mother armed with a sharp stick would not naturally want to rush back to her children to protect them, while the husband grabs a spear to see off an aggressive boar, bear, or mountain lion? Yet when these women do run back to comfort the weak and scared, men scorn their bravery.”

“When a woman cannot lift the same as a man he calls her weak. When they can they call her freak! Yet women work harder and longer than most men. I have seen it to be so the world over,” she tells those who would listen.

“It was so always so for those early humans. Both maternal and paternal happily worked together as equals, like you lot do so well, until one day men discovered just how easily fashioned metal kills. Where all that is needed is a quick sharpening to make it ready again. Those metal weapons gave foolish men ideas of endless power and filled them with a madness that believed women ran from conflict. And being too weak to wield a sword made them
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worthless. With madness in their eyes, men threw down the simple bowls or trinkets they were creating lovingly to adorn the necks and fingers of their beautiful wives or children to raise up swords with the cry. *Get thee woman back to hide with the children while I go to battle. I am the stronger, so you must do as I say.*"

Then Asha tells her audiences.

"From then on everything changed…, for you and all, while I became busier than ever. Then the men turned on wonderful nature and cowered it with metal tools while needs to protect the family turned to thoughts of war and a want to control everything. And then they learnt that words, like a sword, could be twisted and thrust and used to hurt. To lessen, confuse and corrupt. Those who commanded the word used them to control spirits. But instead of finding beauty in the meaning and flow of words, they grew power-hungry and used them to control. So, that is what we fight my friends. Men's want for power at any cost and the nasty despondency of those who cannot achieve that foolish false dream. The very same who beat and control women and children, or do worse, in their need to feel powerful. To feel anything other than despondency and a fear of weakness and ignorance which pulls their spirits down. Instead of finding love in the words, they found hatred."

But Asha has another weapon besides her sword, the human's dread of futility which she uses against them well.

"You push me away, but I will keep coming back until you give up and stop your ways." She says often.

Nature brims with her message. The sun radiates it, while a clear night sky twinkles it gladly. But not humans. And that is what puzzles Asha the most.

“The world is beautiful. Life is a precious treasure,” she tells humans often.

“Yet your despondency and your impatience refuses to notice and care about the wonders of nature and life. Unless it’s to follow a want to ruin or quickly kill them and each other. But I have abundant patience, while you humans have so very little. And that…,” she says to any who might be listening still. “...will prove to be the undoing of your species. Unless you learn to call on me like once you did.”

Section Six

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"One day, I will win this battle. Humans will notice the beauty of their world and how it all works together and they will come to know me as well." She tells the breeze as it ruffles her hair and gladly shakes the dust off her simple tunic. "So, go wind, spread my words far. Go tell those who need me that I am here to help them fight back."

Asha is aware that her existence is a strange contradiction.

“But then that’s just like so many things in nature, isn’t it,” she shrugs. “I fight futility and despondency in all its many shades. So, just like the sun needs the nudge of night to activate its cycle, my destiny is entwined with those evils and the ills that arise from despondency.”

During such moments she wonders, if I do ever win and those bad things cease to be, will I fade away too? And maybe I will…, she muses. But not for a long time yet. Humans are growing more destructive, which breeds even more despondency and their desperate scrabbles to maintain their lifestyle causes even more destruction.

With that thought uppermost she steps on into the deepening shadows which grip the village, to head towards her nightly dance with despondency. For dance with Asha, it will, regardless of where in the world she chooses to tread the night. Or increasingly so as the years pass, in the daytime where human’s increasing population and their self-inflicted poverty causes more despondency to arise. It is why she is so waif-like. Many humans and all
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creatures are constantly tearing parts of her off to take into themselves, but she does not mind. Indeed she welcomes it because it means her presence might spread and grow to slow despondency's wicked dance, which has so many styles and names that it is almost impossible to pin them all down.

So, in this horrid land where women and girls are treated so badly, or wickedly as Asha names it, she walks through the village proudly, refusing to lower her head, constrain her walk, or guard her words.

"I am who I am," she says proudly to the air "and I will not be silenced."

Where the fall of her defiant steps suggests, even though men are desperate to smother my shine, I promise, I will never go dark like the night and I will face their evil down.

Then, a little sooner than expected, one of despondencies many corrupted skeins unravelled from the shadows and stepped out silently to throw her harshly to the ground. That action triggered the rest of his gang to emerge from the side of a hut.

"Why are you out at night, girl," the leader demanded to know. "We have not given you permission!"

"I do not need your permission to go anywhere," Asha declared.

Shrugging the man's hand off she rose determinedly like a trampled flower. Dusting herself down she said. "Know that I am Asha. I will go where I please, when I please."

Section Seven

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Those calmly delivered words came with a smile, one envied by the moon but they had no effect on the gang. Other than to encourage anger and desire. Who in this town will dare blame us for punishing this insolent girl?

As they surrounded her the leader said coldly. “These streets belong to men. You have no right to walk them without our permission. Or at night. And especially not with your cursed defiant head so immodestly bare.”

Asha’s smile stayed in place while her spirit rebelled. What you really mean you silly man, is that if I was your wife other men would see my beauty and you my weak owner might have to compete for my attention. You might even lose your possession. I say, put that sack on your own head, fool and stop trying to make me your prisoner.

To the gang’s outrage, Asha replied with yet another smile. “I am a free spirit and I am not yours to control.”

“She must be punished!” One of the men shouted.

“The insolent bitch has broken our laws.” Another spat.

Symbiotically they agreed she must be humiliated and raped and then hung for all to see.

The leader punched Asha hard in the face, knocking her to the ground.
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Towering over her, he snarled contemptuously, “That is for your insolence, girl.”

“And so is this,” several others hissed angrily as they quickly stepped forward to grab her arms and hold her so others could strip her.

Asha neither screamed nor struggled or bothered even to close her eyes. She just stared up as the leader crouched before her, instantly ready.

You poor, broken, weak-willed man, she merely thought.

Instead of crying and begging please stop as they expected weak girls like her to do, as their need for power demanded, Asha’s eyes overflowed with such obvious pity that it shamed and enraged them further. Only for their anger to erupt even more when one after the other found they could not penetrate her. Frustration turned to punches and ferocious kicks. But she just laid there, refusing to cry or move or drop her look of pity. Struck by an overwhelming sense of futility the men’s abuse faltered as Asha knew it would. Like nature’s magnificent combustive forces do, the beating petered out. But unlike nature, this malignant human force still had one more trick to play. But she was prepared and in her way she welcomed it.

Dragging her harshly off the dusty ground they quickly wound a rope around her slender neck. Hauling together they soon had her swinging high and naked from the sturdiest branch of the village’s punishment tree. It did not blush as it received her naked state, for it has borne many women and girls like her in its time. But so few men or boys. The rules were written by men to favour men and they are needed to fight wars.

Standing back to admire the effect of their corrupted justice the judgemental men quivered with indignant ire as they waited for the insolent girl to twitch and maybe even beg a little before she dies.

“She’s taking too long,” one impatiently moaned.

Another shouted at Asha. “You should be ashamed of your behaviour. You deserve to die.”

Others equally as hateful joined in. One very stupidly even yelled, “Why don’t you dress, you whore.”

While another scolded, “See what happens when you disobey us!” And so, on their unimaginative rants went.

From within the shadowed windows of the surrounding huts women, too scared to speak out or help Asha, looked on shamefully. Their hearts tortured by the idea of yet another girl sacrificed to this nonsensical madness.

The long-tailed monkey who had witnessed it all skittered up the tree to sit on the branch Asha was hanging from. In its loud chattering way, it wondered, “Why do you allow them to do this to you, Asha? Why?”

Section Eight

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"While they treat me badly they are not doing it to others, are they?" Asha spoke calmingly into the monkey's mind.

“And with the men’s anger spent that gives the women and girls here a rest. And when they see me standing up to the men’s bullying and surviving, they will have hope for a better tomorrow.”

Then with a hard kick of feet, a gymnastic twist of body and her bright laughter ringing through the air she swung up and landed on the branch beside the monkey.

“See, my curly-tailed friend, I’m fine once again. So be happy and at ease for me,” she said cheerfully while pulling the rope off her neck.

Still laughing she threw it down at the feet of the astonished men. With a victorious yip, she leapt from the branch to land lightly before them.

“See, you did not hurt or kill me and you never will,” she shouted to the backs of those men who recognising and fearing a far greater force than they could muster had turned and fled into the night.

Raising her invisible sword high so all might feel its power, with a patient smile Asha delivered her defiantly firm but heart-lifting words. Without spilling blood, they cut deep into the fearful hearts of the two scared remaining men.
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“No matter how many times you try to stop me, I will return and I promise that in the end your evil will be cowered. Who I am and what I represent will come into you and when you take me into your hearts I will chase away your shadows and you will finally know a better way to live than this. Now be off with you and go tell all the men about me and make sure they understand how wrong they are.”

To the cheering clambering mass of women and girls who against the men’s rules had rushed out of their huts to meet the wondrous waif-girl, she declared boldly.

“See, this sickness of theirs can be chased away. And I am here to help you stand up and do that. For I am Asha, I am the hope that makes seeds open and flowers grow. The butterflies to skip and flit. The bees and birds to take wing and the rivers to sing. I’m in all that lives and in the sun’s light. I fly with the winds and flurry with the snow that heralds spring. I’m in all seasons too and can be found in every second of day and night. And I am here now to gift hope to any who might want it. Just call and I’ll enter your hearts to lift your will, always. Because I am Asha… And that means hope and hope is immortal! And like the sun I will shine for you all… and I cannot and will not be darkened or beaten!”

With the women’s praises and cheers ringing loud she took her tunic from the monkey who had picked it up for her. Together they headed off to the next village, where Asha will again help the women and children find the strength and means to stand up to abuse. Just as she will go on doing throughout the night and many others to come on her quest to fight the enemies of hope - men’s ignorance and abuse.

“I am Asha and that means hope and hope will win,” she shouted cheerfully to the backs of yet another group of cowardly fleeing men, while village women and girls threw down their bonds and cheered.

“Come on my curly-tailed friend…,” she chirped happily as she set off again. “...We have more hope to deliver tonight.”

Where the fickle breeze carried off her words to spread them as far as possible before finally running out of puff. But its rest will be brief, for the wind knows that like Asha it is destined to return, for they are the same, they are immortal and they will continue being until there is no longer any need for either.

The End