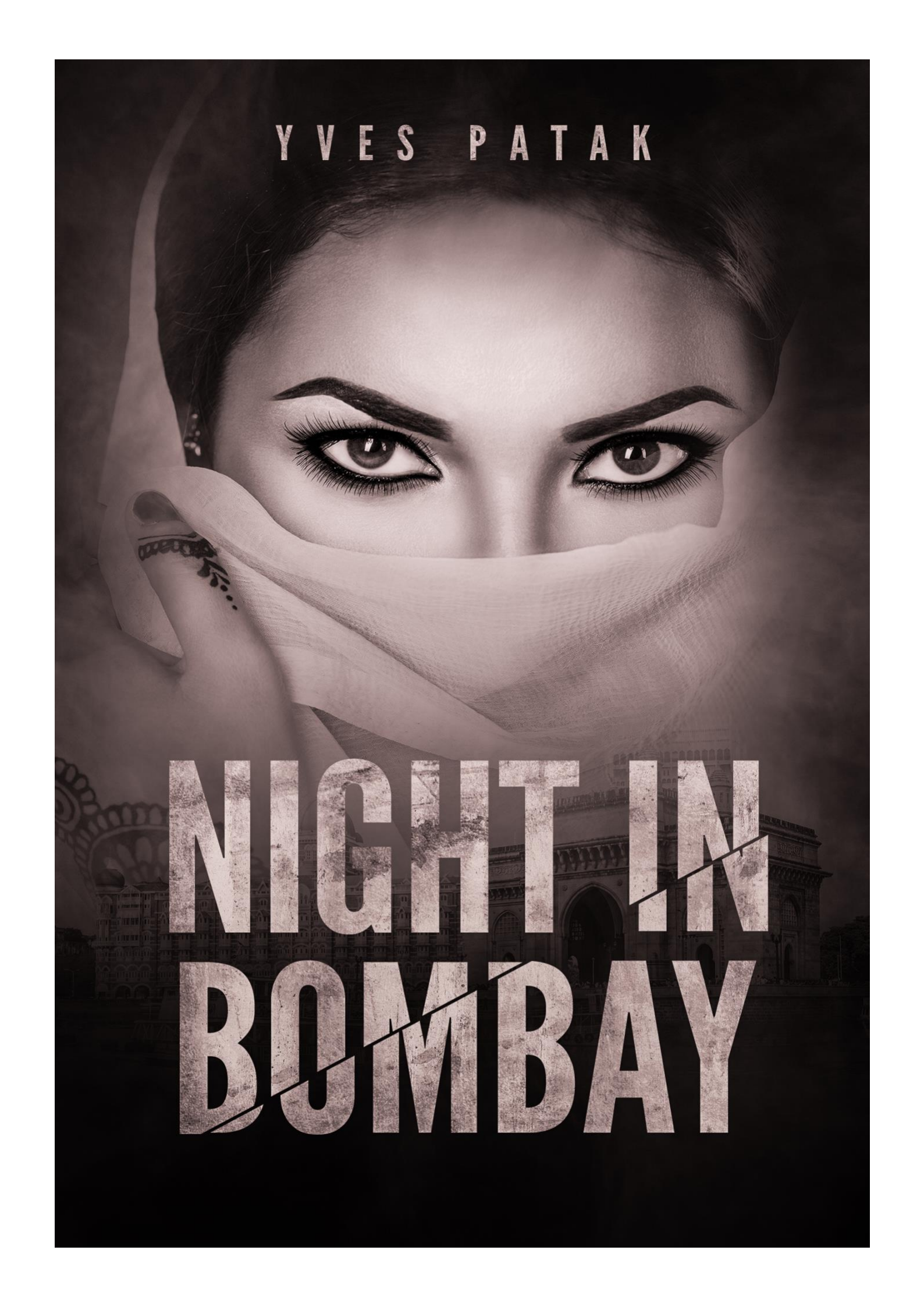


YVES PATAK



**NIGHT IN
BOMBAY**

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Yves Patak

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Raj gazed down the rubbish-strewn alley populated with rats, dogs and beggars – sleazy beggars like himself. Even after sunset the air was liquid lead, hot and humid, the stench sickening. Gods, how he loathed this city, how he hated his life!

He spat out in anger. *Karma my ass.*

Like many young people, he had fled the countryside and come to Bombay looking for a lucrative job and a bright future. And just like most fortune-seekers, he had crash-landed, had seen his hopes and illusions crumble to dust under the millstone of reality.

Only two years ago, he had walked into this ogre of a city with empty pockets but an iron constitution and high dreams. Before long he realized that the ladder to success was steeper than he'd anticipated. Soon the occasional jobs got scarcer, and less than a year after his high-spirited arrival he found himself reduced to a walking skeleton, stranded on the streets like so much human flotsam.

Absently he scratched at one of the boils on his cheek. Pain and malnutrition had taken their toll on his previously handsome face, made him look older than his years. His

stomach rumbled, and he felt the familiar pain of hunger. Had he really believed he would be one of the lucky devils who actually made it? Looking at his dirt-crusting hands and the sores on his skinny legs he felt like screaming with frustration.

I'm dying, little by little ... just wasting away.

Every new day was a nightmare, coming at him with hunger, pain and desperation. Most passersby, locals and tourists alike, turned a blind eye on the beggars and cripples with their cupped hands. To them, they were nothing but human trash, street rats that deserved contempt rather than sympathy.

Around nightfall, the hunger pain became unbearable, and Raj forced himself to hobble over to one of the busier streets, hoping for some good soul or some tourists with moral issues who might spare him a few rupees. When he found a corner he deemed promising, he leaned against the brick wall and held out his hands. He looked at his arms in disgust. Hardly more than skin-covered bones. An overwhelming sense of frustration and self-pity knotted up his empty stomach. He spat out, furious at the world, fate and the cold-hearted city.

Time passed, meaningless and empty. Less than thirty rupees found their way into his pockets, hardly enough for a loaf of bread. Around midnight, he dragged himself to an alley that belonged to the hookers, pushers and beggars at night, an alley most cops avoided like the plague, and fell into a restless half-sleep.

Abruptly, Raj jolted out of his slumber. Had something changed? He looked around. Nothing but the usual cluster of sleeping bodies, the pervasive stench of sweat, rot and despair.

Just when he was about to drift back into lethargy, he saw a woman sauntering by, a woman that attracted all his attention.

What on earth ...?

With her beautiful face, the cascade of jet-black hair and her white sari she stood in stark contrast to the hellhole alley. It was blatantly obvious she didn't belong here, and yet she ambled along the nocturnal alley as if going for a stroll in the park.

Her features were unlike to any Raj had ever seen. Was she even Indian? Her fair skin hinted at a higher caste, her gait a noble descent.

Raj caught himself gaping. *She looks like a goddess!* His pulse quickened. He looked about. While most of the beggars kept sleeping, some of them stared at the woman as at an apparition, their haggard faces filled with awe and fear.

The woman approached one of those awake, a wizened old man with only one eye. She bent down and whispered something in his ear. The beggar listened in rapt attention – and nodded at last. Gently, she touched his cheek, and the old man closed his eyes, smiling. Then she walked on, her sari luminous in the moonlight, and disappeared around a corner. Frowning, Raj stared after her.

The day after, the strange lady wouldn't leave Raj's mind. He bought himself two roti and devoured them, but instead of appeasing his hunger, the bread only made him more ravenous.

Around noon, he forced himself to go panhandling once more. This time, there was no Good Samaritan, and with a sinking feeling Raj realized he was even too weak to snatch some food. Driven by sheer desperation, he dragged on from street to street, praying for a miracle, praying to see the intriguing lady again.

When his legs refused to carry him any further, he trudged back to the dismal alley he called his home and collapsed to the floor. Soon he drifted into a dreamless sleep.

A strange atmosphere of hushed excitement awakened him. Night had fallen, and he realized he must have slept away the whole afternoon and evening. Warily, he cocked his head. There was something in the air ... like a whisper one could rather feel than hear.

It's her!

The thought made him shiver with an anticipation he couldn't explain. There was a good dozen of homeless people in the alley, but this time all of them seemed awake, all of them looking in the same direction.

And then she appeared- a radiant figure ambling along the alley as if she had no particular place to go and all the time in the world.

She's crazy, Raj thought, mesmerized. *Anybody could rape or rob her!* Yet some gut feeling deep inside told him nobody would ever touch *this* lady. He had to follow her, had to find out about her purpose. Feigning sleep, he waited until she had passed him by. Then he struggled to his feet and followed her from a distance. As he tailed her, he saw her pausing here and there, bending down to some of the ragged beggars on the ground, whispering to them, sometimes touching their cheek.

Strange, Raj mused. *Whatever does she tell them?*

Unerringly she kept walking, weaving her way through narrow streets and dark alleys nobody in his right mind would set foot in. Keeping his distance, Raj followed her deeper and deeper into the slums of Bombay. With her white sari and the moon shining upon her, she was easy to follow through the dim streets.

Fascinated, Raj watched her cower down next to an old woman with an oozing boil on her forehead. As the woman in the white sari whispered to her, the wrinkled face lit up. For a moment, both women smiled at each other. When at last the old woman nodded, the lady in white rose and walked on.

Raj resumed his pursuit, driven by a feverish force. But as he passed the old woman, he stopped and frowned down at her. Her body was slumped back against the wall, her eyes closed, her expression serene ... as if she were sleeping.

Or dead.

When Raj looked around, the woman in white had disappeared. Swearing under his breath he pushed onward, around a corner, then another one. No sign of her. His hands curled into fists. How could he let her out of sight?

He licked his parched lips, realizing he was dying of thirst. His head low he plodded on, found an old beer can half filled with murky rainwater and drank from it eagerly. Immediately, his stomach sent spasms through his starving body. Hands on his belly he leaned against a wall, despair clawing at him.

All his thoughts were riveted on the mysterious woman. What was she all about? Did she bring spiritual care to the desperate and the dying? An absurd idea flashed through his mind. *Or does she bring everybody what they deserve? Death to the hopeless – and a way out for those who still have the hunger to live?*

No doubt, that woman was sent from the gods, the one person who might be able to change his life! Judging by her attire she had to be wealthy. If he could only talk to her, convince her that he still had the dream and the drive to pull himself out of this this cursed quagmire, she could help him out with some money – a debt he'd pay back with interest, so help him Ganesha!

Raj stood up, his heart brimming over with an emotion long forgotten.

Hope.

He had to find her again, right away! The circumstances of his life were just one big great mistake waiting to be rectified. He didn't belong here, wasn't part of this fetid purgatory!

He pushed forward, fighting a wave of dizziness. For nearly an hour he roamed about the ghetto, wandering through neighborhoods he had never seen. Just when he was about to give up, he chanced upon an alley so narrow that even the moonlight only came through in odd-shaped patches.

Despite the late hour, the silence was uncanny. There was no hint of the noises pertinent to ghetto life. No snoring, swearing, sobbing ...

Nothing. Only the stench of rotting garbage gave proof that he wasn't dreaming.

As his eyes grew accustomed to alley's darkness, he saw a handful of waifs and street people sitting on the beaten earth ground, all of them seemingly waiting for ...

... for *her*?

Then some of the homeless began to stir, as if sensing something or someone approaching. Raj followed their glances – and saw her.

The woman in the white sari sauntered through the alley in perfect serenity, her face luminous beneath the black hair.

Raj took a deep breath. This was his chance, his one opportunity to give his life a new direction. Just as he was about to make toward the woman, he hesitated. Watched the lady in white approach a young girl of about ten. The girl was crying, and the woman hunched up next to her, whispering words Raj couldn't hear. The girl listened raptly, nodding from time to time – then whispered something back to the woman,

spoke with growing urgency, as if outpouring all of the misery she had bottled up on the merciless streets of Bombay. When the girl broke out in convulsive sobbing, the lady in white took the girl's face in both her hands. For a moment, nothing happened. At last, the girl got to her feet, smiling. Oblivious of her surroundings, she walked off into the darkness, as if guided by some invisible force.

Raj felt his heart hammering in his thin chest. *A miracle ... I just witnessed a miracle!* He knew, simply *knew* that for the girl the only way was up from now on. The lady in white had rescued her from a sinister fate, had handed her the key to new life!

Then he saw the woman walk on.

Now or never. Casting all doubts aside, Raj headed for the woman. Even though he nearly ran, the distance between them remained. Narrowing his eyes, he hurried on, saw her turning a corner at the alley's end. How could she make such progress at such leisurely gait?

Panting, he stumbled after her, infuriated by the weakness of his scrawny legs. He rounded the corner - and found her gone.

His left eye twitched. *No!* He fought down the panic surging up in him. *You're a doomed man,* a cold voice within whispered. *You're going to die.*

Half running, half limping he rushed through the ghetto's twilight maze, through a nightmarish world of sleeping beggars, cripples and rubbish-strewn passageways. At long last, his legs wouldn't carry him any longer, and he collapsed against the corrugated iron sheet of a shanty, sweating, cursing, heavy sobs shaking his gaunt body.

He wiped the tears away with his forearm - and froze. The woman in white stood right in front of him, her sari billowing despite the dead calm. She was smiling down on him, her face more beautiful than anything he'd ever seen. Before he could utter a word, she gently touched his cheek. The coldness hit him like a thunderbolt. His eyes widened, his lips shaping the word *no!*, but not a sound escaped his throat. Still smiling, the woman put a slender finger on his lips, hushing him.

He took one final breath, tried to scream - and felt his heart stop beating. With a soft thud he fell back against the shanty's wall, his breaking eyes twisted up to the moon.

With an unearthly calm, the lady in white walked on, into the night.

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About the author

Yves Patak, MD, physician and writer, sees himself as a modern Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hyde: psycho- and hypnotherapist by day, he spends his nights writing about the dark side of the human soul and the eerie entities between the dimensions.

Inspired by Edgar Allan Poe and Stephen King, Patak's pet subject became the mystery thriller.

Published novels: Der Screener, Tödlicher Schatten, Ace Driller, Himmel und Hölle, Null Bock auf Karma, Gespräche mit Luzi (latter also translated into English and Spanish).

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