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The Goddess and the Thief

Written by Essie Fox

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GODDESS
AND THE
* THIEF *



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A NAME IN EXCHANGE FOR A LIFE

Do you believe in other worlds, of lives ever after, of heavens on earth? My ayah did, and from her lips there dripped such honeyed promises. There was one tale she used to tell, and I heard it so often that, even now, I recall her every word by heart . . .

Far, far away, my heart's dearest, is a palace atop of Mount Kailash where Shiva lives in wedded bliss with his goddess bride, Parvati. But there was a time, long years before, when Shiva loved another: a woman made of mortal flesh whose name was Sati. Perfect wife.

Sati adored Lord Shiva. She worshipped the ground on which he walked. But her happiness was blighted when her father refused to accept the fact that his daughter, a lady of radiant beauty, had wed the god who was uncouth, with long, braided hair which was never combed, and his dirty flesh so often clothed in nothing but stinking animal skins. When Shiva was not invited to a festival her father held at which a sacred fire would burn and sacrifices would be made, Sati was filled with such grief and shame that she walked alone to her father's home and there, before his very eyes, she flung herself into the flames.

The devastation Shiva felt when he heard of this was terrible. He came to the place of his loved one's death and prayed for her soul to live again. He danced with her blackened, charred remains and washed her body in his tears. He smeared his flesh with her ashes, and then returned to his mountain home where he sat cross-legged in the snow and closed his eyes against the world and every pleasure it contained. There he mourned for a thousand years while the Pole Star glistened high above, around which the heavens all revolved,

the hub of time, not life or death in which each soul shall be reborn. And so it was with Sati, when her spirit waxed like a springtime moon and entered the newborn, living flesh of a princess of the mountains.

That child was called Parvati – which means she who is of the hills – and from the moment of her birth, Parvati longed for nothing more than to leave her father's home and go in search of Shiva, to love him as Sati had before.

When at last she found the god she offered him gifts of flowers and food. She knelt in the snow to wash his feet, and prayed in freezing mountain streams. She was to suffer many trials before Shiva accepted her love for him, when at last he opened his eyes, and said, 'Oh thou bowed beauty. I have caused thee much misery and pain. Take my hand, and live with me in my palace, high up on the slopes of Kailasa. There thou shalt become Mahadevi. There thou shalt be divine.'

And there she lives to this very day, proving by her constancy that death is but a little dream. Death has no beginning. It has no end. It is only the mortal body that dies, our souls forever to be reborn, until every wrong has been righted, and every debt has been repaid, and then there will be the nothingness, which is Nirvana. Perfect bliss.

Those years I lived in India, I think they were my paradise. And Bhamini – that was my ayah's name – she was my guardian angel. I used to call her Mini. She called me Priyam – Beloved.

I will never forget that last summer when my father sent Mini and me to the hills to escape the city's heat and disease – and also the threat of another war, although I knew little of war back then, only that the first, against the Sikhs, had begun when I was still a babe. And when that was done, when the British prevailed, my father brought Mini and me from Benares to live in the city of Lahore.

My father began his army career when enlisting as a surgeon with the British East India Company. But, later, his role was 'political', aiding the work of the Resident who spoke for The Company's interests on the Punjabi Durbar, the council made

up of Sikh generals and the aristocracy of Lahore, who ruled in the place of the boy Maharajah – the boy who was five years older than me, who was still too young to be aware of the simmering tensions and deceits that had led to the loss of his Golden Throne.

In the hills we were very far away from those dangerous games of politics. In the hills, we heard no bugle calls, no fifes or drums or marching feet to wake us in the mornings. In the hills we rose to the squawking of parrots, or the coos of doves on the windowsills and, sometimes, if my father was absent, then Mini would dress me as she did, in the *salwar kameez* – a loose tunic, with trousers secured by a string at the waist – with a gauzy *dupatta* to cover my head should we walk into the villages.

On those walks I liked to see the big houses with English names on the gates; names like Moss Grange or Sunny Bank, with gardens full of hollyhocks and roses trained around the doors. Our garden was full of roses too, but less constrained, more rampant growths that twined through trailing jasmine stems. Their perfume was dense and intoxicating when blowing through the window screens where, every morning, I liked to stand and look out at the saffron yellow skies, below which I always hoped to see the tiger that sometimes walked the lane – that sometimes stopped at the end of our driveway to scratch its great paws on the gateposts.

In the villages they often told of children snatched by tigers, and those children never seen again. And such a fate I might have shared, for there was one morning when Mini was sleeping, when none of the other female servants had by then emerged from their mud hut which was set at one side of the mango tope – and the gardeners who slept upon the verandah (charged by Papa with guarding me) were lying as silent as the dead. It was almost as if each one of them had been cast beneath an enchantment. Not a breath, not a snuffle or snore was heard, and had I wished, had I been so inclined, had I been some demon murderer, I could have crept along the rush matting and

lifted the rifles stored under their charpoys and blown out the brains of every man – or else used the rifles' bayonets to slash any one of their sleeping throats. That's what the worst of the dacoits did. That's what Balkar, the coolie, always said.

Instead, I crept right past them, on down the wooden verandah steps, to wander across the dew-wet grass and then beneath the banyan tree where, within the basket weave of growth that was knitted together to form its trunk, there was a shrine to Shiva. It was the lingam, the stone phallus, of which Mini said I must not breathe a single word to Papa, although what that stone might signify was something then unknown to me. But I knew that it was sacred. It was where Mini went to pray each day, to pour water, or incense, or milk, or ghee upon the shaft's thick, rounded tip.

That dawn, when I'd looked from my window, it was very near to the banyan tree that I happened to spy a little deer. A hog deer, a doe I thought it must be. It had no horns as the males did, or else it might be very young, not yet having learned to be frightened of men because, as I drew closer, when it scented my presence on the air, it did not try to run away, only raised its head and stood quite still to gaze through baleful, moist brown eyes.

'Shush . . . I won't hurt you,' I hoped to assure it, reaching out with one of my hands, and just about to stroke its neck when it suddenly startled. And so did I, hearing the scream of alarm it gave, almost like a peeping whistle – after which the deer bolted away, the white flashing flag of its tail held high as it crashed through the shrubs at the garden's end. I watched until it disappeared, lost in the shadows of black and green and then, somewhat dejected at not having made myself a friend, I turned to go back to the house again – only to find myself face to face with the predator that had caused its flight.

Above my head the dawn sun throbbed. Its light glinted down through the banyan leaves. But my flesh was cold and prickling, frozen in that one moment of terror, with the tiger no more than three feet away, and so tall that its piercing yellow

eyes were on a level with my own. There was nothing, nothing else in the world but the gleam of those mesmerising orbs, and the swirling stripes of gold and black each side of its enormous jaws – the jaws with white, barbed whiskers which were then stained and wet with blood, through which I heard a low, deep growl, a vibration of sound that filled my ears and continued when the creature moved. But, not to attack me as I feared, only to stretch and extend its legs, and to flex its paws, like dinner plates, through the stems of the grass on which I stood. I felt its claws, like razors as they grazed against the tips of my toes, as it lowered its head in a sort of salaam, after which, when the creature rose again it proceeded to circle around me. Its movements were slow and languid, but so close that I felt the ripple of muscle, and the fur, so much softer than I had expected when it brushed against those parts of me where the skin was not covered by my shift. I could feel its breath on the back of my neck, on the curve of my cheek, on my parted lips, and that breath smelled noxious, of fetid meat. I felt sure the beast would be eating me. But instead it did something very strange – something which, when I thought of it afterwards, created a mixture of dread and excitement, filling my veins with a rushing thrill whenever I recalled the way the tiger’s muzzle rubbed my cheek, and then on down, along my arm, all the way to the wrist and back again. Another sound, deep in its throat, something between a groan and a purr, and then the tiger’s rasping tongue began to lick my face, my neck – licking at all the trails of red that it had smeared onto my flesh, until, as if quite satisfied, it left me trembling, near to a faint, as it stalked away through the thicket of trees and followed the path of the deer before.

I ran back to the house and crept into my bed. I lay there, breaths shaking, pretending to sleep while I waited for Mini to wake me. When she came, when she dressed me and saw the wounds, she gasped and took me by the hands. Saying, ‘*Arrê!* My thumbling, what have you been doing? Have the rats been nibbling your toes?’

‘Oh . . .’ I looked down to see them, the lines of finely

crusted scabs. 'It might have happened yesterday, when I wasn't wearing any shoes.'

Well, it might! I had been barefoot, when Balkar chased me along the drive, and some stones in that gravel were very sharp.

'And you didn't even cry. Such a brave little *butcha*, my Priyam!' Mini smiled her relief and kissed my cheek, and the state of my toes was forgotten then, and very soon they had quite healed. But not so easily lost for me was the thought of the creature who'd caused those cuts – of which I dared not breathe a word. Not to Mini, not Balkar, or anyone else. If Papa learned that I'd gone out and roamed through the gardens alone at dawn, well, I couldn't imagine what he'd say. But, more than that: if it was known that the tiger had dared to scale our walls, then I feared that he would have it shot.

I did not want to see it die, even though I knew, deep in my heart, that the tiger could never be my friend. The tiger was wild and dangerous, a creature of instinct and appetite, a force of nature all its own.

I knew if the tiger had wanted to feed, my flesh would have tasted just as sweet as that of any mountain deer.

It was the third day of *Shuckla Paksha*. The Bright Moon Fortnight in Shravan. The time of the festival of Teej. The festival of Married Bliss. Balkar was driving the bullock cart, taking Mini and me to a mountain shrine where women from the villages were gathering to feast and dance – to celebrate Parvati and her perfect love for Shiva.

I was snuggling up to Mini's side, both of us batting away the flies that buzzed about around our heads. In a way, I was glad of those insects. They stopped me from dropping off to sleep, for it was very late at night and I was lulled by the rock of the cart, by the rise and fall of Mini's breaths as I rested my cheek upon her breast.

Through a yawn, I forced myself to sit, and asked, 'Mini, why do they call it Teej?'

'It is named for the little red beetles who know when the

monsoon rains will come . . . who burrow their way up through the soil and crawl across the ground above, to signify new life, new love.'

I thought I could hear those beetles then, rustling through the groves of pine where rising mists were swirling. I peered very hard through the veils of grey and whispered, 'Could there be tigers . . . crawling towards us through the trees?'

Balkar glanced back with teasing eyes. 'Not only tigers, little one! There have been ghosts seen in these woods, Rakshashas too – the demons who roam about in cemeteries!'

'Rakshashas?' Very slowly, I echoed this gleeful announcement, already fearing Balkar's words when his dreadful news was carried on.

'The demons who suck on children's blood, who can only walk at night, because the sunlight burns their flesh, but—'

'No more of this nonsense!' Mini snapped. And then, to lure my mind away, she suggested that we sing some songs – some Christian hymns that I had learned in the Sunday school, back in Lahore.

We sang 'All Things Bright and Beautiful'. We sang 'For the Beauty of the Earth'. And the earth was truly beautiful when we first caught sight of the mountain shrine, where the growth of the trees was sparser and the track began its steep descent. And there, in the bowl of a valley, was the gleam of clustered temple domes, all the pillars and arching terraces with statues of monkeys and holy bulls, with crumbling roofs and balconies where ancient trees had taken root. Glittering in the very midst there was the most enormous pool, and Mini told us those waters were sacred, having been formed from Shiva's tears when the god had been inconsolable at the loss of his first beloved wife.

Mini said, 'No one knows how deep it is. By day it is an emerald green. By night it forms a mirror, reflecting the stars and the moon above. And anyone who enters then may bathe in the waters of heaven, enfolded in Lord Shiva's arms . . . as if another goddess wife.'

‘I want to bathe in Heaven!’ Impatient and excited now, I could hear the sounds of laughter, of chattering and singing from those already in the shrine. I was tugging hard on Mini’s hand. My hand. Her hand. Fingers entwined – along with the patterns of flowers and leaves that formed brown stains upon our skin – what Mini had painted the day before with the crushed leaves of henna, and oil and water; all coming together like mirrors then, until she lifted high my arms and shaped my fingers like a prayer. But a prayer with a space left in between, and in that space I held the moon, and the moon was as bright as a diamond – a vision that held me quite entranced as Mini leaned closer and murmured, ‘A full moon, my dearest . . . that is an omen for thee to heed. But come, see its light in Shiva’s pool.’

A thousand souls it seemed to me were gathered there around the pool, and every single one of them – every mother, sister, daughter, aunt – was dressed like me and Mini; each one as if she was a bride, in reds and pinks and greens and golds. They were singing, ‘*Om Namah Shivaya. Hara Hara Mahadeva*’. They were chanting the name of Parvati. Some of them were holding lamps. Some of them were holding bowls. Brass bowls full of honey, or sandalwood paste, or oil of rose, or sticky ghee. Some bowls they filled with Shiva’s tears. They poured them on a lingam stone. I watched the water trickle down, to flow amongst the marigolds that formed a carpet on the ground. But where one woman’s veil came loose and fell across those yellow blooms, that trailing silk, it looked like blood.

Dawn was already gilding the skies by the time we arrived back at the house. And how surprised we were to find my father waiting at the gates – he and several other men armed with guns and rifles, and every single one of them about to come in search of us.

We had not expected his visit. He had not expected to find us away. And, seeing us back his anxiety was replaced by a seething anger, when Balkar (poor Balkar, so afraid) explained exactly

where we'd been – and then ran off while Mini wept, while my father refused to look her way when making the announcement that he could not trust her with my care – that he had decided to take me home.

I thought he was talking about Lahore, but very soon I was to learn that 'home' for my father was England – even though he'd not been there in years – even though his own mother and father had also lived in India.

The following day, when we made to depart, when Mini came to help me dress, and not in the coolness of flowing silks but in starched skirts and petticoats, I felt her fingers trembling, and I saw that her eyes were rimmed with red, and I heard the sorrow in her voice when she said, 'Go with the gods, my dearest one. I pray that Lord Shiva will care for thee and carry thee gently in his arms.'

'But Shiva will carry thee as well . . . for surely thou wilt come with us?' (Whenever my father was not around I often mimicked Mini's voice, what the memsahibs in the regiment church might scorn and call my 'chi-chi' ways – even though they spoke that way themselves when reciting their Bible verses, or during the singing of the hymns.)

'No,' Mini sighed as she lifted my wrist, around which she wound some coloured threads, and into those threads were knotted beads – little glass bubbles of red and green, and some seeds of the rudraksha tree: the rough, bobbled nuts which are sacred to Shiva, which I'd seen in a painting in Mini's room as being threaded at his throat, and through the plaits of his matted locks, along with snakes and flowers, along with the stars and the crescent moon.

'Always wear this, my dearest,' Mini said while she tied the bangle's threads. 'It shall be a token of our love. And every time you touch a bead you shall know that Mini thinks of thee, and that Mini shall be praying still for her beloved's safe return.'

I never imagined not coming back, never seeing my ayah's face again. But, I do sometimes wonder now if Mini knew exactly what my father planned to do with me. I think of her

that morning, and how shocked and bewildered her lovely face when she stood by the tiger-clawed gateposts to watch our carriage drive between, when my father called out for the vehicle to stop, then left me alone while he went to her side. He placed a hand upon her arm and whispered something in her ear – something that I could not hear. But, I could see quite well enough how he reached a hand into his pocket and drew out a large brown envelope and pressed that into Mini's hands. And whatever it was – well, I think I know now, and Mini must have done as well because, when my father returned to me, when the carriage was setting off again and I strained to look back and wave goodbye, I saw Mini standing there, perfectly still. Mini just stared but she did not move, until she screamed my father's name – a sound that was shrill and alarming, a sound like the warning cry of the deer in the moments before the tiger appeared, during which she lifted up her arms, and holding high that envelope she tore it in two, then two again. Little scraps fluttered down about her feet.

My father said it was summertime when we first arrived at Southampton docks. But, so often I found myself shivering and oppressed by the dreariness of days when it seemed all the colours in the world had been bleached away to a dirty grey. My father left me yearning for the only home I'd ever known to live in a house like a darkened maze where, at first, I was very often lost in the claustrophobia of walls too close, of ceilings too low, of narrow stairs that led up and up to a bedroom where the walls had been papered with rosebuds. But those flowers were pale imitations, too regimented and prim by far when compared with the fragrant, blowsy blooms we'd left behind in India. I would lie in that bedroom and think of home, feeling hungry but never wanting to eat, with the food so bland and lacking taste. And the only thing to comfort me was to stare through the gloom to a gap in the shutters, where I sometimes saw the starlit skies and wondered if those self-same stars were shining over India. To sparkle in my ayah's eyes.

None of those stars could offer warmth when my first English winter came around, when, even with a fire to burn in the grate in the little bedroom hearth, the air was always much too cold – so cold that some mornings a layer of ice would form a skin in the water bowl. And then I would crawl back into the bed and bury myself in the blankets, and draw up my knees and bind my toes in the pocket made from my nightgown's hems. I would blow hot air onto my hands and when my fingers grew less numb, twist at the glass and rudraksha beads that Mini had wound about my wrist – just as I'd done when on board the ship, when I had been tortured by seasickness, where once I had been delirious when taken with a fever.

Hearing the constant creak of the paddles, I imagined that rhythm to be the sound of Shiva beating on his drum; the thrumming of eternity as he guided me through Limbo Land, that misery – not life, not death – in which I longed for Mini, to be lying again at my ayah's side and not in a cramped ship's cabin, but in an airy mountain house, where her fingers would softly stroke my cheek, the glass of her bangles tinkling, her hair like black silk as it wove through mine and spread across the pillow.

How I pined for what I'd left behind, for Mini's scent of musk and patchouli, instead of the ocean's salty tang. How I yearned for the music of Mini's voice as she told her tales of Hindoo gods – as I heard her whisper in my ear,

'Far, far away, my heart's dearest, is a palace atop of Mount Kailash where Shiva lives in wedded bliss with his goddess bride, Parvati . . .'

Once, those words were all it took for my heart to start thudding in anticipation, thinking of love and fire and death as I stared through my bedroom window to see amongst the banyan trees the roosting bats that looked like fruits as they clustered in the branches. And, if the skies were clear of cloud, then above those branches the stars would shine and the Pole Star would hang like a lantern, and the moon, round and ripe as

a mango, would gleam upon the snowy tips of mountains in the distant range.

My mother died when I was born. I suppose that is why I liked that tale, to think her soul might still live on, perhaps upon a mountain top, where the Pole Star glittered high above and crowned her head in silver light.

We followed the Pole Star to England. It looked like a beacon – a diamond. I saw it one night when my father insisted I leave the nest of my cabin bed and take some fresh air on the deck of the ship. He said we might see some flying fish. But while my hands clutched the wooden rail, all slippery from waves then spraying up, when I stared down at the sea below all I could see was a cauldron of demons who were splashing and raging, who roared in my ears. And over that noise I had to shout while staring up at the skies instead, telling my papa about the star, and the god on whom it always shone, and how I hoped my mother's soul might feel its light and be reborn.

Papa frowned to hear me then. He said that I was much too old to believe in the stories my ayah told, that they were no more than fairy tales. He had no faith in reincarnation. He refused to be drawn on my mother's soul or where it might be living then – in Heaven, Nirvana, or anywhere else.

Instead, he told me what was true, which was that my mother had died in Benares and that my father blamed himself for ever having married her, for luring her from England to live in a climate too arduous for one whose health was delicate, for whom there came the tragic toll when a childbirth fever claimed her life.

I always feel a pang of guilt to think that I lived when my mother did not – yet more because I bear her name. My name is Alice Willoughby. A name in exchange for a life.