

Girl Made of Gold



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 juggernaut

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The Hunter

First he heard the crow. Crows know everything that goes on in their forest, and this crow, sitting on the branch of the jamun tree on the other side of the river behind the Shiva temple, had something important and curious to report. Again and again, he tilted his head this way and that to look down with first one yellow-rimmed eye and then the other, at something strange, then cawed his amazement and surprise. The tribal hunter, with his gourd for wild tomatoes and water chestnuts slung over one shoulder, armed with a catapult and throwing spear, squatted and watched the bird's unusual behaviour. Perhaps the leopard had killed a calf near the river and dragged it into the thick undergrowth there. Or could it be that a wild pig had fallen into a trap set by some other hunter? Now another crow came, and another, and they talked to each other in raucous, insistent tones. The

hunter decided to go and investigate before darkness fell, or jackals would beat him to the prize. He marked in his mind the spot that troubled the crows and set off at a slow, steady run along the paths that only he and the wild animals used, which criss-crossed the townspeople's paths but remained hidden from them. Meat would taste good tonight.

As he neared the tree the crows cawed louder, telling the hunter he was now being mentioned in their conversation. But more than the sound told him he was near – he could smell freshly spilled blood. Then, with building disappointment, he knew what he'd find even before he saw it. He'd smelled that scent before, the distinct odour of his own kind, the thin-skinned ones, not much good for anything. In the thickest part of this jungle, between the back wall of the temple garden and the river, he saw the trail of disturbance, branches broken, the mat of fallen leaves churned up and the earth revealed where feet had kicked and dragged. There had been a struggle. Then in the puddle of blood, thickened but not yet completely dry, soaking into the soil and buzzing with flies, was the man's body, slumped against a tree trunk, jubba torn, dhoti open, komanam no longer covering his genitals. It was hidden only from the most superficial gaze, behind a thicket of bamboo.

The crows had already conducted their own investigation: he could see crow droppings on the man's dark curls, and

the mark of the thick black beak in the wide open, staring eye. The hunter looked in the fast fading light for anything of value on the man's body. He ignored the gold ring and the diamond ear stud, for those could only lead to trouble. He saw a glint of silver grasped still in the man's hands, and took it from the dead fingers. It was a hair ornament, pointed and bloody at one end, and thickening to the width of his little finger at the other, with a parakeet's head, holding in its beak a piece of coral like the seed of a silk cotton tree. This he would wash clean of blood, and give to his woman, for she had long, thick hair. He would tell her nothing of the dead body. He would say he had found it on the bank of the river where the women bathed. He gathered up the few beedis that had fallen from a pocket of the shirt now gone, the box of matches, some two-rupee coins, a two anna and four pice.

He looked one last time at the body, and saw on the thigh where the pretty silver stick had gone in a small wound, but fatal, for the blood would have flowed from that place in spurts to the beat of his heart. The jackals were already waiting, would come as soon as it was dark, drawn by the scent of blood. They would start their feasting there, on the soft parts of the man. Then, being jackals, they would fight over the best meat, tearing his limbs, destroying his wholeness. The wild pigs, knowing themselves to be

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safe in the midst of such a feast, would root through his entrails, swallow his toes and his eyeballs whole, shitting out somewhere the gold and the diamond. Someone from the village might hear the noise of hyenas and wake from a dream or a nightmare that by morning would have been forgotten. Vultures might find some putrefying flesh dragged out into more open spaces. Maggots would grow fat on what was left, and crows and grackles would swoop down to eat the maggots. Ants and beetles would labour day and night carrying away even the flakes of dried blood, whatever hadn't soaked into the earth. Nothing would be able to grow there though, on the spot where the blood had pooled, not for a while. For many seasons, he would be able to make out the faint outline of that puddle.

The Priest

Before we enter the temple through the towered gateway, notice these unusual details. Usually the dvarapalakas guarding the entrance are ferocious male figures. But here, they are big-breasted females. Frightening nevertheless, one with her mace, the other with her curved sword. There is a reason for that. I will tell you the story when we are inside. First take a moment to look up and wonder at the gopuram, rising in seven diminishing storeys, capped by pot-like finials between the arched ends. Now you may step over the threshold. I will follow.

I understand your revulsion. It is only natural and I'm used to it. But if you want to get what you've come for, you have no other choice. I won't touch you.

Look there, ahead of us. We come to the Nandi, wearing a necklace of bells, with bells around his forelocks as well, his braided tail all decorated. This is a royal bull.

Let us begin the circumambulation. The shafts of the pillars along the corridor are called *indrakanta*, the eight sides polished to the smoothness of wood instead of being intricately carved. Notice the bases, with fish beings, mouths gaping, flaunting their flowering tails, and swans, with their necks entwined.

Stand here. Your gaze is drawn upwards to the frieze along the gallery. Have you ever seen its like? It is said that the sculptors were a father and son whose ongoing rivalry led to the special beauty of these carvings. Whatever the father carved on one side, the son matched on the other. The drummers seem to be nodding in time to the beat, and the flute players seem to be swaying to a lilting tune. The father carved this dancer here, so graceful you can almost hear her anklets jingle. Now look at the other side. The son, it is said, carved a dancer even more graceful, whose eyes seemed to dart from side to side. Late that night, the father came and carved closed the eyelids of the dancer. But what he did to spoil his son's work instead enhanced it. See? She seems to have closed her eyes in ecstasy.

The inscription reads, 'This shrine was caused to be made by the King of Immutable Resolve, as a receptacle for the elixir of precious gems that are his own good deeds.' Do you remember the story of King Manunitikanda? The king's young son, charging recklessly in his chariot through the

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streets of the town, drove his wheels over a calf, killing it. The grieving mother cow came to the court and rang the bell of justice. She demanded that the prince be killed in exactly the same way her own child had been killed. When none of his charioteers was willing to carry out this harsh punishment, the king himself whipped the horses on so that the great wheels crushed and mangled the young flesh, more precious to him than his own. Shiva is ever pleased by such displays of righteousness. Only the great god can weigh and judge. He restored both the calf and the prince to life. The raja who built this temple was a descendant of that heedless prince, who paid dearly for his carelessness, and then lived again, haunted by the memory of his own death. Do you ever think of what it must have been like to remember dying? I do, all the time.

The sacred tree of this temple is the jambu tree, sometimes called rose apple, or bull's heart. Do you want to taste the fruit? Go ahead. It is ripe. Does any comparison come to mind as you hold it in your hand? Look at this part here, where the flower has fallen off. Doesn't it look like lips, pouting to make the sound 'ooo'? Or you could say the fruit itself is shaped like a budding breast. But what does it matter, since every fruit and every plant and every flower suggests a woman. 'Her skin like a young mango leaf,' 'Her teeth like new buds on a palm tree.' So the poets say.

This temple came to be here because of this tree, and the suggestive nature of its fruit.

The raja, called Iravat, meaning rain clouds, was travelling with his retinue – servants, ministers, his favourite wife – along this riverbank.

I have calculated exactly when the events I am about to describe must have taken place. It could only have been on a Sunday, just as the rays of the sun lengthened before sunset. The king's beautiful consort, leaning out of her palanquin to admire the beauty of this scene, saw the ripe fruit hanging in abundance from the branches of the rose apple tree, and expressed her wish to taste it. The raja himself immediately alighted from his horse. While plucking the round, fleshy, pink-tinged fruit from the branches to satisfy the desire of his wife, desire arose in him. For is this not the very nature of desire? Desire awakening desire, never satisfied? So the sages warn us.

But kings do not heed the words of sages. The raja ordered his servants to set up camp right then and there so that he could immediately act on his amorous feelings.

Now it so happened that the royal astrologers had predicted that this raja would never have children. And for twelve long years, it had been so. I do not have his horoscope before me, but it is most likely that he had Taurus ascendant, given his dark skin, his regal status, his surrendering so

readily to lust. Saturn, granting power, wealth and sexual prowess in the house he ruled, would exert his malefic influence on the house he aspected.

But on this occasion, the queen conceived. When it was clear that he was going to become a father, in refutation of all predictions, he immediately made a vow that he would construct a temple on the very spot of their union and finish it before the child was born.

Stonemasons laboured day and night cutting the stone, carving the pillars, making the gopuram. They chiselled the guardians of the entrance to represent the maids who had kept watch while the king and his consort sported in the grove. The frieze of celestial dancers and musicians look down from the heavens, providing divine accompaniment to the couples in the niches, in all the postures of lovemaking. The east-facing shrine they built to Shiva showing him in Vrishabhantika, as if standing and leaning on his bull. See? The bull is not there, but can be inferred from the position; so the raja himself with Taurus ascendant could imagine he supported the god. A shrine was built to Shanishwara, Saturn, his ruling planet, in a benign mood, with his two wives. The simplicity we now admire was a necessity, so that it could be finished within the time of the queen's confinement.

When the raja came with priests and musicians and dancers to complete the rituals by which the statues of the

deities come to life with the god inside them, for some reason they were as if turned to stone, unable to move from this very spot. The time the astrologer had declared to be auspicious was about to pass.

One old priest understood the problem. He said, 'A shrine to Rahu must be constructed.' My surmise is that the raja had in his chart a Rahu yogakaraka, where this malevolent shadow ruled two houses in his natal chart. When he and his queen had congress under the jambu tree, it must have been Rahu kalam. Under ordinary circumstances, and for most people, such a time would not bring success to any venture. But for this king, with the particular positioning of Rahu in his chart, this was in fact the only time of the day when he could have succeeded in fathering a child.

The other priests began to argue about how to sculpt a deity in such a short time. Just then a monitor lizard was seen running across the spot and disappearing into a hole. That was a sign. The old priest said, 'This is where we must dig to make the shrine.' Right there under the earth was the deity, carrying sword and shield, cast in bronze, and shining like gold. That is the image you see. Thus, the raja's vow was fulfilled. The next day his wife gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. Our present raja is a descendant of the same illustrious lineage.

This temple was given into the charge of the old priest who understood the true nature of Rahu, a master of

deception who hides behind fog and mist. The story of his origin gives a good idea of his character. When the gods set out to churn the ocean of milk for amrta, they needed the help of the anti-gods, the asuras. They said when the amrta rose to the surface, they'd share it. The asuras tried to take it all for themselves, but Vishnu as Mohini bewitched them and got it back, fully intending to give it only to the gods. But one asura didn't get muddle-headed by lust in Mohini's presence. He seated himself between Sun and Moon, and if they hadn't tattled on him, he would have succeeded in becoming fully immortal. As it was, he swallowed the nectar just in time, so that when Vishnu's chakra severed head from body both halves lived on. The shadow had become immortal along with the light. Rahu, the head with no body, can never be satisfied. And he hates Sun and Moon, getting his revenge by swallowing them whenever he can. Rahu is tricky, a blessing disguised as a curse.

Descendants of this priest, my ancestors, have been priests at this temple for I don't know how many generations. We are known for being able to handle the malevolent influence of Rahu. I will show you those inscriptions, written in an ancient script, confirming my rightful place within these walls.

My ability to see what others cannot has come to me as a gift. I didn't learn it, or develop it through practice. I have always been this way, for as long as I can remember.

But it has done me precious little good. I have not been able to prevent even one disaster in my own life, not one. We can't know ourselves, we stand in our own way, blocking the light that might illuminate our character. But perhaps what I see can help you. Maybe, maybe not. Not many who come here ever come back to tell if my spells and omens and incantations have worked. But whatever I see, I can't help seeing. I can tell many of your qualities by looking at your face. If you show me your palms, I can tell even more about your character. Disclose your name, and your date and time of birth, and you would be an open book to me. I will warn you of your fatal flaws. I do not look into the future, as many of my profession claim to do. I see patterns, that is all.

It is like this. If I write here in the sand a 3, then a 6 . . . you can only hazard a guess as to what the next number will be. It could be 9, it could be 12, almost any number is possible. But if I write 18 next, won't you feel certain that 108 must follow? So it is with human beings. The pattern of all that has gone before tells us what to expect next. This is what I believe. My ability is to see the pattern. What do I do? I just look, until the pattern reveals itself. Maybe anyone could do it, if only they stare long enough at what is right there in front of them. The world you see is not the world.

You have come all this way and I do not want to disappoint you. I think I know what you seek, but there is

no simple answer to that question. I must tell the whole. There are many ways to tell a story. The storyteller may tell tales that go along like a river, smoothly or over rocks but continuously, always in one direction. That kind of story is called 'river's flow'. Or he may look back and then forward, as a lion looks, back towards his pride and forward towards his prey. Such a story is called 'lion's glance'. It is also possible for the story to jump from one event to another crossing great intervals of time and space. This manner of storytelling is called 'frog's hop'. Or a story may bring into close proximity different effects, different colours, different moods, like marigold, tuberose, margosa leaves in a garland. Such stories are called 'flower garland'.

Once when I was sitting on the riverbank, I saw a woman from the village wade out with her brass pot into the very deepest part of the river. There, barely balanced on the slippery rocks, with the current swirling all around, up to her hips, she put the pot in and filled it with the clearest, sweetest water. With the pot on her head, she fought her way back to the riverbank one step at a time.

Later on, when some pilgrim comes to the door of her little hut and says 'I'm thirsty,' she will pour the cool water in a steady stream into his cupped hands. He won't know how she stood there in the middle of the current and was nearly swept away, but his thirst will be satisfied. And I thought to

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myself, this is the storyteller's art. While immersed in life, while it swirls about and threatens to carry you away, you take a part of it and keep it with you. Later on, you pour it into the listener's ear. He won't know how you were in the events you describe, how you nearly drowned. He'll simply hear the story, he'll drink it in, it will satisfy his yearning.

The water has no beginning and no end, but the pouring does. Life has no beginning and no end, but the story must start somewhere. Listen.