

Reading sample



NELL

NOWHERE WOMAN

She climbs up the hill with light-footed steps. There is no trace of trampled weeds. Is she secretly at one with the plants? She actually reminds me of a graceful creeper. Bursting with excitement, I follow her, wishing she would cling on to me and not disappear mysteriously again. Watching her sitting on the rocky ledge and looking down fearlessly brings pearls of sweat to my forehead. I say silently to myself, ‘Nell enjoys the risk. Her proud profile yet her gentle gaze form the image of a delicate princess in the ancient castle of my dreams.’ Catching myself in the act of such thoughts, I ask, ‘Why am I such a nostalgic fool stuck in the past of Indian romances?’ My grandmother’s rendering of the *Ramayana*¹ formed my desires and I drift between the hero, the divine lady and a demonic power. But Nell is not Indian. Actually, she does not belong anywhere. Maybe one day she will discover herself as part of a myth written long ago.

‘She’s a real nowhere girl, sitting in her nowhere land, making all her nowhere plans for nobody.’ I happily sing the Beatles song, changing the lyrics from a male to a female character.

Turning towards me, she interrupts and asks: ‘How did you come to own a piece of land in such a vast forest?’

‘Mmm, well . . . I didn’t want to own this – it just happened. I always thought that ownership is a devilish thing.’

1. One of the two most important epics of India, about 2,500 years old and consisting of 24,000 verses. It is the seminal work for the Sanskrit language and literature (the other epic is the *Mahabharata*).

‘Then how *did* it happen, Gowind?’

Her insistence on getting into a deep conversation makes me fall silent. It has been a long crazy story and can’t be explained in an instant. I give a simple answer.

‘I just fell in love with this forest. The vast green space calmed my quivering mind. Who am I? To what and to whom do I belong? Where do my fears come from? Suddenly, I was able to breathe. Everything here is vast and open – the smell of the woods on the clean fresh air and clear blue skies.’

At that moment, a beautiful bird with a long ribbonlike tail flies off in front of us.

‘Nell, see the white paradise fly-catcher. It looks like a nymph!’

Nell laughs. ‘Ah, you’re looking for some magic!’

‘No, no, not magic. I still look for something that helps me feel connected to creation, to the essence of life. ‘Save this rainforest’ were once the words pounding inside my temples and my life was turned upside down.’

I snap my fingers and continue. ‘Then all this happened!’ I point over the land down to where we could see the old school-house I had renovated. It looks tiny from here, even though it is a large building, my home now.

‘Sounds like a wild journey. Still, I understand you. The lush green landscape is overwhelming. It is truly addictive,’ she says, turning back to the valley as if speaking to herself. ‘Throwing off a hard-earned career in mathematics to live in this jungle – that’s pretty radical! You always said that your family in India was important to you – your grandmother, the clan, your caste with all its rules . . .’

‘The India I had remembered in my head during the years abroad . . .’ I pause and add: ‘I didn’t find it. It was no longer there.’

‘Then what did you find?’

‘The earth.’

She crawls away from the edge of the cliff and sits next to me under the same shady tree. The vast expanse of the vibrant valley beneath us whispers, ‘Animals are gods here.’

‘How often did you think of me in all those years I was gone?’ she asks.

‘Often, Nell! I searched for you obsessively back then. You left an emptiness inside me. I was perplexed. I didn’t know why you went so suddenly. No word, no letter. It was dreadful!’

She looks at me intently, her dark eyes drawing me in.

‘How many women did you have after me?’ she asks in a soft voice.

‘Three,’ I answer, looking down into the valley. Before she wanted me to tell her more, I ask her, ‘And you?’

She lets out a short laugh. ‘Well, I was a mother. That wasn’t so easy!’

Suddenly feeling guilty about my masculinity, I ask the same question I had asked a few times already since we were reunited: ‘Why did you disappear like that back then?’

‘Oh, please, not now. Maybe I can tell you one day.’

‘Alright then, let the earth answer for now! Maybe her spirit will show up as a nymph – a nymph who looks like you!’ I tease her. Nell throws back her head and, sinking to the ground, stretches her arms up along the earth and over her head looking cheekily at me.

‘Tell me one of your stories!’ she says.

Pleased that she remembers me as a storyteller, I banter casually.

‘Shall I tell you how it all began? How the nymph revealed the birth of Hanuman, the monkey, the friend, the messenger, the son, the god and the *bhakta*?’²

2.

‘Yes, exactly!’ she giggles happily, at last pulling me towards her. And, in that moment, we are enveloped in that elliptical orbit again: the tight circle of unity and separation, of dying and being born, of repetitions and the happiness of reunion after the pain of separation. The void is filled just then and the years of feeling abandoned by her are wiped out. What a time of extraordinary searching for a meaning to life and what unbelievable experiences with great gurus I had gone through. Now, as I start telling a tiny part of the great *Ramayana* in a blissful tone, the myth itself will explain what I can’t tell. Sitting next to me, Nell is as soft as grass, as strong as a tree and as sweet as a flower. I feel that a shooting star is descending on us.

1

The ancient apsara Punjikasthala,³ a beautiful and enchanting nymph, whirled along the sound of the spheres above the clouds like a wave of water. Stepping onto the earth one morning, she came to a standstill at the entrance to a cave. A hermit was sitting at the threshold between light and dark, and seemed to have closed all the nine gates to his body: hardly any air flowed through his nostrils; his gaze was inwards and his lips were closed tightly. Punjikasthala gently whispered: ‘The butterflies, the dragonflies, the worms and the beetles – yes, the entire animal kingdom wants to unite in the spring air!’

‘Don’t disturb my meditation! Go away, get lost!’ he seemed to say.

Did she hear him say this or not? In any case, he must have sensed her presence. But, as he continued to sit like a motionless rock, she tiptoed away and spotted a couple enjoying an exuberant love game on the banks of a lake. There was a powerful sensation in her own loins. With all her senses on fire,

3. A nymph transformed into Anjana, mother of Hanuman.

she ran back to the yogi as there was no other man in sight. She wrapped her arms around him, coiled her legs around his and showered him with kisses.

‘What nonsense is this while I am looking for the meaning of all life?’ murmured the master of ascetics. With his life essence, his prana,⁴³ collected in thought, everything became reality. At that moment he thought: ‘What an animalistic woman; let her live as a monkey among monkeys!’

Instantly, Punjikasthala was transformed into a monkey sitting on the branch of a tree. There, she curiously watched two monkeys copulating. She had no idea that these two monkeys were a god and a goddess who themselves were trying to be monkeys. Amusing themselves completely, they could not get enough of each other. Their cries of pleasure were deafening.

When the goddess, still in the form of a monkey, was aware that she was with child but did not want to give birth to a monkey, she ordered the wind god to transfer the embryo from her womb into that of Punjikasthala’s, the enchanted nymph, sitting as a monkey on the branch behind her staring eagerly at the goings on. ‘Why should that nosy parker not bear the consequences of my lovemaking?’

And the holy wind blew, stormed, sucked and whirled until the tiny manifestation of the divine was transferred into the enchanted nymph’s belly. This is what happened to the once divine apsara as a result of her curiosity: wanting to look closely at love would lead to an incredible entanglement.

But more than that is the yogi’s curse. It is dangerous. It could turn the world upside down and nothing would remain as it had been.

4. Breath, the driving force behind life.

VISHNUPURAM, 1955

I see myself standing in the doorway as a small boy clinging to the end of my mother's sari. Hiding behind her hips feels comfortable. The narrow lane with the little identical brick houses on either side tightly nestled together in an ancient dignified world takes form in front of my eyes. The world outside is unknown. The intimate smell of sambrani¹ wafts over from the altar and I hear the prayers of my father. I feel the gentle push of my mother's left hand as she says: 'Don't hang on!'

Yes, the difficulty of not hanging on is a task in my life that I still have to tackle. My memories bring back the transparent light and the sun reflecting from Amma's bronze pot which she carries on her hip, causing her slender figure to bend forward slightly and her red sari to swing.

The outside world came once a year with my grandmother's visits. How my heart jumped for joy when she arrived on our doorstep. Her magical stories of gods and demons lit up the darkness of our austere life. We called her Paati and she was a great singer and storyteller.

We would sit on the cool stony floor close to her, listening intently to her tales that fired our imaginations. 'Sitaaraaaaa!' rings in my ears now. That's how each story began. Her slightly gravelly voice would carry us into the deep, dark forests, the wild characters jumping and flying around the endless sky.

1. Resin extracted from trees that, like frankincense, is used as incense and in ceremonies.

2

Punjikasthala, named Anjana in her monkey form, gave birth to a baby of limitless strength. She screamed: ‘God of the wind, this child is sucking the life out of me!’ Fearing that she could never return to her previous life dancing in the morning dew to all the fantasy she loved, she whispered in the newborn’s ear: ‘When the fruits are red, they are ripe and taste luscious. Suck on them, not on my breast!’

This powerful little baby, born from divine seeds, cradled by no one but the wind god and blessed by two fathers, swung himself into the air and left his wonderstruck mother behind. Confusing the sinking red sun with a ripe fruit, the baby monkey grabbed it and started playing with it, throwing it around like a ball. Suddenly, the light in the world disappeared and everything began to wither in the darkness.

The king of heaven, Indra, pushed the wild monkey to the ground, striking him with a thunderbolt in the mouth. The wind god, seeing the disfigured face of his foster son, shouted very loudly: ‘Hanuman, you have a broken jaw! Indra, you old lecher, stay with your nymphs and away from this child!’ With a gust of wind, he took the young Hanuman and disappeared from Indra’s kingdom.

It was a disaster. Without wind, nothing could breathe. The stillness was complete and all life was suffocated.

The proud Indra realised his plight and shouted: ‘God of the wind, come back! Never leave my cosmos! You are the true ruler over life and death. And Hanuman, you will become the messenger!’

Since that day, breath is seen by the wise as the essence of life. The sage honours the wind in his breath and lengthens it.

Paati's visits were the highlight of my childhood. She came from her remote village far down south by rail, bus and bullock cart.

When the coachman unloaded Paati's luggage and put it down on the veranda, she dusted off her sari. That whirl of red-brown earth blended in with the muddy lane and the light brown of her *pallu*,² which she wore over her shaven head. Everyone stood still in awe of the traveller from far away.

Amma and Paati looked into each other's eyes with such intensity that they didn't need to embrace each other. The toothless coachman asked for water and Amma came down the steps with a jug to pour it into his joined palms. Not only was touching a cup from our household taboo for him, but he could also never consider putting his foot over the threshold of our Brahmin house. It was at that moment that I realised that it was us, the Iyengar³ clan settled here living closely together, consulting the stars about each move we made, and them, the other castes from another world. The division gave us a homely comfort to live by. Today, I see it as a disaster, dividing people into compartments. And we too must have looked a strange group of people with extreme rituals in the eyes of that coachman, while for me he remained a rider into the unknown.

When father lit the oil lamp that evening, Paati went to the front door to look down the lane towards the temple with the softening light of the Indian dusk gently falling. She murmured 'Om'. The falling light carried her voice. How her wrinkled face was illuminated. What did she see in the black granite figure lying on the huge snake in the dark inner chamber of our temple? Paati was a mysterious woman and I never left her side when she stayed with us. I slept next to her on the straw mat and even now I can visualise her, believing that everything is connected to a greater space. She softly whispered 'Om' and explained why we give importance to that syllable.

2. The loose end of a sari, usually draped over the shoulders.

3. Brahmins worshipping Vishnu as the supreme deity.

3

In the sea of worlds, where time is unmeasured and endless, and beginning and ending have no meaning, a great soul is reclining on Adishesha, the cosmic snake. From out of nowhere, a cosmic call is heard: ‘Vishnu, great soul. Life wants to happen. Preserve it!’

Out of Vishnu’s navel a lotus flower emerges and a joyful Brahma sits in the middle. Again, a cosmic call is heard: ‘Brahma, now create all things!’

‘Ah,’ whispers Brahma inside the blossom: ‘Creation is an ongoing task!’

‘Uh,’ sighs Vishnu. ‘My navel is the centre of the universe and my trance keeps creation in balance!’

‘Mmm,’ agrees Brahma.

The sounds ‘aa-uu-mm!’ resonate in a never-ending space. An all-embracing sound vibrates in infinity. This gives the whirling Shiva the opportunity to perform his rhythmic footsteps and calls ‘aa-uu-mm’ – ‘Om’. Shiva’s third eye witnesses Brahma creating the devas,⁴ asuras,⁵ apsaras⁶ and gandharvas,⁷ as well as humans, animals and plants.

‘Look at these humans searching for order, wanting to measure what is immeasurable!’ The apsaras just dance and the gandharvas play music happily. Animals roam free and plants grow towards the sun. But then the devas begin to fight with the asuras. Their quest was to discover who would rule the world.

In the heat of their battle, Vishravas, a deva, sees Kaikasi, an asura, and they fall in love with each other.

4. Divine godly energies not born like beings of the earth.

5. Demonic powers that can take any form.

6. Fairies and nymphs; heavenly dancers.

7. Enchanters playing music.

Ravana, the demonic king, Surpanakha, the wild man-eater, Vibhishana, the strong-willed pacifist and the ever-sleeping giant Kumbhakarna are soon born out of the angelic and demonic union.

Shiva gave his boon to Ravana, making him the most powerful ruler over Lanka, endowed with infinite special gifts. When Vishnu opened his eyes, Rama, as Ravana's opponent, was incarnated and the story of the *Ramayana* arose.

The *Ramayana* reveals that there is a demonic force in life. As a young boy I was rather frightened to hear about demons and other obscure characters. Could I also be changed into a monkey? I was scared of making mistakes, of being a bad pupil or of not obeying my father. In our garden, gangs of monkeys climbed around and stole ripe fruits. One day when I watched the leader, I was scared that he might take me with him.

Paati told the same stories of the *Ramayana*, but each time they were slightly different. 'Neither this nor that is the truth,' she said when my older brother Srini questioned how the story could be correct this time.

'Look at the trampled earth down the lane: in the morning it looks golden, at midday it is white and in the evening it is red,' she replied. Back in those times I hated Srini for questioning Paati's changing stories. Also, a smile appeared on my father's stern face as he admired his unconventional mother-in-law. And he who never laughed, laughed loudly when Paati spoke about her travels. 'Imagine,' she said, 'someone asked me whether I travelled alone as a woman.' She replied to her ignorant co-traveller: 'No. Why don't you look properly. I am sitting on Hanuman's lap!'

How I wanted to be Hanuman with all his extraordinary powers. With time, I lost my fear of being stolen by the monkeys in our back garden. In fact, I wished they would take me with them. I went to

school with Hanuman and made a pact with him. In my classroom, I secretly prayed to Hanuman to carry me away, and we would fly off and leave behind the boring teachers and the slow-learning pupils.

I loved the abstract world of numbers too. I could count quickly. I wanted to disappear in the round of the zero. Zero was the door to another world in which ‘do this’ and ‘let it be’ did not exist. Zero was my free space. My classmates did not dare to acknowledge the fact that Hanuman was behind the zero. Today, I see Hanuman dominating the nothing, with him as the axle, the centre of a circle of repetitions. Isn’t zero the wheel in which we are all senselessly caught?

4

Ravana, being divine and demonic at the same time, shone with his many talents and skills. It became too much even for his father to bear and he banished him to the island of Lanka. The banishment was well intended as he believed that there his unruly offspring could give vent to his energy.

In the midst of an uninhabited forest, Ravana practised the most extreme form of meditation. All his senses were directed towards Shiva. Even when he was collecting wood by day to burn at night, he prayed all the time only to Shiva: ‘Divine eye, see me! Hear me, Shiva.’ At night, he would hang upside-down with his feet tied to a branch overhanging the fire, while he uttered, ‘*Om namah shivaya*’.⁸ Without feeling tired, he shouted continuously: ‘I want to rule water, fire, earth, air and the underworld.’ With his hair and skin becoming singed as he hung over the fire, he added: ‘I want to become immortal, Shiva!’ Often a god can become tired of his devotees’ requests, so Shiva called out to Hanuman and told him: ‘Go to this ascetic, pacify his lamentation and self-inflicted pain, and grant him

8. ‘I bow to Lord Shiva’.

my blessing. However, tell him that with this god-given power, the habit of the asuras to steal another man's woman must be ended.'

Hanuman went immediately to Lanka and told the ascetic: 'Your request is granted.' But on seeing the man with his singed features, he forgot to tell him to refrain from taking another man's woman. He only said: 'Your wish to rule over air, water, fire, earth and the underworld will be granted. Also, your wish not to be killed by any human being is granted.'

'My little rascal, you are born gifted. Follow your *dharma!*'⁹ Paati's order rings in my ears even today. I still do not really know if I am following my *dharma* and what she meant by telling me to do so.

I think Amma with her calmness and stoic ways is living her *dharma*. Looking at us with her large black eyes exuding complete confidence, Amma is still concerned about our welfare. Amma and Paati both radiate such positiveness which they transfer to me, but that makes me dependent on them too.

Paati was already a widow when I was born on 24 February 1949. Two years earlier, on 15 August 1947, Indian independence from British rule was announced. While everyone in Paati's village celebrated their new-found freedom with music and dancing, Paati herself sat alone, lamenting over her husband's dead body. Grandpa Srinivasan had died in an accident when the bullock cart he was driving had overturned and he had fallen underneath it. A British soldier riding on horseback came across the overturned cart in his way. He raised his whip and gave a warning crack to chase the animals to one side. However, the frightened animals were startled and dragged the cart out of the soldier's path, crushing grandfather who was trapped underneath it.

The soldier rode into the village and announced: 'One of your

9. Living up to one's full potential.

men is lying underneath his cart!’ However, he did not reveal his own part in the accident. A witness sat silently in front of the village office, but only later did he tell how it had really happened. From then on, Paati had to bear the stigma of being a widow. Only united couples represent the union of the universe. Lakshmi and Vishnu are ever united.

‘Oh, Lakshmi. Oh, immortal goddess. You can never be a widow,’ Paati cried. ‘You lie united with Vishnu in the timeless ocean. You are a *nityasumangali*.’¹⁰ I always remember her daily prayers.

5

Ravana married the princess of the ocean and made his kingdom under the water. He also married the princess of the air and controlled the sky. He built a huge tunnel leading to the underworld and married their princess and brought her up to his palace, which he created in Lanka almost instantly. Women fell for his attractive appearance and his endearing ways. With his pleasing voice, he sang and entertained them all. As soon as his glance fell on a woman, he knew her secret desires. As he could fulfil them, he was considered the most desirable lover among all the three worlds. There was nothing unattractive about Ravana. The infatuated women could see that he had two heads, but some experienced such ecstasy in uniting with him that they could see his ten heads at the same time. However, he had not discovered the women of the earth. He had not found the plant woman yet!

10. The ever-auspicious woman inseparable in union with the divine, therefore never becomes a widow.

My eyes turn to Nell. She is sleeping next to me on the earth at the top of the hill.

‘She’s jet-lagged,’ I mumble. Her slumber created the space for me to go back to Paati.

At the death rituals of her husband she must have fallen into a trance and had an extraordinary experience, one that made her so independent and self-confident even as a widow in Indian society. In Paati’s *bhakti*, there is no death. I never saw her sad or frightened. When her husband’s body was laid on the pyre, she must have said: We stay together; dead or alive, we lie united in Vishnu’s sleep.’

‘At the height of *bhakti*¹¹ is there duality between life and death or the sky and the earth?’ I kept asking myself this question all through my life. Lakshmi represents the finite earth and Vishnu the infinite sky, and they are inseparable. A couple in love represents non-duality.

Again, I am looking at Nell and reflect that god and goddess are seen as a happy couple in union. Even in our worldly love-making, when a man and a woman’s blood are mixed, it is a divine act and ensures continuity. In temple rituals, the statue of Lakshmi is brought to the shrine of Vishnu in a grand procession and the curtain is closed around the shrine. To the sound of the conch, finitude and infinity find each other. Even duality between man and woman, between life and death, between heaven and earth is suspended in the union of Lakshmi, the Earth, and Vishnu, the Cosmic Space.

Paati symbolised steadfastness. On one occasion when I was a young child, I had my first asthma attack when one of Paati’s visits came to an end and I was in distress. I can feel the desperation even now. I see myself running as fast as I could to follow the bullock cart that was carrying her away. As it disappeared into the distance, I fell to the ground in despair and wept uncontrollably.

11. Devotion and surrender to the divine.

Paati's stories had led me into the world of the imagination and now she was gone. Nobody would have time for me like Paati did. Amma already had seven children and was pregnant again. It felt that an invisible hand was choking my throat. When Amma found me, she called for help and a doctor came in the evening, but it was only when Paati's package arrived containing some yellow paste and a letter in which she said, 'It is a greeting from Hanuman,' that I felt his divine breath and returned to good health. I was sure that Paati had met Hanuman.

Everything around me changed rapidly from then on. My older siblings packed their bags ready to attend colleges in Madras. More and more community members moved out of our small lane, leaving behind their empty houses. The roots of the banyan trees grew into the walls and the fairy-tale character of our little settlement consisting of one lonely lane in the middle of wide open land became ghostly. Uncle Muku, grandfather's youngest son, was an old-fashioned Sanskrit scholar, living directly at the temple entrance. I liked to be near him and one day, after his rituals, he whispered into my ear: 'Mathematics originated in India. Study Aryabhata. He discovered zero and wrote about it in poetic verses.' Although Uncle Muku fascinated me, I thought he was eccentric, praying to circles and squares in which he saw Vishnu and Lakshmi as *purusha*¹² and *prakriti*.¹³

One day, father surprised us. 'We will move down to Madras,' he said. When he saw our shocked faces, he added: 'In the evening there is a cool breeze from the ocean and there are plenty of schools and colleges for all of you.' He did not tell us that he had been forced to give up his job as a lawyer for a local politician. However, for him it was a move in the right direction. A job was waiting for him in the high court in Madras after his brother, a successful lawyer in Madras, had arranged it for him.

12. Pure consciousness.

13. Nature in its entirety.

6

‘Listen, we need to leave!’ announced Nemi,¹⁴ the chief of the clan, to his loyal companions, for a wandering bard had told him that King Ravana was conquering foreign lands and clans. Foreseeing danger, Nemi was ready to act.

‘Let us march ninety days inland. Ravana will spy on us and won’t be satisfied until he has conquered our territory. We need to put an end to his exploits.’

Nemi’s loyal followers nodded their heads in agreement. They knew that while each parting would be painful, it could also bring new pleasures. After ninety days they reached a bamboo grove.

‘This will be our new abode!’ declared Nemi. ‘Let us build huts from bamboo.’

So his companions cut the bamboo to make shelters for themselves. However, the next morning, to their great astonishment, the bamboo grove appeared uncut, exactly as it was before they arrived.

‘Extraordinary!’ exclaimed Nemi and he ordered his followers to cut the grove once more.

The following night, he watched over it and discovered in the newly growing bamboo a virgin, as beautiful as a new soft green leaf.

‘What is your secret?’ Nemi asked the surprised maiden.

‘I have no parents, only the earth. She is mother and father to me.’

Nemi felt strangely drawn to this virgin and tenderly took her hand and led her from the bamboo grove.

14. His well-known name is Dasaratha, he is the father of Rama.

‘She belongs to us now,’ Nemi told everyone. ‘Look at her beauty, which is like an evergreen bush. Let her be our queen as she is a gift of the earth. We will build her a tower made from bamboo. Since she can make the forest grow, she might have the skill to foresee our enemies before they appear.

He crowned the maiden as his first queen. The bride who was promised to him pouted in disappointment, but what could she do in the face of a beautiful creature who could make plants grow in an instant? The betrothed bride accepted her fate and was crowned as Nemi’s second queen.

Ravana, with his twenty eyes, had created telescopes with which he could spy into far-distant places. On witnessing how Nemi shared his nights with a tender young beauty, his lust increased. When he learned through his newly invented instrument that the tribe treated her as an earth goddess, he shouted: ‘That’s the princess of the earth who is missing from my possessions. Together with her, the entire cosmos will be mine.’

He developed an intense passion for the young queen and made a devious plan. However, nature is full of wonders and no one would be able to conquer her easily.

Appa finally closed our house in 1963. I was fourteen years old and this was the beginning of the end of my Iyengar way of life. Only Uncle Muku stayed back with his wife. Their only daughter, Maitili, joined us to study in Madras as she wanted to become a medical doctor. How my aunt must have suffered, losing her only daughter so that she could be educated. She sobbed when she saw the horse carriage being prepared for our journey. Uncle Muku stood motionless next to her. His tall, slim body and his powerful eyes that looked inwards showed that he was connected to a greater plan. He told us the exact time that we should leave.

When our three horse carriages started to move, I reflected on the dark sides of this vanishing agraharam¹⁵ life. How my classmates from the farming community used to tease me and shout out ‘Pillaka!’ – as we Brahmins wear our hair long, shaved in front and tied into a tuft at the back – and how I took my revenge. When one boy waited for me on my way back home from school and grabbed me brutally by my hair tuft, I called out to Hanuman: ‘Carry him into the hot sunny air!’ The following day, the boy had a fever. As a result, my classmates believed that I, from a strange community, had magical gifts, so they left me alone as they believed I could order the gods. From then on, I was aware that I could use my privileged status in Indian society to my own advantage.

‘Why must Amma stay outside in that room in the back yard and why can’t we sit next to her?’ I asked my brother Srini one day.

He replied: ‘Mother bleeds.’

I was worried and shocked. As soon as Paati next visited us, I asked her: ‘Is it true that mother bleeds. Is she ill?’

‘Listen, my boy. Anjana, the mother of Hanuman, gave birth to her son through the wind god who put him into her womb. Because women bring children into the world, every month they bleed and must rest from the windy ways of the men around them.’

Was the red kumkuma¹⁶ that we put on our forehead after praying connected to fertility? When I felt my penis moving for the first time, it was expansion, an obsession in connection with possession, conquering not only women.

Blood, fertility and widowhood form a strange connection. Women disconnected from men are not in balance. This was and sometimes still is the belief, not only among our community, turning widows into untouchables. As if the state of a widow is contagious

15. The streets around the temples where only Brahmins lived.

16. Red powder made from ground turmeric and lime, used to make a mark on the centre of the forehead.

and brings bad luck to the family, they are excluded from social events. I feel ashamed even now thinking of Paati's fate when I remember mother's words.

'Paati returned from the burning ground where my father had become nothing but ash and found her few simple cotton saris, a few towels and a blanket tied in a bundle left on the terrace of the courtyard. She understood that from now on, she would have to live in the courtyard and would no longer be allowed in the house. The house became the property of her brother-in-law who gave Paati's jewels and fine embroidered saris to his daughters. Widows are expected to live an utterly poor life, with few possessions and no rights.'

'No, my future lies not in crude customs,' I told myself when we loaded all our belongings onto the train at the railway station in Hyderabad. We travelled through the night and I could not sleep and saw grandfather also sitting upright on the wooden bench in the compartment. He had not only left behind his home, but also had to fear that his rituals would be out of place in the city. We will become refugees from a far-away place, loners without connections, I thought to myself.

A full moon shining through the window and the cool night wind blowing into the humid compartment promised a better future. The stars were standing still. How small the moon was and how far away it seemed – a stranger too? And since it accompanied us all the way on our journey, I began a special lunar relationship: 'Take me into your space, into your magic! Make Madras a place of wonder!' I begged.

7

Ravana was planning to kidnap the bamboo queen. However, he had to wait as she was pregnant.

The shaman of Nemi's tribe called out prophetically: 'I see a prince who skilfully uses his bow and arrow. He will defeat

Ravana. Call this boy Rama, the radiant one.'

Since the second queen was also pregnant, the shaman shouted: **'Call him Lakshmana, the true companion of his brother!'**

As the third queen was also pregnant, he called out: **'Call this boy Bharata, the loyal follower of his brother.'**

All the children were born and Ravana stood in front of Nemi. **'I will burn down everything with all the strength in my body, but everything will be saved if you give me the earth princess immediately.'**

Nemi shook in fear from head to foot: **'But she has just given me a son!'**

'Even if she has given birth to twenty sons, I will take her, as she is the missing pearl among my possessions. Shiva has given me, not you, the boon to rule over the earth.'

Nemi was afraid of Shiva. He went into the hut and wrapped his arms around the bamboo queen.

'We have to separate, my beloved,' he said, 'otherwise Ravana will destroy everything.'

'Tell him I need a little more time to feed the child and then I will come,' she said.

Nemi went outside and, awed by Ravana's majestic appearance, said in a quivering voice: **'She is feeding the child, but will come when she has finished.'**

Nemi replied: **'You, my fellow, will stay here. She is my woman now and you can't lie with her and produce more children.'**

After a while, the bamboo queen came out of the hut. Nemi was angry at the injustice of the gods and was pained at the prospect of separation.

‘Here is the mother of my son,’ he whispered.

Ravana pulled the queen with her shimmering skin and clothed in green garments into his carriage and took flight up into the air. Everyone stood back, speechless.

