

FICTION

Matsyanayam

A story of ancient Bengal, and the queen who lived a hundred years

MEHRUL BARI

And in the streets of Shonarga, Luna went about on foot, her nupur clinking against her ankles, notifying all passers by of the good queen's proximity. Men and women leapt off their stools. Storekeepers and merchandisers hastily left their items at the counter. And hagglers stopped their haggling to answer the queen's question: "Have you, men"—or "Have you, women"—"seen my youngest sister, the inquisitive Luna?"

No one had, though. But she went and asked everyone, from that time in the early afternoon to the next evening. She asked blind Surada, a great descendant of the great blind king Dhritarashtra. Surada, though blind, could hear even the quietest rumor and loneliest footstep about town. She asked him the same, "Have you, blind Surada, seen my youngest sister?" and unfortunately, too, he said the same. "No, queen of a hundred years, and may you live a hundred years more, I have not."

She asked the silent Lila, great descendant of the great poet and astrologer, Khona who had severed her own tongue. Lila, though silent, could see to the ends of Bangalah. She asked her the same, "Have you, silent Lila, seen my youngest sister?" and unfortunately, too, it was the same: she shook her head, in her way saying, "No, queen of a hundred years, and may you live a hundred years more, I have not."

She asked the runaway Akhan, a royal servant of the Ottomans who was made deaf to secure their secrets. The runaway Akhan, though deaf, could tell the truth from fiction in any human movements, and Luna convinced him, in the Ottoman language of the Mutes, to accompany her throughout the city.

The pair walked and searched and inquired. Soon they searched the whole city, with only the small nameless village by Shonarga left. And it was there, at evenfall, that she asked him, "Have you, runaway Akhan,



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

into a bag. It was good that it was dark in the forest, for any creature with eyes would have dropped at the sight of her body of purest beauty.

She tied the bag of clothing and belongings on her back and plunged herself into the river, that was at once hot and cold. She swam, splendidly, so as to keep the tip of her back above surface, spinning her arms and fluttering her thighs. Truly, her body was the most magnificent in all of Bangalah, rivaled only by the beautiful Vishwas, who had received his stunning features from his ancestor, the beautiful swordsman Nakula. She glided her hands, swimming along the river's bends and turns. And she swam. Before long, she swam to a point in the river where she saw only branches and trees and waters.

And suddenly, a sound came like a crash, stabbing in her ears. "Who goes there?" said the sound. Luna turned her head in every direction. There was nothing, nothing save for the river and purpling sky. "Who goes there, says I?" said the voice—a woman, old in her voice. The voice was like thunder, spreading over the unknown river. Luna traced it to a tall, dark figure ahead, its legs close together, its posture bent and pitiful. Still the figure stood, with great might. Luna could see now ahead. An island of dark sand and trees had appeared. The voice once more: "Who goes there, said I, and for one last time?"

Luna hurried to the island. The tall figure was clearer now: an old woman, skin heavy, hair silver. "It was I, unknown woman," Luna said, crossing over from water to land, her naked person glistening. The unknown woman's eyes collided with this sight, and she spun her face quickly. "It is Queen Anne, ruler of the kingdom of Bangalah, who comes here," Luna continued, now closer. "Do you lie?" the unknown woman asked, averting her eyes. "Yes," admitted Luna, who had heard this question now for the first time. "I am indeed Luna, the youngest sister of the good Queen Anne, and I have taken temporary place of the Queen." She re-dressed as she spoke; her jamdani shari slipping back onto her shape.

Many were the times that young Luna sought to cross that unknown river, but her travels were halted on each occasion when her grandmother or mother or any sensible village member came at the right time to restrain the young girl physically.

"You have come here for your sister?" asked the unknown woman, who turned her face back.

"Yes, unknown woman," replied Luna. "Have you seen her pass by?" "She passed this way, as she has on occasions before," said the unknown woman, who pointed out an extremity of the island. "There—is a tributary of the river Brahmaputra. It is there that she had gone a few days past."

"Did she with a boat?" "No. This river—you only go by foot," said the unknown woman. "Walk into the river with your right foot first—count your steps—one, two, three, four, five... and when you reach thirteen—the thirteenth step—you must do so with your left foot. You must not move a single inch after you plant your left foot for this step. Stand still, and below your feet, in the river, a crevice will open. Bend down and walk into it."

"Thank you, unknown woman," said Luna with gratitude. "May I ask, once more, for your name?"

"It has been so long, even I forget," she replied. "But I believe I was a granddaughter of one of the five Kulin Brahmins."

The faint hour of twilight had faded from the sky, and night filled more and more the spaces between the clouds. Luna, the pretend queen, walked, with the woman behind her, to the extremity of the land. The pretend queen asked, as she took off her earrings, "May I, too,

ask for your story?"

The unknown woman acquiesced, taken aback by a question she hadn't been asked in tens of years. "I will tell you my story, child," she began. "My story is of some many years ago. I was then a tree. The tallest in our forest. Of any forest. I was tall, so tall, and my branches and leaves spread out wide. I was the tree and beneath me, in my shade, was our people.

"Our people were tigers then," she continued. "We forget this, but there was a time we had our hands and feet to the earth. We acted our own actions, caught our own fish, left the land be, the branches, trees. I was revered, all of me. They planned their lives around me. But things changed, in the way that they do. Some people came in."

"Hunters?" Luna asked. "Tigers," she replied. "But slightly different. You could see it in their eyes—not as yellow. Certainly a different hunger. These tigers, they brought new things to us. New food, new ways, ideas. And before long, our tigers grew tired of fish. Tired of branches, leaves, trees, themselves. It wasn't truly a choice."

"How come?" "Let me finish, teenage child," the woman said. "It wasn't a choice because this is what we are like. There is something in us. It makes us do as we are told to do."

"What happened to your tigers?" "They turned into this, humans. It seemed better this way."

"Did you know my sister, the Queen Anne? What was she like?"

"I knew her," she said. "Hers was the first family to turn. The new tigers—new humans by then—took a shine to them, and to her. Yes. They got along splendidly, and before long they asked her to rule over this kingdom."

"And the land?" Luna asked. "What was our land like?"

"It was how it is now, always changing." "Our rivers?" Luna asked. "Our lakes?" "Some rivers died and some lakes started anew. The same ilish flow through them still."

"Then," Luna said, "what changed?" "Nothing changed. Everything repeated."

"But," Luna interjected, "Queen Anne, how did she... live? Some in our towns wonder. I wonder it, too, sometimes. A hundred years. How did she live?"

"She didn't. She repeated." "I don't understand you," Luna said, "but nevertheless, thank you for your story." Luna could only offer a kind smile. "May I know what you did after the new tigers came?"

"What did I do?" the woman repeated. "What could I do? With the help of the new tigers, they built a new city, build so much. I grew smaller and smaller until I was small. I was shown out... My city today is gone, rebuilt twice since. They built cities and they fell, then they built them again. We do what we did before, again and again."

Luna resumed unfurling her shari. "I have heard before the tale of tigers and new tigers, but it did not happen how it did in your story."

"As I have said, it happened again. My story was replaced by yours. Forgotten for yours." The unknown woman threw her eyes to the ground, the black sand earth. "Forgetting has its benefits, teenage child. You remember some, but you cannot remember all."

"I am sorry you had to un-forget your past for my inquisitiveness," Luna said.

"You needn't apologize, teenage child," the unknown woman said. "The things we forget, we still live with."

Luna had cast her shari down, which piled on the dark sand in spirals around her feet. She had only on her blouse and petticoat. "I am sorry even so," Luna said.

Luna stuck her feet out of the jamdani pile one leg at a time. And it was so that as she hoisted her right ankle off the ground, a speck of moonlight caught her nupur, glittering a large, momentary flash in the green darkness of the island. The unknown woman twisted at once, tracing the spark to the anklet. "Beautiful child!" she called out, "leave that white-sparkling nupur be."

"My nupur?" Luna asked, halting. "Yes, yes," the unknown woman replied. "Walk into the river as you are. Go. This shall be fine." The unknown woman waved her arms, shoeing her toward the body of water. She had been won over, as even she couldn't predict, by the pretend queen's grace and charm.

Luna strode then to the river's bank, her loose-fitting blouse and petticoat flapping in the breeze that had speedily arrived. Her nupur, fashioned from mollusk shells, sounded in the wind like wind chimes, and more so when she moved. She tiptoed steadily into the river.

One step, she took... two... three... four...

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ILLUSTRATION: ABIR HOSSAIN

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been able to discern if the people spoke truths or fictions?"

And with his hands he replied, "Alas, queen of a hundred years, they have all have spoken the true truth."

She gave him four of the newest pressed coins, and told him to leave for his house, and he hid.

Who she had to ask next, she had to do it alone. Beyond the villages, beyond the city, there lived a woman with an unknown name who lived near an unknown river. Few had seen her face in the villages and fewer would care to. She was haggard, they said, she was kind. They said mixed actualities about the woman, but one thing was exact—and indeed it was—that the woman of no name had lived for a hundred and one years.

Many were the times that young Luna sought to cross that unknown river, but her travels were halted on each occasion when her grandmother or mother or any sensible village member came at the right time to restrain the young girl physically. Now, at age nineteen, she could. She could do it, and at evenfall, the sun still clinging to the low clouds, she made for the edge of the forests. She skipped over branches and walked around animals and insects on her way to the end of the green horizon, but the horizon never ceased, and was never not green.

She recalled at that moment an old legend. It was said that the unknown river was visible only by nightlight and on no occasion in the day would it appear to any man or mapmaker. She continued, she trailed for a while, on the grassy surface, and as the wind began to quieten, the sun crept unhurriedly into the soil. She reached suddenly, and she saw it solely in the lonely few pickings of light, a river—flowing as any should—loud as any could be. Without delay, in the black of the forest, Luna, the pretend queen, stripped herself of all her clothing and belongings, tying them neatly

POEM

LEAF

MD JUNAYED ALAM BHUIYAN

I saw a leaf falling yesterday.
The wind took the leaf on its back
then disappeared.

Maybe it fell upon some pond or
river, crossing thousands of waves.
Or the wind took it to some other
world.

No one saw the leaf falling
Or saw when it was born.

However, the bird saw it, and the
tree that carried it, is now mourning.

Another day, another leaf was
missing

No one saw, when it fell, maybe
everyone was asleep.

In the morning, everyone was
looking for it.

I was also worried all day, my
thoughts were carrying the sorrow of
the tree.

Then the next day, another leaf,
this time everyone saw it falling.

Though, the sorrow was little less
today, as all accepted the repetition.

To comfort themselves they made
stories of the leaf traveling from one
pole to another.

Free as Arctic tern birds.
The sun rose the next day, it was as
beautiful as a life beginning.

The new born sees life as boundless,
all and everything so gorgeous.

The warm thought of a new day
and the smell of a smile spread
everywhere.

I also felt it that day, the happiness
like I was reborn, the sensation of
being alive.

I was also grateful as they were.

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ANNOUNCEMENT

“I smoked and we stared. We stared and I smoked. One cigarette after another. To this day I'm not certain how the next two hours had passed, but I will never forget the blank look in its eyes and something that resembled a sneer that I never saw on Liton Mia's face before.”

Catch more stories like this on
Star Literature throughout this winter
in
**“Winter Night
Ghost Stories”**

DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA