

Excerpts

1.

April 1984

Mayyaji made me understand the true magic that life is. She gave me something to believe in, something to look forward to. She would sit by me every night and listen to the wild meanderings of my imagination. She believed in my Moon Goddess. She understood why I needed to believe in nymphs, fairies and angels. One night when I was only ten years old, I secretly ran off to Bebi's rooms at the back of our house, crying. "Bebi, Bebi, wake up. She is here. The Moon Goddess is here to tell us her secrets." Bebi woke up with a jerk and followed me to the edge of the lake. It was a clear night. There was a hint of crispness in the air. The sky was a deep, rich velvet black and seemed as bottomless as the lake below. There was no moon.

"Tara tai, but there is no moon," Bebi said. "The Moon Maiden only comes out on full moon nights. Surely you are mistaken."

"No," I said stubbornly. "I saw her glide past my bedroom windows. She made her way, here, toward the edge of the lake. She asked me to come and join her, I swear." There were tears in my eyes. I was so disappointed because there was no Moon Lady waiting for me. Bebi and I made our way back to the house, sad and forlorn that the moon maiden had let us down. The next day I was very quiet. I did not run to Mayyaji with my usual enthusiasm. I did not want to go with her to the temple. I did not want to listen to her usual stories. And Mayyaji did not pressure me to talk. She did not ask me why I was so sad. She went about her daily chores as normal.

Later that evening, at sundown while we sat quietly in the library, she asked me softly if I would go for a walk with her. "I want to show you something Taro dear. You haven't been out of the house today. Come with me." I looked at her and shook my head but something in her glittering and mischievous eyes made me change my mind. I got up reluctantly and followed her into the garden outside. We walked silently toward the edge of the lake. Ahead, I saw the grey stone bench. This was the place I imagined my Moon Goddess inhabited every time she visited our house. There was no one there. As we sat side by side on the cool stone bench, I looked up at the sky. There was no moon but the stars seemed to explode in their radiance like flaming torch lights. Across the lake, the small Ganesha temple was dwarfed by the shadow of the lone banyan tree next to it. The village beyond slept quietly. "Taro, did your mother ever tell you the story of Hecate?" "No," I answered grumpily. "I don't know who she is and it does not matter Mayyaji. Stories are stories. They are not real. You lied to me."

She did not answer but continued quietly, "What a beautiful night! I am sure Goddess Hecate is lurking somewhere behind those stars."

I looked up at the sky and saw a cluster of bright stars shaped like a dog. They were glowing brighter than the stars that surrounded them. Mayyaji looked up with me but did not say anything. Somewhere in the distance I could hear the howling of stray dogs.

"Then why doesn't she appear? Why doesn't she talk to us? Why does she think she is so special?"

"But Taro, she does appear," insisted Mayyaji. "You have to be willing to see her though." Goddesses take on many forms. They do not always appear in human form.

Otherwise everyone can see them. They like to appear only before special people. People who believe that they exist and are around us all the time.”

“Can they speak to us as well?” I enquired.

“But of course, you just have to receive their messages in different ways.”

“But, how do I know that they are with me and are telling me something?”

“Don’t worry, child, when they do communicate with you, you will know immediately. I guarantee that. This is the magic that I have always said exists in your life if you choose to embrace it and believe in it.” I looked up at her smiling face and decided to believe her. This was our secret.

2.

Tara could feel the scorching heat of the early afternoon sun pierce her body as she turned west on 26th street, toward the river. This was the place where tough longshoremen once embroiled in corruption; deception, and murder loaded and unloaded freights at the warehouse piers and truck terminals that lined the waterfront. Perhaps they still existed in the guise of gentrified real estate developers? She could see their presence all around her.

Now ugly new loft buildings dotted the streets. The gardens had mostly disappeared although a few tree-lined streets with nineteenth century brownstones and lofts converted from warehouses and meat lockers still remained. Tara caught a glimpse of the riveted steel structure of the elevated freight railroad that was built between Tenth and Eleventh avenues in the 1930s. It lay abandoned for many years. But now it was partially transformed into a public park with grand views of the Hudson River and the

city beyond. Shady birches and rugged meadow plants had replaced the shriveled shrubs and trees that had once choked the tracks.

Chelsea had once been a desolate outpost filled with austere warehouses and humongous trucks parked outside garages and empty lots filled with stones and rubble. But now it was different. The landscape had changed again with the influx of stylish and upscale art galleries and retail shops hidden behind the black and white graffiti filled brick facades. Tara looked at the way the sunlight refracted on the futuristic brick and aluminum façade of what appeared to be a bulging Hobbit hole in the middle of the desultory street. Above hung a faded black sign that read ‘Heavenly Auto Body Works/Auto Body and Repair Shop’ in bold white lettering. How surreal it all looked thought Tara as she glanced back at the way dark and light zones merged in the street. They reminded her of a humungous chessboard spread out in the middle of the city.

There was hardly any tree cover and the neighborhood looked still and deathly as she crossed the hodge-podge of more warehouses, industrial and commercial buildings, and auto repair shops toward a row of single storey buildings. Tara noticed that many galleries had already closed for renovations. As she walked to the end of the street, she could see the glistening blue water of the river. She gaped in disbelief at the new, giant residential buildings that crowded the edges and stopped and stared at them for a few seconds before she walked toward a single-storey warehouse. Outside a lone tree stood erect, like a lollipop with a mop of dark green leaves. That must be the gallery thought Tara as she squeezed between a brown UPS van and a truck that blocked access to the entrance.

She heaved a sigh of relief as she walked through the heavy glass double doors and entered the cool sepulchral whiteness of the gallery. She wondered why Lilith chose to name it ‘Black Box?’ Everything inside was blinding white. But then she did not know anything about Lilith. The space inside was much larger than Tara had expected it to be. The main gallery looked like a stolid, yet nimble square box with four equal sides and a roof that could be lifted like a lid and raised to accommodate large installations. The painted white concrete floor merged seamlessly with the smooth and frosty white plaster of the walls. A row of translucent plastic covered the ceiling to bring in as much natural light as possible. There was no one at the reception. Tara walked admiringly toward the tall steel installation exhibited in the center of the room and did not hear the soft clicking of stiletto heels behind her.

“Hello. You must be Tara?” said Lilith, reaching out to shake her hand.

Tara turned abruptly to look at a tall, slim, yet well-endowed woman with auburn hair that cascaded seductively in soft waves to her waist. Her big, haunting eyes had extraordinarily long lashes. She was dressed in a stylish white silk dress with a low neckline revealing a milk white bosom --as soft as the rose that was pinned on her collar. She wore no make up except a glossy pink lipstick. ‘Lady Lilith’ thought Tara as she looked at the thin eyebrows; full lips and pale, flawless skin, on a perfectly chiseled oval face, and shivered. This was Rossetti’s model come alive more than a hundred years later. Suddenly Tara was claustrophobic. The gallery seemed like a watertight icebox that offered no escape. Lilith had a cold and arrogantly self-confident manner about her. Yet there was sadness in her demeanor that Tara could not define. It was almost tragic... Tara

wasn't prepared for this at all and she was uncomfortable with the way Lilith studied her with an unflinching gaze.