FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

On the first day of the festival, we honour the crows. We put out offerings of rice because crows are the messengers for the lord of death.

On the second day, we honour the dogs. We dot their foreheads with red powder and place marigold garlands around their necks because dogs are the guides to the land of the dead.

And on the third day, we clean our homes top to bottom. We put out dozens of tiny oil lamps at dusk to welcome the goddess Lakshmi, my namesake, who will circle the earth and bestow wealth and blessings on the humble and the pure.

Our family has no grain to spare for the crows and nothing for the stray dogs, save a kick from my stepfather's sandal.

Still, Ama says we must prepare for Lakshmi's arrival. Ama sweeps every corner of our hut and sets the blankets out to air. Then she twists tiny bits of rag into wicks and places them in shallow clay saucers, each with a drop of oil.

When my chores are done, I sit out in the sun in front of our hut and string a necklace of marigolds. We have no dog, so I make the garland for Tali. But when I go to place the wreath over her head, she shrinks away. I scratch the place between her ears just the way she likes. Then, as her head droops with contentment, I slip the garland around her neck.

She sniffs and sneezes and shakes her head from side to side. Then she bends low, her ear to the ground, and tries to wriggle out of it. Finally, she gets to her feet, and with one grand, impatient toss of her head, she throws the garland in the dirt. And eats it.

Ama comes by and smiles. 'That goat,' she says. 'Perhaps she is not so silly after all.'

AN AUSPICIOUS NIGHT

A thousand stars have fallen to earth.

That, at least, is how it looks to me as I sit outside our hut and look down the mountainside at all the houses below, each windowsill and doorway adorned with tiny lanterns, lighting the way for the goddess Lakshmi.

‘This is an auspicious night,’ says Ama. Her brisk and steady hand flies through my hair as she twines the strands into braids. ‘The goddess Lakshmi will see our lights and bring us good fortune.’

My stepfather comes out of the hut, wearing his kingly hat and his big-shoulders coat. He pats his chest, and I see Ama’s money pouch around his neck.

‘This,’ he says, ‘is an auspicious night. This is the night when the goddess favours gamblers.’

And because it is my favourite night of the year, the festival of my namesake, I let myself believe him.

AT THE FESTIVAL

Ama and I walk down to the village, my little brother riding on her back. As we draw near the bonfire, Ama presses a coin into my palm. ‘Run off and buy yourself a sweet cake,’ she says, ‘like the other children.’

I tell her I’m not a child anymore. I tell her not to waste her money. But she insists.

‘Tonight,’ she says, ‘you are a child.’

POSSIBILITY

As I stand before the bonfire, licking the last of the sweet-cake crumbs from my fingers, a city woman comes and stands next to me. She is wearing a dress of yellow cloud fabric, a hundred silver bangles on her wrists and ankles. She smells of amber and night flowers.

‘Where I live,’ she says, ‘the girls have sweet cakes every day.’

This delicate stranger, it seems, is speaking to me.
I steal a sideways look at her.

She smiles, drawing her shawl to her lips with the dignity of a queen.

I, too, draw my shawl to my face, see that I have the callused hands of a farm girl, and stuff them in the pockets of my homespun skirt.

‘City girls have pretty dresses,’ she says from behind her yellow cloud. ‘And fancy baubles. They eat oranges, dates and mangoes every day. It is the easy life.’

‘You?’ I say, my voice as tiny as a bug’s. ‘You’re a maid?’

The city woman laughs, still hiding her mouth with the hem of her shawl, but she does not answer.

‘Would you like to come to the city with me?’ she says. ‘I will be your aunty.’

I nod yes-no-yes-no and run back to Ama, afraid to tell her about this new aunty who smells of amber and jasmine and possibility.

WINDFALL

We are awakened in the middle of the night by a thunderous roaring outside our hut. Ama and I come outside to see my stepfather seated on a machine with two wheels and a pair of metal antlers.

‘It is a motorcycle,’ he says. ‘I won it from a city boy home for the festival.’

The metal beast coughs, and great blasts of smoke come from its tail.
‘I told you this was an auspicious night,’ my stepfather says.

I do not see how this thing is of any use to us.
But Ama hugs me and whispers in my ear that we will trade the beast at Bajai Sita’s. In an instant I see it all. We will buy back Ama’s earrings. We will have enough money for a drum of cooking oil, a barrel of flour, a new dress for me and one for Ama, a jacket for the baby, a tin roof.

Perhaps, I think grudgingly, even enough for a new vest for my stepfather.

THE NEXT DAY

In the morning, my stepfather is up early, tending lovingly to his beast.
He rubs it down with a rag and talks to it like it is a baby.

‘We are going to the tea shop,’ he tells it, ‘so that everyone can envy my good fortune.’

The beast, however, baulks at his suggestion. It belches and breaks wind, but it will not roar the way it did last night. My stepfather kicks the thing, curses at it, then finally it snarls in reply. My stepfather rides away, slipping and sliding in the mud.

NIGHTFALL

It is nearly dark when my stepfather comes back from the tea shop.
The beast is nowhere to be seen, and my stepfather is on foot, without his city coat or even his hat.

Ama runs to the door, sees, then turns her face to the corner so as not to shame him when he comes in and climbs the ladder to the sleeping loft.

A TINY EARTHQUAKE

Ama has to be coaxed from bed the next morning with a cup of hot tea. She says she is not ill, but she has the look of a great sickness about her.

I put the baby in a basket on my back and go about my chores, all the while keeping my eyes on Ama. Her steps are slow and heavy, and she stops often in her work to shake her head and sigh.

At noon, I warm the remains of yesterday’s soup, feed it to the baby, then tighten my waistcloth so my own hungry stomach will think it is full. Then I go in search of Ama so that she can wipe the bowl clean with the last heel of bread. When she doesn’t answer my calls, I go outside and find her hiding behind Tali’s shed, weeping.

‘What is it, Ama?’ I say.

Ama wipes her cheek with the hem of her shawl. ‘Your stepfather has said you must go to the city and earn your keep as a maid.’

This news is like a tiny earthquake, shaking the very ground beneath my feet. And yet, for Ama, I stand firm.

‘This is good news, Ama,’ I say, my voice full of a boldness I did not know I had. ‘There will be one less mouth to feed here, and I will send my wages home.’

Ama nods weakly.

‘If I go, you will have money enough for rice and curds, milk and sugar. Enough for a coat for the baby and a jumper for you.’

She smiles wanly and strokes my cheek with her work-worn hand.

‘Enough,’ I say, ‘for a tin roof.’

CITY RULES

‘In the city,’ says Ama, ‘the people clean the floors with one rag and the dishes with another. Take care not to mix them up, or you will risk a beating.

‘Get up early in the morning before anyone else in the house and be the last one to bed at night. Never sit down in the presence of your mistress or her husband or even in front of the children. And never eat your meal until they have gone to bed. This will prove what a hard worker you are.

‘Hide your wages inside your blouse. That way,’ she says, ‘you will fool anyone who thinks you keep your money in your waistcloth.

‘Do not eat any food that comes in a paper wrapper. You do not know who has cooked it.

‘Put a pinch of cardamom in the rice,’ she says. ‘This will make it more filling.

‘Stay two steps behind your mistress if you are helping her with the marketing, and keep your head bowed when you are in public so that the city men cannot see your face.

‘Say your prayers every day and wash your skirt and blouse once a month.

‘You will make us proud,’ Ama says, ‘as the first member of our family to leave the mountain. And perhaps at festival time next year, your mistress will let you come back to visit. Then you can tell us all about the world beyond this one.’

A TRADE

The next morning my stepfather brings me to Bajai Sita’s store. He is carrying Ama’s empty firewood basket and yet he is wearing his vest, his watch, and his best trousers.

‘Lakshmi wants to go to work in the city,’ he tells her.

I feel myself grow taller with his words.

Bajai Sita regards me through little lizard eyes. ‘Is she a hard worker?’ she asks.

‘She needs a thrashing on occasion,’ my stepfather says, ‘but she is not as lazy as some.’

My cheeks flame with indignation, but I say nothing.

‘Are you willing to do whatever is asked of you?’ she says.

I nod.

I will use a separate rag to wash the dishes, I want to tell her, and I will wait until night to take my meal.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘I will do as I am told.’

She goes behind a curtain and returns with the stranger in the yellow dress.

The woman looks me over head to toe, then addresses my stepfather. ‘How much do you want for her?’ she asks, her veil to her lips.

My stepfather squints. He takes in the costly fabric of the woman’s dress, the baubles on her ears, the silver bangles on her wrist. ‘One thousand rupees,’ he says.

There are not that many rupees in the world! I cringe at his backwardness and pray this refined and lovely city woman does not laugh him out of the store.

Instead, she motions for him to step inside the back room with her. ‘She has no hips,’ I hear her say. ‘And she’s plain as porridge. I’ll give you five hundred.’

I do not understand. I can carry a load of firewood so heavy it would put a man to shame, and my legs are sturdy enough to climb the mountain a dozen times in one day. What does it matter that I have no hips yet?

My stepfather says he knows the going rate for a young girl like me. ‘No less than eight hundred.’

‘I will give you half now and the rest when she has proved her worth,’ she says.

My stepfather grunts, and he and the woman return. Bajai Sita unfurls a roll of rupee notes from her waistcloth.

My stepfather counts the money, then counts it again.

'Your family will get nothing, not one rupee, if you do not obey your new aunty,' says Bajai Sita. 'Do you understand?'

I don't. I don't understand at all. A great deal of money has just been paid for work I have not yet done. But I nod.

My stepfather counts the money one more time.

'Tell Ama I will make her proud,' I say. 'Tell her I'll be back for the next festival season.'

But he has his eyes fixed on the wares on Bajai Sita's shelves. He is taking things and putting them in Ama's empty basket: a carton of cigarettes, a bag of sweets, chewing gum, a bottle of rice wine, and a new hat.

While he is busy haggling with Bajai Sita over a watch that has caught his eye, I place two things in the basket: a jumper for Ama and a coat for the baby.

It is a rich and happy day for our family, an eight-hundred-rupee day, a festive and auspicious day, and so I add one more thing for Ama: a costly treat that only the headman's wife can afford – a bottle of Coca-Cola, the sweet drink that people say is like having tiny fireworks in your mouth.

My stepfather scowls, but he does not say anything. On any other day, he would not tolerate such defiance, especially from a mere girl.

But today, I am no mere girl.

A SECOND LOOK

As Aunty and I leave the store, I see Krishna coming down the dirt road with his flock of goats. He is whistling and coaxing a straggler to join the others by tickling its rump with a long stem of elephant grass.

I pray that he will look in my direction, but, as always, his eyes are fixed on the ground before him. I want to tell him where I’m going, to tell him that I will return as soon as I am able with a cash dowry for our wedding. I want to tell him to wait for me.

‘Eyes forward,’ Aunty says. ‘No sense looking back.’

I lower my head and obey.

But as we reach the end of the village, I turn around one last time. And steal one last look at the boy I have been watching for as long as I can remember.

MOVING FORWARD

Aunty says I must walk ahead of her even though I do not know the way.

‘I will be behind you,’ she says.

I am too shy to tell her I won’t run off, too timid to tell her how proud and nervous and excited I am to be the first person in my family to leave the mountain.

I feel a tiny sting on the backs of my legs, and I realise that Aunty has thrown a handful of gravel at my heels. To keep me moving forward.

A NEW WORLD

We walk all day. We travel through three villages, where the people pause in their labours and gape at us, and where even the water buffalo stare at us with the solemn eyes of old men.

I stare, too, at all the things I’ve never seen before.
A man pulling a wild boar on a rope.
A herd of yak hauling sacks of salt.
A mail runner ringing a cluster of bells as he nears a village.
A rope footbridge strung like a spiderweb.
A river that runs white.
And a man with teeth entirely of gold.

I ask Aunty how she knows the way to the city. She says that we are simply following the footsteps of all the others who have gone before us.

I try to remember each hut, each village. I try to memorise each twist in the path so I can find my way home at festival time next year. But when I close my eyes, each hut, each village, each twist in the road looks the same. And when I open my eyes and look behind us, the poinsettias stir in the wind, as if touched by fire.

It is a new world.
But there is one constant:
the mighty swallow-tailed peak.
It grows smaller the further we walk,
but still, it is always there, waiting to guide me back.

WHAT I CARRY

Inside the bundle Ama packed for me are:
my bowl,
my hairbrush,
the notebook my teacher gave me for being the number one girl in school,
and my bedroll.

Inside my head I carry:
my baby goat,
my baby brother,
my ama's face,
our family's future.

My bundle is light.
My burden is heavy.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Aunty and I have been walking for two days and a half. We have passed through seven villages, each one invisible to the other because of the mountain between them, but each one the same, with women pounding laundry on rocks at the village fountain and men sitting cross-legged in the tea shop.

We go up and down hills, sometimes following a dirt path, sometimes following an empty riverbed. Sometimes following no trail at all.

When we stop to rest, Aunty pulls a packet of betel-leaf tobacco from her waistcloth. She stuffs a wad of it between her gum and teeth, rocks back on her heels, and sucks.

'Aunty,' I say finally, 'tell me about the city.'

She spits, and a stream of red betel juice lands on the ground between us.
'You will have to see it for yourself.'

'Is it true that all the roofs are covered in gold?'

'Where did you hear that?' she says.

'In school.' I want Aunty to know that I am not a backward girl. I am educated.

She spits again and says that I am very smart; that I will do well in the city.

I have a hundred questions:
How long will it take for us to get there?
How do I address my mistress?
How can I find Gita?

But I ask only one:
'What are these things called movies?'

Aunty says that in the city, people gather and pay money to see beautiful women and handsome men put on a show. The people in the show are called movie stars.

'Are you a movie star, Aunty?'

She smiles, and I see then what was behind the shawl she always draws to her lips: a mouth of blackened teeth.

I smile back, but inside I am a tiny bit afraid of my new aunty.

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