

chandi

By Harry Jivenmukta

First published 2007 by Loosewords Publishing Company

www.loosewords.org

Copyright © Harry Jivenmukta 2007

The right of Harry Jivenmukta to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights are reserved. No part of this publication may

Part One

The story had been
that he was half man
and half some sort of animal.
As usual the imagination of the villagers
had got the better of them.

He was, in fact, a man.
No-one knew when he'd
arrived in the forest.
The old men nodded sagely
and said it had been a long time ago.

The story was that Yakshini,
a daughter of the village,
had heard all sorts of music and songs,
in her dreams.
Those dreams, they say, led her into the forest.

It was indeed folklore.
The half man and Yakshini
created the Devi
who now visited the cave
and blessed the village women.

The local Brahmin shook his head
and entreated the women not to go,
not to visit the Devi.
He said that he could give them mantras
to help them conceive male heirs.

My job was to live in the wooden hut
at the edge of the forest
near the cave.
I was the custodian of the shrine
and kept nature company.

My hut was about the size of a small bed.
The furniture; a small bed.
The features of my home;
a door and some wooden walls.
I even had a roof.

I awoke with the dawn
and stretched the sleep out of my body.
I waited for the day to get brighter
and then swept the entrance of the cave,
and waited.

Waiting is what people who
live in villages are good at.
Except the new brides,
who cant wait to be filled with a male heir
to satisfy their in-laws.

All those eager eyed new women
nervous of their neighbours,
wanting to prove their womanhood
by giving birth in less than a year
of their marriages.

They all came up the hill
from the village.
They came regularly to the huge stone
under which the cave
to their salvation lay.

No-one knew where the Devi lived,
just that she came out of the forest
at the given time
and blessed the women

and showed them the future.
Really, I had an easy life.
Sweeping a few yards of ground,
looking into the darkness
down through the entrance
of the shrine.

I had been in the shrine, of course,
under the pretence of cleaning.
It was down three rough steep steps,
two cave rooms
each about ten foot square.

Both rooms lit by the magical rocks
that glowed in the dark,
the second room with a small pond of water
and the wall behind, projecting images,
but only when the Devi opened her palm.

The Devi never spoke.
She was just like a young woman
except when she gazed at someone.
She wasn't a normal woman.
She had magic in her eyes.

That was my life.
No questions about truth.
Just the truth that was all around.
Just the barren women filled with males
and Brahmins shaking their heads.

Part Two

I am ten years old.
Maybe, give or take a year.
No-one really cares about numbers;
it's enough to be alive
in the village.

I go to deliver some milk,
just a small amount
in a brass container
with a brass saucer on top.
For my grandfather.

I walk up past the old stone shrine
that no longer glows.
Where the Devi no longer comes,
where the new brides no longer visit.
Where I used to live as an old man.

Round a curve and along the stream
about two feet wide.
It's not a long walk.
It's never a long way when
you visit an old person.

Chandi is following me,
a girl of the village,
a neighbour, she is a chatterbox.
She taunts me
where am I going?

I walk along
don't want to talk to Chandi.

She skips along on the other side
of the stream.

Where and what am I taking?

I ignore her and just walk.

She is bolder and leaps to my side
of the stream.

She is cheeky.

She is trying to make me spill the milk.

Give me some to drink, she taunts.

Going to the toothless relatives?

I want some of your precious milk.

You are a sissy, she taunts,
running to your mother?

She bounds towards me and stretches
out an arm.

I stand forward defensively,
she retracts from me instinctively.

She falls backwards.

There is silence.

Chandi no longer taunts.

I don't look back,
but can't resist.

She is spread out on the floor.

I stop, look back.

Take a step on.

Stop.

Take a step on.

Stop.

She hasn't moved,
not an inch.
She is a statue, made of stone.
The hairs on my back
stand in fear.

I take some steps back
to where she is fallen.
She looks asleep.
Chandi! Chandi! I call.
She does not move.

I stand for minutes
mixed up inside.
I have never touched a girl before.
You can't touch a girl.
It's not allowed.

I stand for minutes.
She doesn't move.
I bend down and whisper
Chandi.
She will not wake up.

I put down the brass pot
and bend down.
I touch her forearm.
The fine hairs are so soft,
I have never felt anything so soft.

Chandi, wake up.
Chandi, wake up.
Chandi, go home.
Chandi, please.
Chandi, please...please....

She is asleep.
I touch her shoulder,
I am frightened,
she still sleeps.
Chandi, wake up!

I shake her in fear
and her head slips to the side.
There is a little bit of red
in her hair.
Like a married woman wears.

I don't know,
am not sure,
she is not alive.
She is not sleeping,
it is something else.

Chandi...
terror is welling up inside.
Chandi...
my head is spinning
why wont you wake up?

Time is sliding past me,
the milk is seeping into the grass.
Chandi?
She is cold and her eyes
are closed.

.....
.....
.....
.....

.....
I am in my home, sitting
with my knees hugged
to my chin.
I can't tell anyone
that Chandi is asleep.

Where's Chandi? asks her mother.
She's a chatterbox, probably talking
to someone, annoying them.
She should be home by now.
She will be annoying someone.

Where's Chandi, asks her mother
There is an anxiety in her voice.
I can hear her speak.
Chandi is my neighbour.
Was.

The sun is sinking into evening.
Where is Chandi?
The desperation is clear now.
The men collect together
to plan, to find her.

The men go out to search.
I sit with my knees clasped
to my chin.
It was me,
they will know it was me.

Night.
Chandi's mother is screaming

Part Three

I am in the theatre entrance.
Cowering in another corner
are two women, one young.
They think that being near a soldier
will help.

I have never been to war before.
There are only a few of us.
I look up to where the road bends
and hold my rifle in sweating hands
waiting for the enemy to come.

Waiting is what soldiers do.
Wait and wait and then what?
Win or die in a few seconds.
I wait for the enemy.
The two women whimper.

The hot day cools into evening.
In my head only two thoughts:
fighting and Chandi.
It's because of Chandi that
I joined the army.

She follows me even here.
A Japanese bullet might end the nightmare.
The enemy won't come
but I know that we can never win.
There are only a few of us.

I know that Chandi is dead
but always dream of the dog

that returns with an arm or leg
or a bit of her bright clothing.
Chandi, leave me alone!

In the end the battle was easy.
The only battle of my life.
We just stood up and put our hands
on our heads.
Surrendered.

The enemy were tired.
We were all marched to the railway station.
We sat for hours.
Nothing happened,
for days.

In the end the Japanese
left us in the station
with one of our own officers in charge.
They told us to stay there
they had other things to do.

We stayed in the station for three days.
No-one came.
In the end we just walked out.
I lived under a bridge with another soldier.
It was unreal.

A woman gave us food.
We couldn't thank her.
We couldn't speak her language.
We gestured and she smiled;
women should not smile at strangers.

Part Four

I have returned to my village,
where Chandi lived.
My brother has died
and I have come to
cremate him.

The village is not the same,
much poorer than before,
fewer people, and strangers
for neighbours.
Chandi, why did you die?

My brother had one son,
married, and three children
playing in the dust.
Their mother brings me
a tray of food.

It is hard to eat when you have
just cremated your brother.
I eat.
My mother and father were cremated.
I wasn't there.