

The Black Monsoon

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The widowed women in our Indian village refused to touch the sacred earth with their feet. Their throats hungered from fasting. They feared the Black Goddess whose *yonis* stormed skies—clouds gushed and spilled into seas. Her wrath flooded their lives with violent monsoons and turned their villages into boneyards.

In the time of the never-ending rain her worshipers crept from growling jungles and gathered where a crimson spring slipped through a cleaved rock. They drank deep her blessings from a hollow in the rockface. Intoxicated from her iron-rich water, their stained tongues unspooled a menstruating red, their bellies stretched like wombs.

The widows remained hidden in their bedsteads, shrouded in shame. For them, the Ambubachi festival was not a time of celebration. Their hearts withered and sunk into darkness, and they left their children to wander in danger.

One boy rose at dawn. Birdsong burst from the treetops, and the wilderness woke and reached toward the light. The boy found Mama squatted on a palm-leaf woven mat, grinding turmeric rootstocks and henna leaves in her stone mortar. Her fingers bent raw in the struggle.

“What are you going to do with that?” he said.

Mama pounded the pestle into the bowl and concentrated on the prohibited dye.

“Mama,” the boy said. “Widows are forbidden the tattooing of *mehndi*.”

He stared at her clawed feet that were naked and neglected since Papa had died. *If he could only see her now.*

“Shhh,” she said, reading his mind. “This is a time of mourning.”

The Great Goddess’s gloom penetrated the village, and frightened children disappeared among the tangled tropics. Mama was still crouched on her heels, blending the scarlet paint.

Her hair tumbled like a midnight river rushing for the floor.

“You are still beautiful,” he said. “Even with the loss of color.”

“I am bland,” she said.

The boy left and joined the children in the forest.

Upon his return he discovered Mama confined to her bed. Her lead-white eyes smudged in heavy lines of kohl, her mouth agape and stained with pomegranate. Drool glistened on her chin.

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“Mama,” he cried. He shook her shoulders and watched her neck dance like a charmed cobra.

There was nothing but black inside her soul.

For three days the boy observed silken webs overrun the shadowed corners of their mud house. Through a paneless window he viewed flies clung to cold stoves. He wept when wind blew her sari draped over the banyan tree and waited for Mama to find her way home.