

The Bright Drop

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Sitting still, he was inside a vortex, suspended in time and space – a cosmic sojourner without leaving earth. He was the absence of all that was and all that had ever been – the vast sweep of existence contracted to a single point, a point on a point, the shadow of point on a point. But he was also the expansion of this point back out - out so wide that it glowed brighter than eternity. He was the nothingness left after nothingness evaporated, and he felt the emptiness around him, how it swirled its orbit like stardust looking for a home.

This was how the elders had taught him to do it: three days of fasting – no food, no sleep, no conversation. Then, at the end, the sitting.

There was a tree near their stream – it seemed to be a grove – like a hundred trees or more, but it was only one, one set of roots beneath the earth, one thirsty life absorbing river and rain, a hundred sturdy trunks poking through the loam. This tree was the cradle of their tribe, the place they went to be still. And it was there that Chandra sat, his hands pressed together at his chest with his index fingers pointing to the heavens in Uttarabodhi Mudra, the gesture of supreme enlightenment. In this space there was only Chandra and Uttarabodhi Mudra, Uttarabodhi Mudra and Chandra. Like a reflection of the moon in water, they were one, and the rest of the universe fell away like soil shaking off a stepping foot. Indeed, if Chandra had thought, he would have wondered if he actually existed at all. But there was no thinking. There was only being – the steady hum of warmth from the mudra up the arms, past the shoulders, to the head and then, like a quick unzipping – down the body. Chandra was open, empty and available to be filled.

But he did not seek. That was the key to it all – to be available to receive whatever was offered without asking. And if nothing was offered, well, then one just sat, and in this sitting lived, and that was enough – to hold the breath inside the body and then give it back and pull it in again – that ordinary miracle. Many times Chandra had been the void and nothing more, had returned to his people after a seven day sit and picked up his work exactly where he'd left it – in the middle of a row of planting, or at the flap of a half-built tent. No one ever asked.

But sometimes there was more, something born of the void (which Chandra could not describe with words), and the original forces would settle into his silence and grow within him like seeds and then buds and then vibrant, unfolding petals in powdery, sun-kissed red. The blooms would be in his heart and in his mind and attached to the very foundation of his soul, and when, after the sit, he walked back to his people, the petals would flutter inside him as if lifted and dropped and lifted by a delicate but mischievous breeze. Often, as he walked back, a word, just one word, might enter his mind – something like “whimsical” or “steadfast,” and it would be Chandra's job to find the universe of meaning that existed before the word took its place. If he was lucky, he

would be rid of the word before he arrived at the tents; then he would signal his people to follow him down to the river, and they would return with arms overflowing with clippings of the plant.

These were the busy times, when the middle aged and elderly worked together to extract sap from the plant – to stir elixir in large batches before the sun crawled behind the mountains for the night. In the dirt, the youth used sticks to draw bulls and birds and rabbits, and they placed moonstones and opals where the eyes and nose would be. They were preparing for the ritual, and because this time it was Chandra's own mother who would go, Chandra did not stay with the other middle-aged men to watch the elixir bubble and boil over the fire, but instead, he stood with the youth, drawing images in the earth. His depiction was of a disc-shaped chariot led by ten horses and an antelope, a chain of moonstones for reins. When Chandra finished, he knelt and kissed the dusty earth, and then he licked his thumb and pressed it to the antelope's forehead, right between the two opal eyes.

"Breathe and burn, my friend," he said, allowing himself, finally, the use of language. "Breathe and burn."

"Breathe and burn!" said the children, dancing around Chandra's drawing.

"Breathe and burn!" chanted Chandra's mother, stirring the elixir with a silver handled ladle.

Night had begun to fall, and the sun winked one last time before dipping behind the mountain and turning guardianship of the earth over to his sister, the moon. The elixir's sweet aroma began to dance and flirt on the wind, seducing everyone to the cauldron to sip from the ladle.

After Chandra took his drink, he walked forward and started a new chant, and the others followed, in a wavy line that fluttered like a wing before rounding into a circle. Chandra's mother sat in the middle, atop the disc Chandra had drawn, ladle to her lips, eyes pressed shut like two sleeping babies, the corners of her mouth turned up in that peaceful half smile so common to mystics.

"I'm ready," she said, taking her final sip and setting the ladle on the ground.

The circle broke back into a wave as each person came forward and kissed Chandra's mother on the forehead, between her two eyes. Chandra was both first and last, two kisses for his mother – a perfect circle. Chandra's mother nodded her head, a half bow to Chandra, and Chandra made a full bow back, then took his place among the others. He looked up. The sky had begun its show.

Pink, yellow and tangerine lights swerved and danced in streaks across the dark canvass of night. Stars transformed themselves into bulls and bunnies and birds, animated by the scent of divine elixir. Chandra's mother stood and closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, the moon, that big bright drop, had lowered and swooped her back up with it, and they rode like sisters into the distance, across the night, pulled by a team of horses with an antelope at the lead. Chandra's

mother's silver hair glistened in the night like waves of tinsel or the slippery sides of fish. She was moving to the space between breaths, between thoughts, between lives. Going there to stay.

"Sing eternity, Mother," Chandra said, waving an arm up towards the sky, his voice filled with emotion. "Sing eternity on bright lungs!"

"Sing eternity," the others called as they waved to the disappearing streak of hair.

And soon Chandra's mother was no more than a twinkling in the distance, and the moon had gone back to her proper place above the mountain, and Chandra gathered up the others to head back to the tents. Like always, they needed a good night's rest. In the morning there was planting to be done.