RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Tiger by the River

Ravi Shankar Etteth

About the Book

Swati Varma is one of modern Delhi's more blessed inhabitants. Then one brilliant morning when the world seemed cleansed by the coming of the rains, the unthinkable happens: his pregnant wife is killed in a road accident. Devastated, Swati makes the pilgrimage back to the land of his forebears, Panayur, in the state of Kerala, to scatter his beloved's ashes in the sacred waters of the Papanasini river.

Returning to this long-forgotten world, he is reunited with a childhood companion who now cares for the crumbling, ghost-filled palace that was his home. For Panayur – seemingly still free from the religious turmoil that threatens so much of the country – was once a kingdom, and Swati is the direct descendant of its last king. As the two friends talk, share memories and exchange secrets, thousands of miles away, Vel – a cousin Swati never knew he had – sets out on a quest for the truth about his family that will take him from America, to Berlin and, ultimately, to Panayur.

And so begins an extraordinary and healing journey. One that will lead both Swati and Vel back through the cruel, vibrant, myth-filled history of the kings of Panayur to the legend that lies at its heart – the legend of the tiger by the river . . .

Contents

The Tiger by the River

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For my mother, Santha, who opened my eyes to magic,
and my teacher, Ipsita, who opened the door.

Swati:

INDIA

IN WHICH A WOUNDED PRINCE RETURNS HOME TO A LOST PLAYMATE, A TIGER, AND STORIES WRITTEN ON PAGES OF BLOOD

The Spell of Forewarning

USED BY SWATI VARMA, THE LAST KING OF PANAYUR,
BEFORE HE STARTED HIS JOURNEY HOME

MAY THE GODDESS Neeli manifest herself through the symbols and materials of this spell:

Grind one *nazhi* of rice from this year's harvest into a fine white powder. Mix turmeric and a black cat's milk into it. Dip the *athame* into the paste, then draw a pentagram on a black marble altar. Light four lamps at each corner of the altar: north, east, south, west. Keep one dried date-palm nut each on the eastern and the western corners; use a coral in the north and jade in the south.

Slice a lemon in two, rinse it with red turmeric water.

In the middle of the pentagram, hold the lemon, plunge the sacrificial knife into its heart, and turn the knife clockwise. Keep the little finger of the left palm pointing east while rotating the lemon between the thumb and the forefinger. Let the red juice of the sacrificial fruit fall upon the ground.

If there is thunder in the west, a great loss is predicted.

If a gecko chirps from the eastern side of the house, a homecoming is foretold.

The name of the goddess Neeli be blessed.

Source: Amavasyakandam,
Neeleebhagavadimantramala

Chapter One

‘WHAT IS INSIDE?’ The policeman at airport security took the urn from Swati’s hands. Swati’s wife’s red silk handkerchief was tied around its mouth. The policeman raised it to his face, and squinted at it.

‘The Queen,’ Swati replied, reaching for it.

‘What did you say, sir?’ he asked Swati suspiciously, moving the urn beyond Swati’s reach. The policeman’s hands were large and brown, with square fingers and bitten nails. Beneath the boredom in his voice, Swati could sense habitual impertinence.

‘It contains my wife’s ashes,’ Swati, the last king of Panayur, replied, reaching out to take back the urn: the urn with the ashes of the queen of Panayur.

An aeroplane taking off outside the terminal startled the policeman. The vessel slipped from his fingers and Swati reached forward to catch it. He did not want Nina to fall again on this strange earth of Delhi, upon the concrete floor, which was coated with dust of unknown arrivals and departures. As he leant forward, clasping the urn in his fingers, he lost his balance and fell against the policeman. Swati was holding his beloved to his chest and he could feel her inside that small vessel of copper, a tender, unbearable weight that he was carrying home. The policeman flailed against him and they fell together, the vessel slipping from Swati’s hands and rolling away.

‘Nina!’ Swati cried out her name. He saw the cartwheeling blur of strangers in the background – faces with unclear features and puzzled frowns. The fallen policeman disentangled himself from Swati’s clasp, shook him away

and tried to rise. The urn glinted at Swati in the light of the dawn coming in through the huge glass panes. It was intact but for a small dent on its side. A little bit of her had fallen on the floor – in a slim trail of ash like a farewell hieroglyphic.

Swati knelt beside it and carefully scooped it up in his fingers. She turned the side of his palm dirty grey. He rubbed her upon his chest. ‘I’m so sorry,’ Swati told her, holding the urn to his face and repeating her name over and over.

The policeman stood by, fidgeting. ‘You should have checked it in,’ he said, pointing at her gingerly. ‘We can’t be too careful. There are too many cranks these days.’

Swati interpreted his gaze, and could not help smiling at the policeman. He stood up, holding Nina close with both hands; she snuggled against his warmth. ‘It is the last journey we will be taking together,’ he murmured.

Swati opened his bag and put Nina back. Walking towards the door, he felt the curious gaze of other passengers upon him. Two women muttered furtively to each other, pulling a child holding a teddy bear away from his path. The little girl stared at Swati – a tall man in black, whose long hair had a white streak at one side. Swati winked at her.

A short bald man with a huge woman smiled at him warily as he approached the door, standing aside, allowing him to pass. Swati caught his eye and smiled back. ‘It’s my wife,’ he said, raising the urn slightly. ‘She has this effect on people.’

Nina would have laughed.

Leaning back against his seat, feeling its texture against his head, Swati closed his eyes. He had placed the urn upon his lap, sensing her weight again after a week of death. He could feel her cheek against his shoulder, smell the fragrance of her fine, black hair, which fell to her waist, spilling over his. He could feel the rise and fall of her chest, the pressure of her soft breasts against his arm. Her silk

rustled against him, and her perfume teased lightly. Swati surrendered to her, not daring to open his eyes – he was not sure of meeting hers. He was afraid to see her again, afraid to lose again that glimpse of her red mouth and the dimple in her cheek.

A diamond of sunlight flashed upon his eyelids. The plane was carving a circle towards the south, and Swati looked down at the Delhi he was leaving behind, green and neat, the Yamuna a gleaming sickle in the morning mist. ‘Goodbye to all these years,’ he whispered. ‘Say goodbye, my darling.’

Under the belly of the aeroplane, the city was wet from the monsoon. The roads were shiny black ribbons upon which vehicles glinted. It had been raining for over a week; on the first morning of the rain Nina had woken him at dawn. She licked the rim of his ear and giggled. ‘Let’s dance in the nude,’ she said tugging at Swati’s nightshirt, ‘in the rain.’

He saw that she was naked. In the morning light, her breasts gleamed, the heavy brown nipples like date-fruit. He felt the vertigo in the pit of his stomach that he always experienced whenever he saw Nina naked; he reached out and cupped one breast in his palm.

‘Later,’ she said, pulling away, drawing her hair deliberately across his face. ‘Let’s go out into the rain.’

Swati followed her, and Nina looked back and laughed. Her teeth gleamed at Swati, framed by the dark fall of hair. He saw the white of her slender arm upon which the gold of her bangle shone. She opened the door that led on to the lawn and ran out, squealing as the rain covered her. He grabbed her, taking her down with him on to the wet grass, Nina laughing and punching his chest. They rolled on the lawn, water falling on them, the incessant drumming of tiny feet, and he took Nina’s mouth in his. It tasted of rainwater, dawn and her. She held Swati against her, inside her, staring widely at the indigo sky. ‘Don’t move,’ she whispered. ‘Can’t you feel the earth move to meet the rain?’

The dawn was daubs of vermilion through the rainclouds, the sky a great and pregnant presence spitting thin streaks of lightning. Swati lay on his back on the wet grass, drawing Nina to his shoulder, feeling the earth under him. Their unfinished house rose against the sky, the bedroom window a golden rectangle of light.

‘Some architect you are,’ he remarked. ‘I wonder if I’ll live to see this house finished.’

‘Oh, you will,’ she promised, ‘and our children will bring laughter into its rooms.’ She cupped his cheeks in her soft palms and laid his head against her belly. ‘Do you hear him stir,’ she asked Swati, with shining eyes, ‘the prince of Panayur?’

The skin of her belly, its pressure against his cheek – Swati imagined the movements of his unborn child within her. He held her close, his heir against his face. The wind shivered on their skins.

‘What kind of a world will he come into, this young prince?’ Nina asked. ‘I am afraid for him.’

‘Into our world, the world of our mouths and our skin, into the safe umbrella of our sleep.’

‘Swati, I am worried,’ she mumbled.

He drew her upon him, naked on the grass, which was wet and clean with the rain. The morning birds sang far away. ‘It is a beautiful world with you in it,’ he said.

‘Yesterday I dreamt that on our son’s first birthday they started the nuclear war. Just like Nostradamus said.’

‘Nostradamus was just a dreamer,’ Swati tried to comfort her. ‘There is going to be no nuclear war.’

‘It began as such a bright dream.’ She sounded wistful. ‘There were streamers and balloons everywhere, and lots and lots of little children. I can recall the quality of that day even now – a bright blue sky lazy with white clouds, and the trees vibrant and green. All our friends were there: Mukul and Binita, Bubbles and Biren, Shammi, the Schmidts and the Jeejeeboys. We were drinking champagne and Mukul

was cracking jokes. The children were outside in the garden, playing some silly game, and they all wore party hats. Inside the house Simon and Garfunkel were singing “Scarborough Fair”.’

‘I hate Simon and Garfunkel,’ Swati said. ‘Imagine hearing that in a dream!’

‘Shut up, this isn’t funny,’ she replied. ‘I was looking for you, but you were not there in the dream . . .’

‘Great, some dreamer, you are. My son’s first birthday and I am not even invited.’

‘The children were in the garden and I brought the cake out. I can smell it now, Swati – it was chocolate and Binita had baked it for him and brought it over. “Happy birthday!” I said and all the kids turned and looked at me. Their party hats were black with soot, and skulls and crossbones were painted on them. All of them had the same burnt faces, like Edvard Munch’s “The Scream” or something.’

‘Hush, it was just a dream, Nina.’

‘The sky was made of pewter, Swati, and the clouds were all small red puffs of fire.’ She hugged Swati fiercely, then drew away abruptly. ‘Some mad general in Pakistan or some war-hungry mullah here, and we’ll have Hiroshima here in Delhi. What will happen to the children, Swati?’

‘There will be no war,’ he whispered, his voice sounding like that of a stranger, hesitant, ‘it was just a dream.’

Suddenly something occurred to him. ‘What was his name, Nina? Our son’s name?’

‘I don’t remember, darling. I can only remember the faces of the children. God, they were so horrible . . .’

Swati put his arm around her shoulder, and clasped the soft firm roundness. She buried her face in his chest. ‘Promise me one thing,’ her voice was muffled, yet fierce, ‘you have to promise me one thing.’

‘Anything, my pet, anything.’

‘Promise me that if a war ever breaks out you will take me immediately to the house in Panayur,’ Nina said, looking up

at him, ‘both me and our son. He will be safe there.’

To distant green Panayur, once the kingdom of his ancestors, nourished by the great river Papanasini, which flowed by the palace of his forefathers. Suddenly, everything seemed to be all right. ‘I promise,’ he whispered in her ear, inhaling the wet fragrance of her hair. ‘I will take you to Panayur. Both of you.’

Nina and Swati had bought land a few miles away from the city, ten acres of rocky red earth situated on a rise. From there they could see the Sohna hills and the green fields, which stretched out for miles; at night, on the other side, the lights of Delhi were a smoky, nebulous haze. Nina was an architect, but she did not want to finish building the house before moving in. She wanted the house to grow around them slowly as they lived in it, adding a room here, a wall there, putting up a marble fountain on the lawn, and a birdbath outside the portico. So they built a living room and a bedroom.

‘Isn’t it better this way? We can feel it opening around us as we go along,’ she asked Swati in the morning, after breakfast. ‘It takes shape in my imagination, like a great womb of warmth. I dream of nooks and crannies where we can make love, staircases I can sweep down, bejewelled, in a blue Kanjeevaram sari, and dazzle you.’

The rain had stopped, and cool sunlight came in through the door. Her neck was like the stem of a lily. Swati wanted to catch the sundrop on her lower lip, taste it.

It was the last time he saw her alive. Standing against the morning light Nina had the sunlit aura of an angel, the dark shape of her through the light cotton of her clothes, her skirt blowing in the morning wind, the gold chain around her neck a shimmering circle of fire. Her face was dark in the shadow, her hair blew in the wind, and she turned away with a laugh. He remembered her profile pencilled by the morning, the curved line of forehead and the sharp nose, the clean, full

lips and the rounded chin. Swati would replay the last twirl of her movement for ever in his mind, the rise of her breasts as the sun darkened them, the curve of her stomach and the soft swell of her belly. He felt a terrible ache as he watched her turn.

‘Goodbye.’ He waved.

She paused in the doorway, looked over her shoulder and smiled. The sun was in his eyes, and ever since he had tried to imagine what her last smile had looked like: the large kohl-rimmed eyes crinkling at the corners, the dimple, the orange mouth with the long, full underlip.

He was still thinking of her smile when he drove to work a few hours later, and saw her upturned car by the roadside. Glass like bloody sugar. A police jeep was parked nearby. ‘Where is my wife?’ Swati screamed. ‘Where is Nina?’

The day darkened suddenly, and he heard the roar of the tiger far away in the sky. He knelt down by the car and the rainwater seemed red. ‘The rain is falling on her blood,’ Swati shouted. ‘Nina’s blood. Please help, help me . . .’

The rain ran over the road, branching out like a great red spider, mixing with the grass and the mud. He kept scooping the water into his hands to keep it from flowing away, but it continued to slip through his fingers in thin red streams. Swati felt a hand fall on his shoulder, and looked up at a policeman in a black raincoat. He held up his cupped palms, full of rainwater coloured with blood.

‘It’s my wife’s blood. Where is she?’ Swati asked.

The policeman did not answer. He held Swati’s shoulder lightly, clumsily. The crowd enveloped them in silence. A small child stared at Swati from behind his mother’s sari.

‘She was coming around the bend when she skidded and hit a tree,’ someone said. ‘I saw it happen.’

Suddenly there was a babble of voices. Everyone was saying something to him.

‘She was coming too fast . . .’

‘I saw it happen . . .’

‘I pulled her out . . .’

‘Her eyes were closed, I saw it happen . . .’

‘There was so much blood. Oh, the blood, the blood . . .’

Swati sat down on the road, where his wife’s blood had mixed with the rain. It stained his trouser-legs. He was aware of the rain that fell on him, long thin messages of water that sluiced over his skin and through his clothes, and stung his face. The rain dimmed everything: the curve of the road and the trees, the people beside him, the policemen standing guard.

Swati got up. ‘Where is she?’ he asked.

The post-mortem report confirmed that she had not died alone. She had been two months pregnant.

My heir is dead, Swati thought, as he looked out through the aircraft window. My son died in a choking whirlpool as the world tilted around him. Swati felt the earth careen, and closed his eyes tight. There was a roaring in his ears, a giant noise which filled him with a great humming throb. He opened his eyes: it was only the aeroplane tilting, its wing banking up in the air. Swati held Nina firmly on his lap. The sky was brilliant, the clouds faint indigo stains. He held his wife up to the window. ‘We are going home, my darling,’ he whispered, ‘to Panayur.’

To Panayur, and the palace of his ancestors: his beloved shall swim in the Papanasini, the sacred river that runs by his palace, the river that is named the Quencher of all Sin. His heir shall swim with her as an unborn golden dolphin. Perhaps they will swim with the tiger of Panayur, who comes down from his cave in the Dhoni forests to drink from the river on *amavasya* nights: they will see the great head lowered to meet the water and the gleaming flanks in the glow of the stars. He will play with them as the noble beasts of the forest play with the spirits of the woods, his amber eyes seeking them out from the shadows mercurial with moonlight. The tiger by the river, the destiny of the royal house of Panayur, the beast its kings had hunted in vain,

that his great-uncle, the regent of Panayur, had sought after Swati's father's death, when he had gone into the forest never to return.

A stewardess offered Swati coffee, which he refused. Outside was a timeless light, the blue sky arching to swoop down thousands of miles later over the palace on the banks of the river, the palace of his childhood, in whose grounds the kings and queens of Panayur had slept to the tidesong of the Papanasini. Northward from its banks were the green humps of the foothills and the thickening shadow of the forest as it climbed up Dhoni mountain. Once, the river had curved down from there, flowing below the railway bridge across the Tenkurissi boulders where one of his ancestors had hidden after he had been wounded in battle. As a child, Swati had stepped on to the bridge to stand upon one of the pillars, clutching the giant brown iron girders, waiting for the Madras Mail to pass – a dare on many a school half-holiday. The Mail passed at noon: a hooting length of shuddering, clattering carriages of brown and dirty yellow. Waiting for the train, he could look over the valley spread out below, and see the river flowing though the endless green paddyfields, dotted with black palmyra trees; the western wind flapped against them as it howled down the pass.

He had found a groove in one of the pillars into which he could snuggle, with his back against the soft cold moss on the stone. In the distance was the fort of Tipu Sultan, with whom Swati's great-great-grandfather had fought a battle and lost. Below the bridge, in summer, the river flowed away from its banks, unveiling stretches of silver sand. These were the battlefields of the armies of Malabar and the tournament sites of its knights. It was on these sands that the *chakorpada* fought their battles unto death: it was forbidden for them to return home in defeat. Sometimes the summer sunset would stain the sands with the blood of dead warriors and their cries could be heard in the wind. It was on these sands that the White Knight, Parangi Cheykor,

had appeared one day, with his mane of hair, half blond and half black, one eye a blue ice chip, the other black quartz.

Sometimes Swati fancied he saw the Cheykor riding the tiger of Panayur upon the slope of a distant hill as he stood waiting for the train. But the mirages of summer afternoons shimmered and swept away his vision: under the great glass sphere of the sky golden filaments danced in shimmering spirals. Far, far away, he could see the spidery line of the railway track and the signal that blinked red and green near Palghat railway station. It was on the Madras Mail that his father had last come to see them before he went away to war. Swati remembered sitting on his mother's lap with Great-uncle as they drove up to the railway station in the Buick with the royal insignia of Panayur painted on its doors. The chauffeur wore a tuft knotted to the right side of his shoulder and a sarong with a border of gold brocade. Valiyamama, Swati's great-uncle, the regent of Panayur, sat erect in the back seat beside Swati's mother, the ceremonial dagger stuck into a red cummerbund around his bare belly. Beside the driver sat the gun-bearer, who held Grandfather's blue-barrelled Winchester with its gleaming walnut stock. The car still flew the flag of Panayur on its bonnet.

'They tell me the district collector is upset about the flag,' Valiyamama had told Swati's mother. 'Only the government is allowed to fly flags, I believe.'

The gun-bearer chortled in his throat.

'What is the government?' Swati asked Valiyamama, and his mother smiled.

Valiyamama's grey eyebrows gathered in a small frown, but below them his brown eyes twinkled. 'I am the government,' he said, 'the ruler of Panayur. No little clerk is going to tell me what to do in my own land.'

The flag of Panayur was crimson and gold, with a leaping tiger embroidered on it.

‘As if I am going to fly that Gandhi’s flag,’ the regent snorted. ‘One of our *kudiyaans* has won an election with that Gandhi’s party and is going around wearing white *khadi*. No king of Panayur is ever going to fly his serf’s flag.’

Swati remembered his mother laying a comforting hand on Valiyamama’s, her hand – so much like Nina’s – with its long, slim fingers and the small, pink nails and the sapphire ring of Panayur’s queen. The night Swati slipped that ring on Nina’s finger, he had knelt down in front of her. ‘It is the custom to kneel before the queen,’ he whispered, ‘just like my father did before my mother.’

Swati remembered Father getting down from the train, in his green army uniform with the colonel’s epaulettes. He had knelt at Great-uncle’s feet and kissed the old man’s hand. Mother stood a few paces away, and Swati leant against her, looking at the tall man from the photographs who was his father. That was his earliest memory of his father, a tall man with a pencil moustache and a green beret, a man with laughing eyes.

As the train roared past the boy on the bridge, in a hot passage of coalsmoke and oil, he would try to scan the blurred faces of passengers at the windows for Father’s familiar features. He tried to sniff his scent in the rush of the train, the fragrance of cologne and soap he had caught from the man in uniform who raised him up in his strong arms.

‘My, my, Kalyani, how the little prince has grown,’ Father exclaimed. Swati could always remember his voice, clear and loud on that distant morning.

Sitting on his lap, he had listened to his father explaining to Valiyamama that there might not be a war with China at all. ‘Nehru and Chou En-lai are friends,’ Father explained. ‘Everything will be sorted out.’

‘Chou En-lai is a Communist,’ the regent said, ‘and Communists are the worst enemies of their own country.’

‘The Americans will support us,’ Father said, ‘and the Americans have the atom bomb. After all, the atom bomb

was what brought the last war to an end.’

Mother was holding Swati’s hand, and as Father spoke about the war she pressed the palm tight. Swati cried out and Father looked at him, then at Mother.

‘Don’t worry, Kalyani,’ he consoled her. ‘There will be no war.’

Valiyamama snorted. ‘I do not trust that Patel. He tricked the Junagarh kingdom into being part of his plans,’ he shouted, ‘and that Malayali Englishman, Krishna Menon, is a fool. After all, it is the *kudiyaan’s* party that is running the country. I don’t see why Panayur has to get involved in this. And you are the heir.’

Father told the old regent that Panayur was no longer a kingdom on its own. Great-uncle flew into a rage. ‘Are you telling me that this *kudiyaan’s* party is ruling *me?* Never!’ he thundered. ‘In their silly white uniforms, and that Gujarati shopkeeper’s multicoloured flag? And then the other day a group of youngsters came with a *Namboodiri* to see me. Said they were Communists. I would not have let them into the courtyard if I had not been told that it was Udayan Namboodiri from Chandanathara 111am who was seeking an audience with me. Even the Brahmins are mad these days. In the old days, Choorikathi Kombiyachan would have chopped off their heads.’

‘What did they want?’ Father asked, suppressing a smile.

‘Damned Communists behaving like Tipu Sultan and Haider Ali. Even Tipu Sultan did not impose his *rowka* rules on Panayur. Everywhere else in Malabar women had to cover their breasts, but not in Panayur! What a king as great as Tipu didn’t do, now the Communists want to, I believe!’

‘What has Communism got to do with breasts?’ Father said.

‘They wanted me to order that women should not go around bare-breasted any more, especially the low castes. They said it was against the pride of the working class. The

pride of the working class indeed!’ Valiyamama spat betel juice through the open window of the car.

‘And what did Your Highness say?’

‘I asked, “Are their breasts so ugly that you have to keep them under wraps?”’ the regent said, ‘and that Udayan Namboodiri flew into a rage. He warned me that Mother Russia would seek revenge on Panayur. I asked him, “Do the breasts of my subjects belong to Mother Russia or to me, the king?”’

Father threw back his head and laughed. Great-uncle turned on him in a rare rage. ‘I told him to tell his Russia to declare war on Panayur. If I see him again, I will not keep in mind that he is the son of Maitran Namboodiri and the grandson of Uttaman Namboodiri who was the court scholar of Panayur. I will chop off his head.’

‘And did it stop the women working bare-breasted?’ Nina had asked Swati, when he told her the story.

‘Only architects who belong to the present king of Panayur have to work bare-breasted,’ he answered, with a smile, pulling her towards him and placing his palm on her breast. She raised her lips to him, her hands slipping around his neck. They were cool and soft. She rubbed her palm against Swati’s cheek, moving it in little circles. They were sitting on the stone steps of the royal bathing enclave, which led into the Papanasini, watching the sun’s margin bruising the horizon.

‘There is sunset on your lips,’ he said.

He leaned forward to kiss her, and she drew away with a teasing laugh. The evening was a great dome that curved away into the distance, disappearing behind the great hills, which were China-green and smoked with wandering cloud. The river was just a thin strip of red and silver, obscured by the grass, which now grew wild on its marshy bed. The wind hissed in the paddy like a million snakes. To their left, in the small shallow harbour, was the wreck of a ship. On its