

MEIRA  
CHAND

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*A Far Horizon*



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Horizon*

Calcutta, 1756. In Indian Black Town, the luminously beautiful Sati is believed to be possessed by the goddess Kali, and finds herself at the centre of a religious cult. In British White Town, Chief Magistrate Holwell and Governor Drake come together to face a common enemy – Siraj Uddaulah, the volatile young nawab in Murshidabad.

When the nawab finally descends upon Calcutta with a huge army, it's too late for those British residents who have not fled the city in time. Locked into Fort William with a large number of the Black Town population, these British prisoners spend a night of horror that would become legend in the history of the Raj.

Lush, magnificent and richly evocative, *A Far Horizon* is a sweeping chronicle of the notorious incident of the Black Hole of Calcutta, that would later be used to justify the British empire's colonisation of India.

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For Review only

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## *A Far Horizon*

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*A Far  
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*Calcutta, 1756*

The evening was already upon Calcutta, light sucked from the sky at an alarming rate. The first bats left their trees and flitted about in a purposeless way. Moths blundered into candles. In the fading wastes above the town, the Pole Star hung, gripped invisibly by God's fingers, incandescent with strange light. A full moon appeared beside it. In the house there was bustle and a heightened sense of expectation not normally to be found.

Sati Edwards twisted the glass bangles on her wrist and sat forward on her chair. Before her a servant, cross-legged on the floor, buffed some bits of silver. A pile of candles was stacked upon a table, before which argued two more servants. The new bearer, a Moslem, refused to touch the candles, saying they were made of pig fat. The chief steward, who had worked for a time in the house, protested that the candles were made from the fat of an enormous fish, and especially imported from France. He rapped the box importantly, with its yellowing picture of a whale.

Sati sensed her stepfather observing her. His grey eyes resembled the monsoon sky and had the effect of a

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downpour upon her. Then, his gaze strayed from her to the table, assessing how many candles would create the right atmosphere for the seance. Too much light would dispel the spectral element. Too little would generate a climate of fear that might drive the curious away. Fabian Demonteguy was normally frugal with the use of the spermaceti since they were not only more expensive than local wax candles, but had to be ordered from France a year in advance of his needs. Tonight, he would not spare their use. The candlelight grew steadily stronger as darkness settled outside.

‘The Governor’s wife will be coming tonight,’ Demonteguy reminded his wife.

Rita Demonteguy examined her appearance in a tarnished mirror, her face held close to the glass. The red brass of henna, lit by the candlelight, flamed in her hair. Ignoring Demonteguy’s advice, she refused to dress or powder it in White Town fashion. If he ever returned to France with her, he knew she would create a stir. At times she caught his eyes upon her, as if already the imagining of such scenes made him shudder with distaste.

‘Nobody thinks well of that Mrs Drake,’ Rita announced, still observing herself in the mirror. The blemishes in the glass disturbed her, moving over her like a disease. However hard she exhorted the servants to polish, the stains remained, untouchable. Behind her reflection floated the image of her daughter, a further blight on her equability. The girl’s eyes followed her every move.

‘Emily Drake is a lonely woman. Such women seek

their own affirmation. But is her husband, our Governor, regarded with any more respect?’ Demonteguy asked, then ordered more candles to be lit. The argument at the table now appeared to be settled. The head steward handled the candles and the bearer carried a taper which he lit from a candle the head steward held, in order to light further candles.

Sati avoided her mother’s gaze in the mirror. The sight of her here in the Frenchman’s house, and the nature of the glances that passed between them filled her with confusion. She turned her face from Rita’s appraisal. A pink ribbon tied up her hair; tight European clothes constricted all movement. Beneath her dress a tight bodice encased her, and a skirt, set with hoops of bamboo, swung about her like a cage. Her pulse seemed to slow, her breath became shallow and her spirit fled deep into hiding. She stared at the room before her and felt only further constriction.

She hated her stepfather’s house in White Town, filled with useless objects, and an excess of mirrors. Everywhere she looked they reflected inaccessible worlds, throwing her own ghost up before her. Danger also lay beneath the chandelier, and its trembling crystal shards. The silk-covered chairs of fashionable design Fabian Demonteguy had brought back from France, but the marble-topped console and the inlaid commode had been built to his taste by a cabinet-maker in the local bazaar. The house was a neat one-storied affair with a veranda and a small garden. Strange flowers had also been imported from

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France and grew in a sickly fashion, cajoled to sprout in the alien soil. Sati gazed out of the window. Across the fading shapes of White Town she could see the river and Fort William.

The garrison had been built in the days when a fort was worth more than an ambassador, and with the dusk it regained some menace. The town was preparing for the night, but whatever the nature of White Town's preliminaries, it was the bustle of Black Town that caught Sati's attention. Her stepfather's home, in an unfashionable area of Calcutta, was situated near Black Town's perimeter, and the smell of dung fires, frying spices and effluent assailed those near the boundary. Clanking pans, crying babies, women's voices and the howl of a dog echoed across the divide. Apart from the odours of Black Town, the reek of the Salt Lakes drifted into the room. Newcomers not yet acclimatised to the stench of Calcutta constantly retched. Women sickened politely behind posies of jasmine. The open drains and noxious mud flats, mixed with the rot of dead fish tossed up each day on the tide, did not disturb Sati Edwards, who lived with her grandmother in Black Town. Nor did it disturb her stepfather. Fabian Demonteguy was not a fastidious man of the East India Company, which was lit from within by its own fierce light. He was an interloper, who had to generate his own illumination as best he could. Calcutta treated his breed with distaste.

Demonteguy turned to assess the room and was forced again to observe his stepdaughter. The girl was from his wife's brief marriage to an English sea captain fifteen years

before. He frowned as he stared at Sati. If it were possible to arrange the evening without her, he would have done so, but she was the pivot upon which it would turn.

'You look very pleasing tonight,' Demonteguy commented grudgingly. He wondered as always why the girl could not have inherited her mother's honeyed skin. Instead, perversely, she reflected all of Black Town's dark intensity.

'You will perform as instructed,' he ordered, suddenly fearing she might yet slip from his grasp. The girl looked up, and he met her amber eyes, disconcerting in their clarity. Those feline eyes and her wild tortoiseshell hair, burnished and streaked as if by the sun, were all she had inherited from her English father.

'Good money has been spent on that dress,' he reminded her, observing the silk he himself had chosen and seen cut by a tailor from France. The ragged *salwar kameez* Sati had arrived in from Black Town he had at once ordered thrown away. Besides Sati's new dress, Rita had also required a suitable outfit. He had purchased a waistcoat for himself as well; the occasion seemed to demand it. Already, a considerable sum had been spent on the evening.

Sati cringed before Demonteguy's scrutiny. The cage of bamboo beneath her dress held her like a vice, squeezing the last of her identity from her. She had seen nothing wrong with her Indian clothes and protested at their disposal. Her grandmother had opened the trunk that stood in a corner of her hut, knowing the importance of the White Town visit. She rarely lifted the lid of the

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heavy chest filled with the bric-a-brac of her life. From its depths she had pulled out an ancient outfit, worn long before in her Murshidabad days. The soft silk and faded embroidery, smelling of damp and incarceration, slipped easily over Sati. For a moment her grandmother's eyes filled with tears, as she remembered her life in Murshidabad. The dress had been given her by the raja in whose *zenana* she had once lived. Sati knew she did not cry for the raja, but for the lost years of her life. The silk flowed like water over Sati, the long skirt swinging as she walked. She seemed to grow tall with the splendour of it.

Yet on her arrival in White Town, her mother had announced that Mr Demonteguy was disturbed by her appearance. A dress of European design, more suitable to life in the settlement, had already been bought for her. Rita's hands were hard and her breath sour as she ripped the old clothes off her daughter. The soft Murshidabad silk was rolled into a ball and carried away by a servant. Sati cried out and received a smart slap from Rita. She thrashed about in her mother's arms, but the clothes were already gone. As she watched, a door was shut firmly upon them. It was as if her own skin were being discarded, like the gauzy moulting of a snake, swept up with the dust and leaves. Except that she was left skinless, unable to make the passage from one body to another. Before her mother she fell silent and stepped into the strange clothes that were offered, which were then lashed tightly about her. At last she turned to the mirror. It showed her only a distant figure she did not recognise. A

crack seemed to have opened within her, parting her soul along a fine line. She belonged to neither Black Town nor White Town. She appeared neither one thing nor the other, but something on her own. Now, sitting on the stool in Fabian Demonteguy's home, she heard her mother speaking.

'The Governor's wife only recently gave birth to a baby. How can we be sure she will come here tonight? I have heard that people avoid Mrs Drake. They only accept official invitations, other times they turn their backs upon her. They say also she is country born. In Surat or Bombay.' Rita Demonteguy stepped away from the mirror, tossing her words lightly, like a ball, to shatter Mrs Drake. For a moment she saw no paradox in assuming White Town scorn.

'It is one thing to be country born, another to marry your own brother-in-law. That is no better than incest.' Demonteguy gave a laugh. 'She is his second wife. First, he was married to her sister, Jane. It is said Mrs Drake's father settled a good sum on each of his daughters. Drake will have got the lot, first from one sister and then from the other. It shows the character of the man. No morals to hinder his greed.'

'Nothing is wrong with being born in India instead of Europe. Who can help where they are born?' Rita's voice was brittle with annoyance as she came up against hard facts. A battle that day with her mother, surrounded by Black Town's pigs, chickens and vegetable hawkers, had unsettled for a moment the future that seemed so certain in her new husband's home.

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She had gone to Black Town with Demonteguy, to collect Sati from her grandmother, and found her attired in Jaya's old clothes. Rita's terse comments had angered old Jaya, who had refused to let the girl go. She had clung to Sati, battling desperately for her granddaughter on her Black Town doorstep. Sati was tugged back and forth between the two women. Jaya Kapur screeched abuse at her daughter, and Rita Demonteguy let loose unrepeatable words at her mother. Demonteguy waited some distance away, fanning himself with a handkerchief. At intervals, when the odour of Black Town pressed too close around him, he held the square of scented linen firmly to his nose. Sati's cries and the shrill determination of both women had gathered a crowd, who all attempted loud and active intervention. A pig interrupted its rooting to watch, chickens stopped pecking, the vegetable vendor lowered his basket. Demonteguy, in embarrassment, had ordered his palanquin removed to the seclusion of some coconut palms beside a filthy pond. Women washing clothes in the muddy water raised their heads and stared. The reality of absorbing his new wife's origins caused Demonteguy to sweat profusely. He had never visited his mother-in-law's thatched hut, never heard from his wife the vulgar, guttural notes she now shouted in abandonment, never entered the labyrinthine depths of Black Town before. The accumulation of all these harsh facts made him feel quite faint. Two mangy pariah dogs started to copulate before him, oblivious to the scene, uttering high cries of ecstasy. He watched them with distracted interest. Languid in his home, wanton in his

bed, his wife had blinded him to everything about herself but the ripe willingness of her body.

Eventually, the screeching subsided; some settlement seemed to be made. Accompanied by the curious crowd, Rita and her mother then turned to approach Demonteguy. To his horror, Jaya had climbed into his palanquin, her hand still locked in her granddaughter's. The squash was so great and the odour of his mother-in-law so intense that he was forced to vacate the conveyance and walk behind the runners, leaving the palanquin to the women. He crossed the Maratha Ditch back into White Town with inexplicable relief.

'And why is to marry a dead sister's husband not a proper thing to do? This I do not understand. Mrs Drake is lucky the Governor married her. It must have been a charitable act. Just look at her; so dried up. No bosom, no backside. No nothing,' Rita announced, turning again to the mirror. 'In India such a marriage is not a bad thing.'

'We are not talking about Black Town customs. Now you are part of White Town,' Demonteguy snapped, watching as the last candles in the room were lit.

Sati listened in surprise. A distant cousin of her grandmother's had married three sisters of the same family one after another as they died, the first in childbirth, the second from cholera. The third and present wife was still alive, but, said her grandmother, should misfortune overtake her also, there was still a fourth and unwed sister who was already nearly twelve. There had been only praise from old Jaya for the dutiful response of this man to the plight of his wife's unmarried sisters. He had



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demanded less for each new dowry, and most important, said her grandmother, the women were wed and not left, a shameful weight, upon their father's hands. Sati frowned in confusion. No bosom, no backside. No nothing. The image of a paper cut-out came into her mind.

Before the glass Rita adjusted the gems at her neck. Her breasts and hips, proportioned like a Hindu statue, were laced into the dress Demonteguy had ordered from the French tailor. Diamonds circled her in cold fire and flashed on her fingers. In the freckled mirror, her dark eyes, ever mysterious to Demonteguy, were hard when meeting those of her daughter and Sati looked away. Tonight, in this room she knew she must climb the steep, slippery slope of approval. The only comfort was that her grandmother had accompanied her into White Town. Old Jaya sat hidden on the back veranda with orders not to intrude. Sati was comforted by the movement of a curtain and a sudden glimpse of her grandmother. The old woman pulled an encouraging face, then let the curtain fall.

Straight-backed chairs had been set in a semicircle about a comfortable armchair. To Sati, the waiting seats seemed to fill the room with expectation. Perhaps nothing would happen. Perhaps the spirits that came to her would refuse to appear at such a debased summoning. For that was what this seance was, debased. These depressing thoughts were unalleviated by Demonteguy pacing about considering the placement of the chairs and the number of candles to be lit. His profession was opportunity, and this had now spread to include Sati.

'Do not be nervous. I have shown you how to do it.' Demonteguy bent and took her hand. She looked down at the bony red knuckles gripping her flesh and immediately drew back.

'The room looks well enough,' Rita said, breasts spilling generously over her dress. She clung to her husband's arm, laughing up into his face, anxious to erase the afternoon's unpleasantness in Black Town. He patted her hand absentmindedly, his attention on the event ahead, but then found a moment to feast his eyes on the succulence trembling so near him. His eyes in the candlelight were bright as a rat's behind his long nose. He exchanged a lecherous glance with his wife; she giggled and looked away. Demonteguy returned to the arrangements.

'Everything is in the details. Word flies around quickly here in Calcutta. Failure with our first enterprise could end a profitable game.' He assessed the room. 'A seance does not demand too much illumination. Perhaps we do not need so many candles.'

'Snuff some out before we start. How will guests enter the house in darkness?' Rita admonished.

'The effect of a sudden darkening of the room will be most dramatic.' Satisfaction spread over Demonteguy's face as he pictured the moment.

A glass bangle snapped between Sati's fingers, the fragments falling into her lap. She stared at the bits of broken glass and the bead of blood on her wrist. Perhaps this was an omen; perhaps she too would crack in the midst of one of her attacks. This was the word used by Demonteguy to describe the sudden melting of her

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mind, and the entry into her of personalities who jostled to be heard.

In the beginning these presences had been vague, refusing to clearly reveal themselves. Then, the Goddess had appeared. Now Sati had only to turn her head to see Durga watching from the shadows of foliage or the rafters of a room. She sensed her moving on the edge of time, always drifting near her. When Durga approached, a wildness burned up her spine, pulling her into a darkness from which she remembered nothing. Her stepfather's use of the word attack implied some violence, but there was nothing of that in what happened to her. There was only the opening of a door and the entering of immensity. Upon her return to mundane life, her soul seemed to cling to her body by no more than a fragile thread. If it snapped, she would float into a limitless world and never return to reality. Like the strands of a cobweb blown free on the wind.

She returned her attention to the empty chairs with an effort. Their shapely gilt legs resembled Demonteguy's shins of silken hose. Excitement continued to spark between her mother and her stepfather. Their voices were high with tension as they moved about the room in a ballet of anxiety. Yet more candles were lit and then snuffed out; a pillow was placed upon the armchair where Sati was to sit. A small table with three upturned coloured glasses stood before the chair.

On his last visit to France, Fabian Demonteguy had attended a seance in Paris. He wished the performance in his home to correspond to that event. He had produced three tumblers of blue, red and yellow glass, and spent

much time instructing Sati. People were to ask her questions, and she was to tell what she saw in the glasses. In the blue glass, for example, she might see the sky, a journey upon the sea or a catastrophic event. Blue was easy to remember, sea, sky or the occult clouds of mystery. The red glass could show blood, disease, a fiery accident, but mostly blood. There was no problem with the amount of gore, Demonteguy advised. People liked blood, became riveted to it, and would always come back for more. The yellow glass could represent anything she wished according to the question. A woman in a yellow dress, a golden bird, the festering juices of an ailment ... She must let her mind play upon the questions, let her imagination soar. If something real entered her mind, so much the better. If not, she must invent it.

Demonteguy had sat himself down before the three glasses to guide her in the matter. They had acted out the seance many times. Under his tutelage her prophecies, in desperation, spiralled to baroque proportions. All the while she had been conscious of Durga beside her, full of sarcastic snarl. Yet in spite of seeing her in the midst of more than one 'attack', Demonteguy refused to realise her visitor was real and would not be contained in a few coloured glasses. Afterwards, he told her, there would be a collection of money. People would give according to their fear or satisfaction. If they felt neither emotion, nothing would persuade them to open their purse strings.

Already there were sounds of arrival before the house. The night vibrated beyond the door, like a scuffling

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animal preparing to break in. Strange voices instructed palanquin bearers and made enquiries of the *chowkidar*. Disembodied sounds floated to Sati. Then footsteps and the sudden appearance of a strange face, cracking open her fragile world.

Although, in the end, the crowd was not large, the room seemed unbearably full. Breath, voices, heat and candle flames beat their separate wings about her. Sati's head began to hurt. Demonteguy greeted his guests with fawning smiles. His paunch fell forward against his waistcoat buttons each time he affected a bow. Beside her husband Rita went stiffly through the motions of welcome, as instructed by Demonteguy, concentrating on her part. If she failed to maintain the proper White Town demeanour things would be hard for her. In the silence of the night Demonteguy would remember the eyes of other men upon her and demand an unusual selection of conjugal rights.

All this was unknown to Sati. She only saw her mother and Demonteguy make extravagant welcome at the door. Wine was passed around, the glasses shaking on a tray held by an ancient bearer. Candles blazed upon cut glass, wine cradled like blood in the bowls. She drew back in her chair. A play was enacted before her. There was much strutting and nodding and the clear stream of talk. There were the long, colourful tails of parrot-coloured skirts, the matted fuzz of wigs and the loop of powdered curls. The unfamiliar European faces, chiselled as marble, whiskered like cats, raw-skinned or slack as cloth, seemed all to be made of the same floury dough she had once seen a

baker kneading. These people were like the almonds her grandmother soaked and divested of their tough brown skins, to lay naked upon a plate.

Gradually the room filled up. The great skirts of the women billowed over stiff hoops. Some rearrangement of chairs was needed to allow them space to sit. The candlelight flickered upon lace ruffles, the silver buttons of a waistcoat, the moist and expectant eyes. It nestled in the hollows of bones, changing shapes, contorting features. People spoke in low voices, as if there had been a death. Women exchanged words behind their fans, eyes resting upon Sati, blowing her backwards down a tunnel as if to view her from a distance. She touched the gold amulet at her neck threaded upon a black string. Her stepfather had urged her to change it for a string of pearls, but she had refused. For once her mother had supported her, knowing the importance of the object. Within its tiny case, rolled up tight, was an invocation to the Goddess.

One by one the White Town people seated themselves before her. How would she see into their *ferenghi* souls? These people by their absence of colour appeared as disembodied as a company of ghosts. She thought of Pagal, the albino, made freakish in Black Town by his alabaster skin. He hid from the sun, as did these people. His pink rabbit eyes, bleached lashes and hair were also to be found upon the *ferenghi*. Would they claim the albino as their own if he went to live with them? It seemed suddenly confusing. The dark mass of Black Town rose up in her mind then as powerfully embodied, anchored by their colour to the warm, dung-smelling earth.

To calm herself, Sati thought of her grandmother banished by Demonteguy to the back veranda. She imagined her sitting in a soft fleshy heap, the tyre of her midriff bulging out between the mounds of her breasts and hips like stuffing from a patty. She saw her thin plait of hair gleaming in the candlelight, grey at her skull and hennaed at the end, saturated with a musty oil. Each night Sati slept beside her grandmother, lulled to sleep by the pungent aroma of her hair. Sati wished she could run to her grandmother, to return to the safety of the thatched hut that until now they had shared. She touched the talisman at her neck again and knew the Goddess would keep her safe. On the veranda, her grandmother must also be turning her prayer beads, imploring the divinity's protection.

Sati was suddenly conscious of a disturbance in the room, like a breeze across a field of wheat. A rustle of comments too low to unravel greeted the arrival of the Governor's wife. Emily Drake nodded politely to people and received a stiff acknowledgement in return. There appeared to be something separate about her in the crowded room. Her hair, drawn back into untidy loops, was pinned about her crown and had been left unpowdered. The décolletage so favoured by Rita Demonteguy was not for Emily Drake. She wore a modest lace-edged neckerchief, crossed over at the waist. Her thin face had the worn and polished look of stones from the river distressed by strong currents. She settled nervously on a chair beside Lady Russell and stared at Sati, who returned her gaze.

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Thoughts tumbled about in Emily Drake's head. Already she knew she should not have come, especially so soon after her confinement. At this time a woman did not cavort about town alone, certainly not at night and for so dubious a reason. Already she was fodder for tomorrow's gossip. It was always a mistake to follow an impulse. There was hardly an occasion she could remember when good had come of such behaviour. And yet a compulsion beyond the normal had driven her to this room. She thought of her child asleep in his cradle and knew she was here for his safety. She had waited until her husband set out on his evening walk. He had announced he would leave the precincts of Fort William to visit Chief Magistrate Holwell. Immediately upon his departure she had summoned the palanquin bearers. As Fort William drew distant behind her, she noticed the swollen moon. She had stared up at the sky in appeal, and that great bowl of feminine light had given her the strength to follow her impulse, irrational as it seemed. Her heart had been in a flutter. But for what, she wondered now. A half-caste girl from Black Town? She stared in surprise at Sati. The reality of the situation, like a pod of ripe peas, broke suddenly open within her.

She had expected somebody older. What could this shrinking, sallow-skinned child impart of any importance? It was madness to have come. Perhaps her mind was beginning to shred like worn linen, dissolving before the disparagement of the town. There was not a moment in the day when she was impervious to Calcutta's taunts and disregard. Emily Drake turned in agitation to

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Lady Russell, who chewed on some aniseed to sweeten her breath. She sought the eye of Mr Dumbleton, but he was busy scratching his head beneath his wig. Turning her head, she met Sati's amber eyes and held them for a moment. To her surprise, something stilled within her, as if a secret passed between them. Her breath seemed to die in her throat. The candles flickered no more than before; nothing appeared to have changed. Yet something had moved within Emily Drake; she no longer queried why she had come, what urgency had impelled her. The wing of a passing moth brushed her face, the air stirred strangely about her.

At the back of the room Sati saw her stepfather raise his hand in signal to her. She gripped the frame of the stool in fear, her pulse beat faster, for the performance was upon her, and prayed for Durga to come. Without Durga, nothing was possible. Already the room had quietened, every eye was now settled upon her. Rita took her arm, her fingers pressed hard in warning, and pushed Sati down into the armchair. The three coloured glasses stood waiting before her; moths already clustered thickly about the candle flames. The shadows of their beating wings flickered on the walls. Suddenly, upon orders from Demonteguy, the servants extinguished most of the candles, and darkness fell dramatically upon the assembled crowd. A smell of burnt wicks filled the air.

Now that the room was almost dark, Sati saw that some fireflies had settled upon a wall. They glowed before her in three points of light above the head of the Governor's

wife. Below, in the dimness, Mrs Drake stared at Sati, her face drawn into shadowy valleys, the ridge of her nose and the plateau of her cheeks caught in a cross of light. Her eyes had a glassy appearance, anxious and severe.

Sati bent forward, covering her face with her hands. If she cut away the world before her, some strange force propelled her inwards. The momentum increased until she arrived before an inner door. There she floated into endlessness, suspended in a timeless world. There she was both found and lost. And it was there that Durga waited.

Slowly, then, she raised her head from her hands and leaned back in the chair. She was no longer part of the room. All she saw now were the fireflies, their fluorescence brightening then dimming, as if they breathed in unison with her, fuelled by her own throbbing pulse. And Durga had come after all, to guide her from one realm to another. Durga, fierce as any warrior ready for battle. Her predatory force filled the room. She stamped her foot and her wildness was a dance Sati must follow. Durga knew what to do, what must be said, where the dance would lead. Sati gave a sigh of relief and relinquished herself. All tension ebbed away. Durga settled into her veins, deep as instinct, liquid as knowledge dredged up from forgotten lives. Immediately, her breath became shallow and her eyes stared fixedly. A murmur spread around the room at this strange transformation. Rita and Demonteguy exchanged a look of satisfaction.

'She is ready.' Demonteguy whispered. He turned towards his audience to invite a first query through the glasses. Before he could speak, a loud voice rang out.

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'Emily. Emily.' Durga's deep voice vibrated through Sati. Even as she spoke Sati saw Durga circle the room, making her way towards the Governor's wife. At the same time, Durga was still fitted tight inside Sati, filling her fingers, expanding through her body.

'Emily,' Durga repeated, flexing up and down on her toes impatiently, like a dancer, making Sati tremble with the reverberations. Durga was not visible to the others in the room. They could only watch in growing terror as Sati's slight body contorted and stretched, releasing each growl of a word.

Emily Drake felt as if split open by terror. She looked around for the invisible presence, but about her there was only the night and the flicker of countless shadows. A whimper of fear escaped her, she had entered a world between worlds and its lush, wild shape closed around her.

Sati heard Durga begin to laugh, enjoying the shock of the audience at her terrifying presence. Her hoarse voice was that of an old singer prostitute, worn bare by shameless projection.

'Jane. Let her tell you about her sister, Jane.'

On the wall above Mrs Drake the fireflies seemed to grow larger. Their pulsating light lit up the place, lending their energy to Sati.

'What does Jane want?' Emily Drake half-rose, and then sank back again onto her chair. She stared fearfully about her, twisting this way and that as tension filled the room, and faces contorted in fear.

'Thief.' Durga laughed again, and Sati thrashed about as the deep voice cut through her.

'I have had enough of such accusations,' Emily Drake shouted out suddenly, struggling up again from her chair, looking around defiantly. Durga took no notice but continued to laugh, the sound convulsing Sati. People looked at each other in horror.

'Why have you come to torture me? Leave me my child, that is all I ask. You took the first; it was him you wanted. Is that not enough?' Emily's ragged voice soared up.

She refused to relinquish another child to Jane's ghost, and she did not care now who knew of her fear of her dead sister.

'Who is to judge what is enough?' Sati swayed back and forth as Durga screeched.

'Leave me in peace.' Emily's voice became suddenly lower, splintering as it fell. The room appeared stalked by unseen predators, the air was sharp as glass. Picking up an embroidered drawstring bag, she turned to leave the room. Beside her Lady Russell reached out and gripped her hand, pulling her down again on her chair.

Rita and Fabian Demonteguy exchanged looks of alarm; Sati was not meant to act in this manner. 'I told her exactly what to do,' Demonteguy hissed into Rita's ear, anger making him splutter. 'Your mother has put her up to this nonsense. It's her usual Black Town hokum pokum.'

'What about the glasses?' Rita whispered, seeking some way to control the situation. Her teeth chattered, and in terror. Things seemed to slither about the room, dark, formless apparitions waited to attach themselves to her. Demonteguy stepped forward determinedly.

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‘What about the glasses?’ he whispered, bending over Sati.

‘What about the glasses?’ Sati heard Durga answer as she swept them from the table with a single crashing gesture. Glass splintered and skidded beneath the chairs. Women lifted their skirts and drew back with choked cries, men made small guttural sounds of fear. Sati felt Durga lift her arm, and at her summons a bat flew into the room. It soared up to hit the ceiling, then dived to the candle with a vicious squeak. Its shadow swelled over the walls. A servant rushed forward with a broom to chase the creature away. Sati grew suddenly still as Durga’s laughter faded in her.

Half-hidden behind a curtain, old Jaya watched, her soft flesh tensed in horror. This was not Sati. The voice did not belong to her granddaughter, who could not speak in this deep mocking tone, like the *ferenghi* themselves. There was another creature inside her, a *ferenghi* devil. As soon as this terrible evening was over she would go again to the temple, Jaya decided. She turned her prayer beads faster, muttering a desperate invocation for help to the Goddess.

It had been clear to Jaya for some time, since the moment these strange manifestations had begun to appear several years before, that her granddaughter was possessed. She had gone immediately then to a priest at the Kali Mandhir and he had taken money to exorcise the demon. Eventually, after some sessions with a brushwood whip, throughout which Sati screamed in a hair-raising way, he

declared the devil gone. Now Jaya saw that her instincts were right; priest or not, the man was untrustworthy. And so was Demonteguy. He had stirred up that creature once more in Sati. Rita should never have married him. He would destroy them all. She must talk the whole thing over with her cousin, Govindram.

She stared from the veranda at the full, ripe moon. In the month no day was more auspicious than this particular day. This particular full moon held a confusion of negative influences and man could resort to nothing but prayer. Jaya sighed. The future waited heavily before her as she sat turning her prayer beads. Yet she knew that when the Goddess gave trouble, she also gave men strength to bear their trials.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Meira Chand is of Indian-Swiss parentage and was born and educated in London. She has lived for many years in Japan, and also in India. In 1997 she moved to Singapore, where she is now a citizen. Her multi-cultural heritage is reflected in her novels.

### **Also by Meira Chand:**

Sacred Waters  
House of the Sun  
A Choice of Evils  
The Painted Cage  
The Bonsai Tree  
Last Quadrant  
The Gossamer Fly  
A Different Sky