

## The Keeper of Lamps

(Excerpt; first appeared in the *Southern Humanities Review*)

It is almost six. The sky is a deep, sulking blue, awaiting daylight. I apply the last coat of mascara, a quick wash of golden shadow over my eyelids and look into the mirror.

Mother used to say my eyes were so large and faultless there had to be more to them; maybe God himself used them as his little windows to the world, she said. Perhaps that is why not many mortals are privileged to meet them.

I catch sight of an errant strand of gray that has come loose from my long braids. I stare at it, that renegade who has dared to step out of line. And wonder what it must feel to be that one, someone who seeks to be carefree and reckless.

I hear Laxmi washing clothes in the bathroom. She comes early, at five. She will sweep the floor, scrub the vessels clean in the kitchen, cook, iron the clothes from yesterday, and sit down for lunch after I've had mine. From here, she will go to the *Thakur's* mansion to work before returning to my services late in the afternoon. The Thakur is the richest man in town, the unofficial chief; he and his ancestors have lived like kings for decades. Rumors abound about how they made their money. Nobody around this place questions the Thakur.

In the mirror I see Laxmi enter my room with a broom, her back hunched, a light tremor in her right hand. She is old. Deep creases crisscross her cheeks and forehead. She has been serving us and working in the shrine since my grandmother's time. She attended the birth of my mother, then mine twenty five years later.

Laxmi tucks the end of her sari into her waist and starts sweeping briskly. In all these years, she has never met my eye, at least not intentionally. We talk a lot. I sit on my bed, and she sits outside the bedroom door. We talk about many aspects of life, mine and hers, life outside the shrine, outside my four walls. Nowadays, I have to talk loudly for her to hear me.

I look at my reflection one last time, and open the bedroom door to take a peek at Ganga, my twelve-year old daughter, who is fast asleep. She won't get up before I return. I have to go; morning beckons. For more than twenty years, since I was nineteen, I have followed the same routine every day. Before me it was Mother.

Days start at four. Since Mother died two years ago, there has been no one to wake me up, and then let me sleep for a few more minutes. But nowadays I don't need anyone. It is amazing how the body responds to compulsion. My dreams end on schedule and eyes open at four.

I apply thick sandalwood paste all over my whole body and sit for a while before my bath. Mother used to say it made me smell divine, but I don't find it special any more, just another fragrance. The veins on my hands have doubled, their colors deeper, bulges prominent.

>>>>