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Suniti Namjoshi

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Abstract

Once upon a time the gods decided to be lavish in their blessings. 'We will make you a queen,' they told the little girl. 'Thank you,' she said, a bit startled, but not really knowing what else to say. She supposed that being a queen was probably a good thing. 'And we will give you a king who is a genuinely good person, and who will help you with everything.' She said 'thank you' again. A helpful partner was almost certainly a good thing; being a queen might be difficult and she could do with some help. 'And we will give you 5 children who will prosper reasonably and 17 grandchildren to go with them.' The little girl looked doubtful. Seventeen grandchildren was rather a lot; but she decided that on the whole they'd turn out to be nice.

The Fortunate One

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'Have we left out anything?' The gods murmured among themselves. 'Oh yes, you will have excellent health and a long life.' 'And you will also be intelligent and beautiful.' This last was an afterthought. The little girl shuffled her feet, thinking she was being dismissed at last; but the gods weren't done with her. 'There's one more thing,' they informed the child. 'For all these gifts we hold you responsible. Do you agree?' For the first time the little girl felt apprehensive: what did it mean to be held responsible? But since there wasn't very much she could say to the gods, she said, 'Yes.'

Well, everything turned out as they had said it would. And when her long life came to an end, she knew she would have to face the gods. So she prepared an apologetic speech in advance. The gods summoned her. She dared not look at them. She launched into her speech. 'I tried to be a responsible queen, but in time somehow the kingdom dissolved. And even the money trickled away. As for the children, they are all right, but not as prosperous as I once was. Both beauty and good health, and even my power over words, faded at the last. And now of my long life nothing is left. I could not preserve any of your gifts. I ask your pardon.' She was certain that the gods were displeased with her.

But the gods merely said, 'So you think you were a failure?'

‘Yes,’ she answered humbly. ‘You gave me wealth and power, and I lost it all.’

‘And you thought we expected you to keep it forever? Had you power over time?’

‘No,’ she faltered.

‘You were only expected to try to grow to your full stature. And from that responsibility as a queen or a mother or an ordinary woman you didn’t abdicate. Come, do you still think you failed utterly?’

‘No,’ she ventured, ‘but I failed often...’

At that the gods laughed. ‘But you weren’t a god,’ they remarked, ‘only a queen.’

So she looked up at last and smiled at them.