

# Mandakini

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*R. J. Kalpana*

It is said that Anasuya raised the river Mandakini for her husband, Rishi Atri, to fulfil his daily penance. So it was that Kadambari bore a beautiful daughter so her husband could prove his manhood and named her Mandakini. She who would birth the turbulent Ganga in her turn should be temperamental. But Mandakini was gentle. She grew into a woman with a voice that whispered like wind among trees. Her hair flowed in gentle lines like her namesake river. She, a woman of the northern hills, carried herself in cloud covered secrecy. A veil of mists trailed her as she glided on rain, past mountain streams that taught her the language of the gods.

He was born on the fiery plains at an unholy hour of light and darkness. He drank deep off palm wine and wrote bitter verses when the sharp taste of pickle on acid tongue raised the spectre of faraway lands. One night when a sickle moon hung in the sky, he packed his bags and left to sit on little hillocks during afternoons with shepherds blowing on flutes making melodies that call forth lost loves and on terraces in late evenings nursing a drink and dreaming of lands without boundaries.

It's a special moment at Rudraprayag, where two ancient rivers meet, Mandakini and Alaknanda. Mandakini, born of glacial snows near Kedarnath, arrives gently swishing on white sands towards Alaknanda, which gushes threateningly from the Himalayan heights above Badrinath. They were destined to become Ganga at the foothills of the Himalayas.

At Rudraprayag, Mandakini and Eshwar were destined to meet. She gently walked past him to worship at the nearby temple while he sat nursing his drink and brooding over the turbulent confluence of the rivers. Unknowingly, she lured him from his granite spaces and showed him a world made of sun and rain. One night, when the fast moving current tumbled over rocks while a full moon blazed in the night sky, lighting up every nook and cranny of the wise hills, he surprised her into womanhood.

They didn't linger long in the steamy heat of Rudraprayag. She led him upstream towards the Himalayas, gradually making an ascent into a realm where cool breezes flowed from the snow and carried the smell of rain through the air.

The sleepy little village near Deori Tal was her home, where she lived with her parents who were farmers and shepherds in turn. Her parents, simple hill folk, didn't know what to make of him. Her father spoke to him of rains and rivers, while her mother took her aside and spoke to her of desires and dreams. He understood and promised her father to bestow all the comforts of life on her. She understood and promised her mother to ungirdle her hips when the time came.

So they were married in a deserted temple dedicated to Shiva. In the open courtyard lay many stone lingams that were painstakingly washed the previous day with water from the river. Overnight, magnolia blossoms fell and carpeted the area and their feet carried the memories of blossom softness.

They left the mountains and the valleys the next day. They carried with them meadows of lushness secreted in memories like some exotic orchid only to be brought out and viewed on special days. She carried a flute and the music of the rivers with her, confident in her ability to make a home out of anything, anywhere. He carried the daughter of the hills with him, confident that no more would his nights be haunted.

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### ***Letter from the Plains***

Ma,

I know I have never written a letter to you. How could I, knowing full well that you wouldn't be able to read it for yourself. I was content in the beginning to let things be, for I knew you would know I am safe and you have not learnt yet to expect letters from me. So on occasion, when I meet someone from the hills, I give them a message to pass on to you that all is well.

Thus, you and I have been content with the state of affairs. But now I feel like writing to you, knowing full well that my letter will be read aloud outside the village post office by Dangwalji. My very soul lay bare. But you will understand, won't you? Of course you will understand, for you are my mother.

Remember Rumi, Ma? I can never forget Rumi. She too came down to live in the plains. One summer, when she visited us with her children, how we laughed when she wouldn't let them swim in the river. She was always molly-coddling them. "Don't do this, don't do that. Don't go here, don't go there." We never could understand such pampering. How it changed her. It made her feel ashamed. The hills made her feel shame because she knew she was no longer one of them, one of us.

But I too am of the plains now. Am I an outcast then? I hope not. I too long for the hills. The green fields that slope down gently to the riverbed. The snow clad summits of the Himalayas. The eagle that soars majestically and perches upon ledges overlooking ravines and gorges. The windswept temple with its nightly shower of magnolia. The heavy rains, warm at first, but bitterly cold later.

It's very hot here in the city. There seem to be no cooling breezes. Nothing stirs in this place, not even air. The streets are long and winding and Eshwar says more than a hundred years old. It makes me laugh when he tells me such things for it makes me think of my

beloved hills, and I want to tell him that I have known things that are more than a thousand years old, probably older even than that. But I don't tell him, I just smile at him and let him teach me the ways of this new place he has brought me to, that he calls home.

There are no open spaces here, no giant trees in whose shade I can sit and rest for a while. There are no rivers here either, just one they call Yamuna that winds and winds and winds slowly on the outskirts of the city. But we don't live by the river they call Yamuna, we live in the heart of the city.

It is not shelter from the heat and the sun that I seek the most, but water. Alas, I find none here. The taps spout water sporadically and at odd hours, so that there is usually a mad scramble to catch the water in plastic pots and small plastic water tanks. The first night that happened, we had to hurriedly get out of bed because Eshwar forgot that he had to catch and store water. By the time we finished storing water we were soaked to our skins. I laughed so much that night.

Eshwar says I don't laugh much anymore. I have become very quiet. I have always been the quiet one, haven't I, Ma? Then I don't understand why he should make such an observation. I lie on my bed and count the hours to nightfall so I can fall into blissful oblivion and block everything out. Some days when I wake up, if I find the sky is still blue and the grass still wet with dew, I am content for a while at least. But then the sun rises and Eshwar pulls me up towards home.

The other day, we travelled by the ponderous Yamuna, sluggishly winding its way past Agra. We walked through its old bazaars, and guess what I found Ma? An old shop selling kites. I was surprised to see so many kites. I didn't know people had to shop for kites, I thought they made them at home, the way we used to. Papa used to make them for me in the summer when the wind was at its fastest, and I would come back from school and we would spend so many afternoons chasing kites. Sometimes I would purposely let go of the string so I could run and chase the kite all the way to wherever the strong winds took it.

The old chase was still in me, I think, since just for a moment, I wanted a kite. Eshwar cocked an eyebrow and wanted to know what I was going to do with a kite. I was surprised at the question, for what does one do with a kite? Fly it, of course. So I bought a sky blue silk kite with a green tail and multicoloured ribbons tied to it from the old man who owned the shop. He had a beard that was dyed red with henna and looked even older than the hills. Eshwar took me to the banks of the Yamuna, and there, with the Taj Mahal behind me, I tried to fly the kite. It was reluctant to soar at first, but Eshwar helped me by running with it and holding it aloft and coaxing the wind to catch it and raise it higher. Finally, it flew. It was a very pretty sight. The ribbons dangling and the green tail swirling this way and that, it was all very colourful. I unwound the string and let the wind take the kite whichever way it wanted and then, just like that, I let the string slip from my fingers. Eshwar tried running after it to catch it, but I just stood there and watched it get away from me, from everything.

Eshwar didn't understand why I let the kite go. You understand, don't you, Ma? I know you do. I am of your blood, why wouldn't you understand. Perhaps if you were here, I would be less lonely and it would be less unbearable. I would not feel so separate. I am like no one here. I want to come home, Ma. There, I have said it. You have probably guessed at it by now.

There are months when my skin feels on fire. Then the rains come, and they aren't cleansing either. They just tumble out of black clouds and keep drumming the earth. Even the walls here drip rain. But there is no cleanliness of release that the rains bring like in the hills, nor is there the blinding brightness of sunshine. Just a blanket of greyness that the eyes try to pierce through all year round.

Eshwar tells me the doctors call it depression. I am surprised at that word. I am married to the man I love, I am carrying his child. Yes, Ma, I am pregnant. Then why the word depression? I do not pretend to understand. But Eshwar tells me he does and so he says I must write to you. We have discussed this so many times. He says we can go and live in the hills anytime I wish it so. He has earned plenty of money and he can still work, can't he, in the hills, he asks me. Maybe he will farm, he says, or tend to the sheep. I smile at his enthusiasm. He wouldn't know the weeds from the plants. He will pull out all the plants just because the weeds have pretty flowers and we will soon be harvesting weeds if we let him work in Papa's fields.

I want my children to grow amidst the hills. To skip on the stepping stones in the streams and whistle with the wind. To run like little goats up and down the hills. I want to see greenness all around me again. I want to see the streams – clear, beautiful streams tripping over stones made round over centuries of water flowing over them. I want to see the forests again, the valley of flowers where we cannot place a foot without crushing a flower. For me the hills represent life, they represent hope that life goes on. They are like the trees – once you have planted them, they grow tall, they give shade, and they whisper tales of history.

I like the colour green. I want to come home, Mama.

Mandakini

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### ***Letter from the Hills***

Mandakini,

I was surprised when Dangwalji sent word with little Tunga that a letter had arrived for me. I had just finished making rotis and was going to carry them to your Papa who was out on the hills tending the sheep. I wondered who would write to me. Everybody knows I am

unlettered. I packed the rotis and sent little Tunga off in search of your Papa and I set off toward the village post office where Dangwalji awaited with a letter for me. By then, of course, the news had spread in the village and the women all came out to ask me who would have written to me. I told them I would find out as soon as I reached the post office. They prayed it wouldn't be bad news. Because the last time we received a letter, we came to know that Okhima's son had passed away tragically in a train accident. I was worried by then. I too prayed it wouldn't be bad news and prayed little Tunga had found your Papa and had given him the message. Perhaps the bad news would be bearable if your Papa was there by my side.

When I arrived at the village post office, Dangwalji smiled and informed me that my daughter had sent me a letter. I wondered why you would be writing to me. You haven't written even once since you left for the plains after your marriage. You, of course, know your mother is unlettered and wanted to perhaps spare me the shame of having my letters read out aloud to me by someone else. So now I worried even more as to the reasons why you must have taken such a step in writing to me. I hoped everything was well with you and you were happy with your husband.

Dangwalji laughed at my worried frown and scolded me that I was like all the other foolish women in the village, always brooding over bad news. He said it was sure to be good news, for didn't the envelope weigh heavy in his hands. That's a sure sign, he had said confidently, that the news was good. For who would write so many pages of bad news, he had argued. Bad news always comes in a single page and the envelope is so light that it might fly off with the winds if he didn't hold on to it tightly or weigh it down with the glass paperweight on his desk, which the government supplied him with. You know the glass paperweight that I am talking about, the one that seems to have trapped all the colours in the valley within its glass globe. The one that you stared at so hard when Dangwalji gave it to you to play with for a while, on your way back from school.

So I squatted by the doorway and watched the hills for a sign of your Papa. Dangwalji slipped the envelope into the pocket of his coat and sat on the wooden chair on the verandah, and he too waited for your Papa to arrive.

We spoke of Dodi's cow that had recently birthed a calf. It was a difficult birthing. The men of the village stayed up all night to help the cow. We women helped by heating up lots of water for the men to apply hot fomentations to the cow's distended belly. Dodi bought the cow from the plains thinking it would give us more milk. As if our goat's milk wasn't enough, we must drink cow's milk too? But Dodi insisted and so we all helped. By god's grace, the calf was born healthy and soon it was standing on its feet trying to reach for its mother's milk. We were all pleased by this sight and so we left the cow to tend to its calf and we returned to our homes. Now we all drink cow's milk. You must have tasted cow's milk in the plains? Do you get goat's milk there? I have tasted cow's milk and it is less smelly, and and somewhat weaker too, than the goat's milk.

Finally, I could see your Papa hurrying down the hills alone. He must have left little Tunga to look after the sheep. We were ready to open the envelope and listen to the letter that you have sent me. When your Papa arrived at the post office, Dangwalji took out the envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to your Papa. Your Papa turned it over and over in his hands, trying to look into its contents, no doubt, as if, through some magical process of osmosis, he could absorb the news of the letter without having to read it. He too is unlettered, as you know. He finally handed the envelope to Dangwalji and nodded his head. Dangwalji tore open the envelope and took out your letter and began reading it.

When Dangwalji finally finished reading your letter aloud to us, we settled into a silence that draped gently around us. I looked at the hills that were all green with recent rain and that lay there sparkling in the bright sunshine. I thought about Dodi's cow and thought about my own birthing. Didn't I name you Mandakini? Your name protects you even as alien lands ravage your mind. Your anklet bells drum beats of the hills into your blood. Have you forgotten the gift of your soul? Abandoned the songs of your tribe?

A man lured you to the plains with the promise of love and you followed with the scent of flowers from the valley and the melodies of these hills. We sent you with our happiness spread over you like fragile butterfly wings. Before gods and mountains made a pact to coexist in harmony, ours too was a hard life. It still is in many ways, but we have adapted to it, haven't we? We have learnt the rhythms of the land and we have danced to its music.

Your father took me to Kashi once. It wasn't Delhi, but it was still the plains. And there I had borne the sense of loss. Everything felt claustrophobic. He wanted to show me Ganga in the plains. Gentle, placid Ganga that flowed so calmly past all the ghats. Everything was loud and noisy, especially after the long journey – it was very long in those days. Every day in the morning, we walked to the ghats and took our holy dip along with the pilgrims who said their prayers, and then there were the temples and the little shops and all those people milling about.

Then one morning, there was nothing at all. Kashi looks different when the sun doesn't shine. There was a thick fog that descended from the unseen skies and blanketed everything in its greyness. Nothing remained that could be seen – the river, the boats, the ghats, the people all disappeared within this grey fog. We went down to the ghats and managed not to stumble onto people and just sat there on the steps. Boats still threaded their way on the river though there was nothing to see. Suddenly, we saw a boatload of people drifting out of the fog. For a brief moment, we could make out shadowy figures of grey and then they too disappeared into the fog. I held your Papa's hand that day.

Mists covered the waters and changed the shape of everything – the prow of the boats, the faces of the people, the redundancy of the ghats. Nothing remained familiar. Light and shadow play strange games on the mind. I learnt moods come and go. All that we can ever learn, we learn in silence.

What do the doctors know? You have to listen to the rhythms of your body and listen and learn. We have taught you well. When you leave the familiar hills for the plains, the leaves no longer swirl and twirl to fall. Your heart feels like it has snapped shut like a mountain crevasse in snow. Only we can dream of mountain summers and wet moonlight.

And so we write asking you to return again to the hills with your husband and your unborn child. I have sent you the wild rose picked from a green wall with the fragrance of our joy at your homecoming.

Ma

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Mandakini and Eshwar arrived in the village when the rains thundered from the skies. They ran into the house laughing like truant children. Raindrops sparkled on Mandakini's eyelashes, or were they tears? Probably tears of joy. She was deeply happy and at peace for having arrived at last to her mountain home with the man from the plains. Her parents were happy to have her there. They were a stoic couple, not given to much talking, but a firm hug established Eshwar in their eyes as a son.

Eshwar and his father-in-law set about building a house for the couple. They chose a place near the temple just a few yards away from his father-in-law's own house. It was a modest structure built of stone that the men of the villages helped lug and it had grey slated roofs that Eshwar himself placed. After much fretting and adjusting, Mandakini's father was satisfied and invited his daughter and her mother to see. They were pleased and Mandakini insisted on moving in the very same day.

Time passed slowly here in this mountain village. Mandakini soon grew round with child and Eshwar soon learnt to tend the sheep, although he wasn't allowed to go farther than the smallest hill.

When the time came for Mandakini's birthing, the women put Eshwar out of his house. He fretted and fumed, but the women barred his entry. The men folk smacked him on his back in sympathy and joked that if Dodi's cow gave birth to another calf, why, they would let him handle the birthing all by himself. Everyone laughed at that since they knew Eshwar still hadn't mastered the art of even milking the cow, and he would break out in a cold sweat every time he was asked to do so.

The entire village waited for Mandakini to deliver her child and soon she did - a healthy boy. Eshwar stood alternately stunned and proud at the news as his mind tried to grapple with the fact that he was a father now. When the villagers made sure mother and son were safe, they made their way back to their homes. Eshwar stood staring at the mountains that surrounded him, all around. The dawn was slowly spreading in the sky and he thought he

could make out Nilakantha and its magnificent snow drenched peaks. At first they were pink with the rays of the dawn and soon they turned gold.

His breath caught in his throat as he turned to look at his son, Nilakantha, cradled in the arms of Mandakini. At her sweet smile, he held her tight and thought that he too had finally come home.