

The Tigress Zindagi

By Taylor Anne Nash

A little place called Chiya Village in South India boasted a population of about four hundred. Everybody who lived there was a superstitious, cruel, and proud person, especially so in the case of Tanya's father. Tanya was the only decent inhabitant of her village, in her opinion. She was a quiet, tiny girl who was creative, musical, and despite never having gone to school, intelligent. She had always been very close to nature. It always seemed to speak to her, a silent but constant comfort. The exact opposite of her father.

There was a forest next to Tanya's home called Zindagi Forest. It had always been a place of refuge for Tanya — for example, when her father had had a bad day and was prone to beating her for no reason, or when her mother had disappeared — the forest had always been right there for her.

When Tanya was little, her mother had disappeared. No one knew what had happened to her and no one could find her. She had simply left the house and never come back. She was assumed, by everyone, to be dead. Tanya couldn't help wondering if her mother had run away, but she had loved Tanya too much to leave her — right?

After Tanya's mother was gone, her father had changed. He'd never been a kind or sensitive man in any reckoning, but now he was a raging drunkard who could muster nothing near sympathy for his motherless daughter. His personality change had been instantaneous from the moment news of his wife's disappearance reached his ears, and now Tanya was essentially raising herself.

Tanya's refuge, Zindagi Forest, had been named after its legendary protector, the tiger guardian spirit Zindagi. No one had ever seen Zindagi in the flesh, and Tanya was positively sure that she did not exist. Legend had it that she was a kind spirit who was gentle and lovely and would give her life for the forest and its inhabitants.

Zindagi means life, but something more. There are many words for life in Hindi, such as jivan, but Zindagi is a life force. It means the choices you make. It

means who you are, it means life itself. It is the peace that comes with knowing who you are. Zindagi is a word never used lightly.

Tanya's normal days were full of work. Most days, she worked from dawn until dusk cleaning, sweeping, cooking, tending the garden, and finding peace in the forest. She prided herself on making amazing *Idli* and *Sambhar*, as well as an exceptional fish curry. Her mother had taught her how to cook using centuries old family recipes. Tanya always saved the best portion of the food for her father, but he was usually so intoxicated when he came home in the evenings that he would lose his temper at almost nothing and throw the food at the wall anyways. But she still saved the best food for him, though she couldn't explain even to herself why.

The day that everything changed started out as an ordinary Tuesday. The usual overwhelming humidity of South India had doubled, and the clouds hung low and dark, heavy with the promise of a storm. The leaves on the banyan trees drooped as though apprehensive of the coming rain. Tanya was out on the veranda of her and her father's riverside bungalow, sweeping the floor when the wind picked up, swirling her neat pile of dirt into a cloud of dust and carrying it away out of sight. Tanya hurried inside before she got rained on. She bolted the door behind her so that the wind could not blow it open.

As Tanya and her father were very poor, the only items in their home were a pot and a pan, a few flimsy tin cooking utensils, six pots full of rice, wheat, and spices, and two sleeping mats that were lined up neatly on the floor. The cooking was done over a fire outside. It was always quite an interesting scene — trying to cook when it was raining without getting the food wet.

If Tanya's father was not currently out drinking obnoxious amounts of alcohol, he was working in the rice fields. Either way, he would soon come running home for shelter from the storm.

All of a sudden, there was a huge flash of lightning that Tanya could see through the cracks in the woven bamboo mats that covered the windows, which were really just square holes in the walls. Glass panels were a luxury that they could never afford.

The lightning was followed by a thunderclap so loud that Tanya felt the floor vibrate and her eyeballs seemed to rattle in her skull. She told herself that she

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would be fine, and Tanya curled up on her mat, waiting in silence for the storm to blow over.

Then, blocking the smells of the tropical jungle, the sharp scent of smoke stung her nostrils.

She bolted to her feet and dashed out the door. Tropical Zindagi Forest was essentially her back yard, and Tanya could see billows of jet black smoke wafting out from between the trees.

Tanya rushed into the woods without a thought for her own safety. The villagers would think that Zindagi the guardian spirit would protect the woods, so they would do nothing about the fire, assuming it was some sort of a battle between the forces of good and evil.

Tanya ran barefooted through the woods she knew so well, not stumbling over a single root because she knew exactly where everything was. It was a marshy area, full of tropical trees, and the soft mud was unusually warm under her feet. Thick smoke choked her and made her eyes sting. She finally reached the fire. It was bigger by now than Tanya ever could've imagined, and something was wildly wrong with the flames. Instead of being red, orange, and yellow like a normal fire, the flames flickered shades of black, grey, and blue. Tanya had no idea what to do. She had not thought about what she was going to do when she got there; she had run towards the danger without thinking like the impulsive twelve-year-old that she was. But it was up to her to save the forest before the wildfire spread; the forest's guardian spirit did not exist, and she would not be coming.

"Leave the flames be, human," said a gravelly voice in Tanya's mother tongue, Malayalam. Tanya wheeled around. Behind her was a huge black monkey the size of a large man, with eyes the colour of molten iron.

"Who are you?!" Tanya cried, terrified.

"I am Mriti," he said. "The evil spirit of fire." Mriti means *death* in a native language of India — Hindi. The name gave Tanya a deep sense of foreboding.

"Why are you here? Did you create this fire?" Tanya asked. She was very scared and her heart was thundering like a stampeding elephant.

"Yes I set the fire," Mriti said. "Because when a guardian spirit's forest dies, the spirit dies as well, and frankly, the world could always use one less guardian spirit."

"Wait, spirits are real??" Tanya asked, her whole view of the world turned on its head. ✦

"Yes," said Mriti. "And a spirit will be the last thing you ever see."

With that, he leapt on her. As a general rule, monkeys are strong, fast, and deadly fighters. Mriti, being an evil spirit monkey, was no exception. His muscles rippled under thick, coarse fur. Tanya struggled for all she was worth, but it was useless. Mriti had her pinned on the ground and his weight alone without the muscle was enough to keep her in place. "Help!" Tanya cried just as Mriti reared back, bared his teeth, and lunged for her throat, obviously aiming to kill.

Tanya clamped her eyes shut and recalled a memory of a quiet place in the woods with her mother, next to a still pool of water that reflected the sunlight making it look emblazoned with diamond, topaz, and sapphire. She remembered when she used to go with her mother into Zindagi forest and they would watch the streams run past with the sound of tinkling bells. Calm and peaceful was how Tanya would die feeling. *I am about to be reunited with my mother*, Tanya reassured herself, and suddenly with that thought, death didn't sound so terrible.

There was a pause and the weight of Mriti suddenly lifted from her body. He gave a loud yowl full of anger and pain that was suddenly cut off.

Why am I not dead? Tanya wondered, and opened her eyes.

Mriti lay dead on the ground six feet away, his throat having been silently slit. He slowly faded into charcoal black smoke until his body was just a wisp, borne away upon the wind. Tanya sat up cautiously. What had killed him? Was it going to kill her too?

"Don't be afraid of me," said a soft familiar voice. Tanya looked around. A tiger with long orange and black striped fur stood before her. She was surrounded by a veil of glittering golden mist. Precious jewels seemed to have strangely grown into the tiger's fur, but that's not what captured Tanya's attention. It was her eyes. They were a perfect spring sky, and her smile was warmer than the gentle sun. Tanya would know those eyes ✦ and that smile anywhere.

"Mother?" Tanya whispered. "Could it really be you?"

The tiger nodded gently. "Hello, my dear sweet Tanya."

"What happened to you, mother? You went missing!" Tanya said.

"I know I went missing with no explanation, and I'm sorry for that," her mother said. "But Zindagi was dying. I found her injured in the woods, and she told me,

'carry on my work to protect the forest. You are the new Zindagi.', then she passed on the job of guardian spirit to me before she died."

"Mother, please come home!" Tanya begged, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears. "Can't you come back home?"

"I have a duty, Tanya," mother said. She shook her fur and the forest fire died out instantly as though it'd never been there. "Come with me," she said. "We could guard the woods together! The forest could be our home. No one being cruel to us, or hurting us with their irresponsibility, or telling us who to be — we could be free forever from the evil of humanity."

"Okay," Tanya whispered, her voice breaking. She hugged her mother and buried her face in the silky fur. Then she climbed on to her mother's back and they vanished into the woods together.

Some legends say that if you are lucky and look to the woods at just the right time, you can see a hazel-skinned girl and a bejewelled tiger with azure eyes, rimmed by golden mist and brimming with an aura of deep serenity, roaming together through Zindagi Forest and guarding it from evil until the end of time. To this day, they still sing songs about the two, the most famous of which has been christened Mist, O Mist, The Mist of Gold.

Mist, o mist, the mist of gold
Surrounds the tiger and girl
Legend that's known to young and old
Says that in the world of spirits, they're pearls.
The mist, o mist, the mist of gold
Clouds the forest where they roam
And every young child has been told
When their lives are gone, washed away like sea foam
The girl and the tiger will still walk bold
For a thousand years to come.

O mist, o mist, swirling bright
Clothes the good spirits in its light
The forest now knows no dark or night
For with the tiger's gracious might
The mist of gold will win every fight.

O mist, o mist, goodness in physical form
Never let them be forlorn
Our guardians in every storm,
The tiger and the girl.

The End