

Child of Spring

Farhana Zia

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For Basanta.
For Mumma, with eternal love and honor.
—F. Z.

Jennifer Unter, Kathy Landwehr, and
Vicky Holifield, you helped make it possible. Thank you!



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ATLANTA



Old Nahni, who was my dear grandmother, used to tell me that I was named after the happy spring season in which I was born. “Don’t you know, Basanta,” she would say, “some of the gladness that came from the birds and flowers rubbed right off on your little infant heart?”

My grandmother said that on the day I was born, the sky celebrated with green, purple, and yellow kites soaring and dipping majestically. Every year, when the kites appeared in the sky, I made her tell my story again and again, until her tongue clacked on her teeth.

“You were born before summer sizzled,” she told me. “That day the air was cool and the grass was lush.”

“Tell me...were there gifts for me?” I asked one year, but Old Nahni shook her head. “Na,” she said, “but there was a lot of singing of songs and clapping of hands in the hut.”

“Singing and clapping are not as nice as the gifts wrapped in colorful paper that my mistress Little Bibi gets,” I grumbled, but my grandmother only chucked me under the chin and said, “A song from the heart is more golden than a nicely wrapped gift, my child of spring.”

“A ring with shiny stones like the one on Little Bibi’s finger would make a nice present,” I sighed.

“Wish and wish on it, my own child of spring,” Old Nahni said, “and a queen of fairies will bring it someday.”

But how, oh how, could I hope for a fairy to grant my wish? And how, oh how, could a song from the heart be better than a real present?

Chapter 1



Yesterday Little Bibi practically called me a thief. I got so mad at my mistress that I was ready to spit, but I didn't dare. My ears burned, and there was a tickle in my nose. I bungled all my duties that morning. When I poured water into her glass, I sloshed it on the table. When I slapped at the mosquitoes in her bedding net, I missed again and again.

"Keep your mind on your work, *na!*" chided my mother, but how could I?

The rest of the day at the Big House didn't go well, and I was still upset that evening. When the next morning came and it was time to get up and go to work, I wanted to hide myself away in our little hut. But there was no place to hide, so I burrowed into my mother's lap and cried a river.

"I quit!" I sobbed. "Please, Amma, please. I don't want to report to work today!"

But the words got all muffled up inside the cottony folds of her sari. Amma clucked her tongue. "*Aiyyo!* What are you muttering?" she asked.

The impatience in my mother's voice was not a good

sign. I lifted my head and tried to get her attention. "Please, Amma, please!"

I didn't want to be a servant girl in the Big House anymore—not today, not ever! I didn't want to walk barefoot on a long pebbly road, just to sweep and fetch and carry and answer, "Yes, Little Bibi. Right away, Little Bibi." I didn't want to gather eggs from the henhouse for her breakfast omelet, which Amma always cooked with a sprinkle of green chili and a sprig of garden-fresh coriander.

Normally, being Amma's helper in the Big House wasn't so bad. The sofas were velvety and soft, the carpets spread out like fields of flowers, and cooling fans twirled on the high ceilings. In the courtyard, sweet-smelling motia bushes blossomed and roosters roamed. Fish swam in a lily-covered pond and the garden was dazzling with its bougainvillea vines and hibiscus bushes.

It also helped that Amma and I had a system to keep me out of trouble with my young mistress on the harder days. "Mind! She blows hot today," Amma would whisper to me, and armed with caution, I'd step gingerly out of Little Bibi's path.

My young mistress was an unpredictable girl. On good days, she was as sweet as the spring breeze and gave me her old dolls. Sometimes for *Divali*, she even gave me small gifts wrapped in brown paper. But on the bad days, when she was as fiery as a mango pickle, she stomped and screamed for no good reason. And yesterday she had been in a particularly rotten mood.

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“Amma!” I cried. “Little Bibi says I am a thief!”

“Come, come. She didn’t actually say ‘thief.’” Amma’s fingers fluttered over my hair, which was so tightly braided that it pulled the skin on my neck.

Early morning was the wrong time to bend Amma’s ear. There were many things to do before the long walk to the Big House. My father’s milky tea was boiling over on the woodstove, and my baby sister Durga needed feeding too.

“But Amma, she didn’t have to! She said her precious ring disappeared from her room and then she looked at me!”

“She only looked,” my mother reminded me.

“With such angry eyes!”

“*Arrey daiyya!*” My mother nudged my head off her lap. “Little Bibi was probably distraught.”

“I don’t know anything about her ring.” I sniffled. “I would have said so if I did.”

If I had seen the ring, I surely would have told her. “Little Bibi, look!” I would have said. “Here’s your beautiful ring and I have found it for you!” I would have done that even though seeing the red and white stones sparkle against my own brown finger would be the best dream come true, and even though Little Bibi had so many nice things that one less hardly made a difference.

“It’ll get found,” Amma said absently. She shuffled around on her haunches under our low, low ceiling, packing roti for my father’s lunch in his tiered tiffin box. That

was a signal for me to get on with the day. It was no use. There was no getting out of working at the Big House today. I would have to face Little Bibi and her accusing eyes whether I wanted to or not.

"I'm going to the tamarind tree!" I declared. Under my favorite tree I could sit and think and no one would shout orders at me.

Amma looked at me askance. "Off to dawdle and day-dream under that tree again?"

"I'm not going to dawdle and I am not going to day-dream!" I said. "I'm going to see Dino Kaka. He is my very good friend, you know."

"You've spent far too much time with that crow," Amma said. "He has surely flown his nest by now anyway."

"*Na!* He waits for me and he pays attention when I have something important to say!" I grabbed my doll Tikki and snatched a scrap of bread from my breakfast plate.

"Keep the bread for yourself and let the crow eat from the garbage bins!" Amma shouted.

I ignored her and ducked out of our smoky hut and into the fresh air. The beaten earth was hard underfoot. A spring breeze rippled my skirt and rustled the leaves in the guava tree. I breathed deeply. The air was light and the sweet smell of a flower filled my nose.

I heard Dino Kaka cawing in the distance, so I zigzagged quickly through the maze of mud and straw huts that sat silent and shadowy in the awakening light.

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I brushed past the broom that belonged to the betel-nut-leaf seller and skirted around the bangle woman's basket. The knife grinder's stone stood silently by his hut, and an elephant ear shaped rice winnow made of woven palm frond lay upturned by the old cobbler's door. The chickens belonging to Rukmani, his daughter, squawked at me as if they were passing on an unpleasant message. Rukmani, a girl with a scheming mind and a sharp tongue, never wasted a chance to put me in my place. I leaped over the *rangoli* pattern near the washerwoman's door, careful not to disturb the pretty red and white swirls she drew on the earth each morning.

Lali's home lay ten steps away, but I didn't call for her. I knew she was still asleep behind the limp curtain that hung in the doorway. She'd be up soon enough to take charge while her mother was at work.

Amma says that Lali and I are like two wings of a butterfly, each one fluttering with the other in perfect harmony. Just two years older than I, Lali was my best friend. If she knew about Little Bibi's accusation, she'd put her arm around my neck and cluck her tongue and say she understood. I would tell her everything on my way back home.

The garbage bins were spilling over and I pinched my nose. Then I let go and took a deep breath when I passed the water pump, where the air was humid and the smells were refreshingly damp and clean.

The tamarind tree loomed ahead, strong and erect like a turbaned soldier standing guard atop the little knoll. Behind it, the sky was changing from red to saffron to pink. I heard green pods rustling in the fern-like leaves above. I ran up, sank to the earth with my back against the broad trunk, and put the piece of bread on the ground beside me.

Dinoo Kaka swooped down with a flurry and a flap. He pecked and jabbed at the bread, and it disappeared before I could count to ten. Then he cocked his head at me.

“Sorry.” I showed him my empty hands. “You’ll have to wait till tomorrow.”

I’d bring him a more generous piece the next day if Amma didn’t grumble too much. But tomorrow was a long time away and there was still today to worry about.

It was going to be a long day at the Big House—a day filled with brooms and dustcloths and washrags; a day stacked with rumpled beds and dirty plates; a day overflowing with Memsaab’s calls of “Basanta, do this, do that! Basanta, fetch this, fetch that!”

But worst of all, it would be another day filled with Little Bibi.

How could Amma be so unbending? She had such firm notions about the rightness of things and the wrongness of things, and missing even one day at work fell squarely on the wrong side of the line. She never looked at things from my side. It was not fair!

“Amma’s not being helpful. She’s going to call me any

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minute now, just you wait and see!" I told Dinoo Kaka.

"*Caw, caw?*"

Somehow I didn't find any comfort in the crow's response this morning. I sang a lullaby to Tikki to distract myself—a soft song my grandmother used to sing to calm me at night when I was a little girl. "*Ooo-hai-gay, ooo-hai-ma...*"

Slap, slap, my leg beat on the earth and Tikki bounced in my lap.

Poor little thing! My doll was bedraggled now, and too old to do anything except lie still. Her big brown eyes never closed, and her dress hid a hole in her middle. When Little Bibi first gave her to me, Tikki's cheeks were the color of a rose petal, but now they were smudged and a voice that had once sweetly called out *Mama* was lost.

Still, she always made a pretty bride when I wed her to Lali's Dear Boy. We had celebrated five weddings already, even as Amma grumbled that we were getting much too old for dolls and Lali was nearly old enough to start thinking about her own wedding!

How could that be? How could one be too old for fun?

"*Ooo-hai-gay, ooo-hai-ma.*" I closed my eyes and waited for the magic that changed me instantly from a poor girl in a little hut to a rich girl in a Big House to happen. But it didn't. Not today.

The tamarind tree was my private nest, a place where all my secret dreams came to pass. Usually all I needed to do was close my eyes, think hard, and *poof!* there I was, in

my very own room, with my very own plump pillow, on my very own soft bed. A ring brighter than a full moon sparkled on my finger—a ring that was mine not because I stole it, but because Bapu bought it for me from Zaveri's Pearl and Gold Shop, because he promised he would, and he always kept his word.

But there was no luxurious room for me today, and when my mind drifted to the ring, I was brought back to the present with a heavy heart.

Dinoo Kaka hopped around for a while longer, and then he gave up and flew away.

The sun was climbing in the sky, burning away dawn's dim light. I sensed the furrows in Amma's brows deepening, but I didn't want to return home yet. I was not ready for the long walk to the Big House, and I was not ready to face Little Bibi's accusing eyes.

But just as I feared, Amma's voice echoed through the thatched huts, curved around the guava tree, flew past the garbage bins and the water pump, and came for me.

"Basanta!"

Aiyyo! I didn't want to go. But Amma called again, and now her voice was hard. The ring was missing and Little Bibi thought I took it. I was *not* Rukmani, the old cobbler's daughter who made lovely clay pots but was also a liar and a thief. I was a decent girl, an upright and honest girl. I was Amma's child.

Amma had called, and there was nothing to do but obey.