

Bhupati by Anuja Varghese

The first time lightning struck Bhupati's shrine to Goddess Lakshmi, it set her face on fire. The makeshift shrine was little more than the foot-high figurine of the Goddess balanced in the crumbling birdbath Maneesha had found when they moved in, overturned and filled with spiders in the patchy grass behind the rented semi. Bhupati had righted it and hosed it off, envisioning Lakshmi-Ma floating serenely on cool, clear water, surrounded by offerings of flowers and fresh fruit. But when he filled it up and placed her in, she had capsized immediately, chipping half a lotus from her third hand. He had propped her up with some loose rocks, still hopeful she could be happy, even in such a cold and brittle place as this, but soon the raccoons started arriving nightly to eat the fruit, shit in the yard, and tip over the garbage cans, and when the water froze in November, Bhupati abandoned Lakshmi to the elements. It was spring when the lightning struck. Bhupati was watching the storm through the sliding back doors, the rain coming down in unrelenting sheets. He could see Lakshmi out there, the red of her painted sari the only bright spot in the drenched April dusk. Maneesha was working the night shift at the hospital, leaving him to find his own dinner, which he ate standing, his fingers greasy with each fat, flaky samosa he pulled from the paper bag. It had already been raining for days, alternating between freezing drizzle, brief, angry downpours, and a kind of mist with teeth. This storm though, this was the worst he had seen it. On the other side of the chain link fence separating Bhupati's yard from the Haitian family's yard, their dog made nervous circles under the overhang of the roof, barking at the electricity in the air. Maybe it was a warning.

Bhupati heard the crack before he saw the flash and behind him, the power went out in the kitchen. It went out all over Parkdale, but he didn't know that yet. All he knew for certain was that Lakshmi was burning. His first thought was to run out and save her, in what would have been an uncharacteristic act of bravery. His hand went to the door handle and he pulled, but the onslaught of weather assailed him so violently, or so he felt, that he quickly slid the door closed again. He watched the fire in the birdbath, burning in the rain. Why didn't the rain put the fire out? Why did only Lakshmi's pink moon face burn, while the rest of her dripped water, untouched by flame? It was a mystery. No. It was a *miracle*.

As soon as this realization occurred to him, Bhupati felt a bubbling excitement, an exhilaration flowing lava-like through his body and spilling out of his sandpaper heels so that he could not stand still. What to do? Pacing and turning and shifting from foot to foot. *What to do?* Capture it.

Bhupati spun around in his slippered feet and realized then that all the lights in the house had gone out. *The lights are off but somebody's home*. He chuckled to himself at his own joke, squinting as he reached for his jacket tossed over the back of his chair, tucked in across from Maneesha's chair, at the kitchen table. He pulled his phone from a side pocket and held it up to the glass. With his eyes, he could see the fire clearly, but through the phone camera's lens, through the dirt-streaked, rain-spattered door, through the gusting and the pouring and the distance and the dark, there was nothing.

"Bloody useless motherfucking..." Bhupati muttered, jabbing at buttons on the phone, opening and closing his thumb and forefinger on the screen in a futile attempt to zoom in. After several minutes of this, the battery icon began to flash red and while Bhupati went searching for a charger, the phone went dead and the fire went out.

Bhupati took the streetcar to Little India and bought another Lakshmi. At the Walmart in Gerrard Square, he found an inflatable pool for children, a bicycle pump to inflate it, and in the toy section, a box of wooden fruit. He brought all these things home, and when the backyard dried out, he set up a new shrine. Maneesha watched from the kitchen, unimpressed. Bhupati thought he saw her mouth moving, but through the door, her face was a blur. He put his hand to his ear and shook his head.

“Since when do you pray?” she demanded, sliding the door open and standing with hands on rounded hips. “What’s the point of all this?” Pregnancy made her irritable. It was true, Bhupati had no real intention of praying to the Goddess, but believed somehow that giving her a home, caring for her, feeding her – these would be devotion enough to get them to the Hills. Bhupati waved Maneesha back inside and went back to his work. It seemed wrong to dump the first Lakshmi in the trash, so Bhupati decided to keep her, charred face and all. He placed Lakshmi #1 in the pool facing the neighbours’ house, and in front of her, placed Lakshmi #2, facing straight ahead and smiling, the gold coins glued to the palm of her second hand glinting in the sunlight. He put the fruit – and vegetables, he discovered, upon opening the box – on a metal *thali* and left them floating for the goddess(es) to enjoy. Sometimes, during the summer, he would bring flowers from Queen Supermarket, rip them from their stems, and add them to the pool, a goddess soup in an inflatable bowl.

The second time lightning struck Bhupati’s shrine to Goddess Lakshmi, it set her hands on fire. All eight of them. The backyard had been blanketed in snow since January and by April, Bhupati had all but forgotten about the Lakshmis, buried up to their crowns, sleeping in the ice. Or maybe they were awake. Waiting.

The storm woke Bhupati and no one else. He shuffled to the bedroom window and peered down into the backyard, all shadows and muck mixed with melting snow in the pre-dawn dark. He wasn’t sure when the rain had started, but now it came down fast and heavy, punctuated by howling wind that rattled the rusty shutters and thunder that shook the house’s bones. The lightning struck soundlessly, a single bolt zig-zagging through the rain, leaving eight fires glowing in its wake. Bhupati stared, disbelieving, the breath sucked from his body. How could it be happening? Why to him? Why again? Sweat dampened his palms, pressed to the glass and paralyzed. What to do? *What to do?!*

Call for help.

“Manu!” he hissed, turning his head to where she slept soundly, the baby curled into the curve of her breast. They seemed to breathe together, two halves of a whole, taking up two-thirds of his bed, replacing his chair at the kitchen table, a multi-limbed beast, always hungry, eyes on the Hills.

Bhupati thought not to wake the child with a shout, but rather to give the woman a shake. He looked back down at the Lakshmis whose hands continued to burn, undeterred by the rain, dripping lotus petals that fell away in melted, fuchsia clumps. He backed away from the window and promptly stepped on the hard, plastic head of a singing turtle. He half kicked the thing and half slipped, his knee smashing into the bed’s footboard, the cracks in the ceiling suddenly illuminated in pale, blue light shooting from the turtle’s shell.

“Ow shit shit shitty shit what the fucking hell!” Bhupati was yelling, the baby was crying, and the turtle was warbling. *The more we get together, the happier we’ll be.*

Maneesha sat up, pulling the small body at her side into her chest before she was even fully awake. Some actions are all instinct. She cast an annoyed glance at the clock, then at Bhupati, then swung her legs over the side of the bed and was gone, the stairs creaking with the combined weight of the two-headed creature's descent.

"Look outside!" Bhupati called after her. "Look at Lakshmi-Ma!"

But by then, the only evidence of lightning was an agitated dog and eight blackened stumps.

Bhupati went back to Little India and returned with eight Lakshmis – some bigger, some smaller, some sitting, some standing; all draped in red, twenty-four arms outstretched, promising prosperity in exchange for a little bit of faith. He left Lakshmi #1 and Lakshmi #2 in the pool – one blind, both indifferent to the dead mouse floating by, the corn cob covered in ash.

Maneesha watched from the kitchen, tight-lipped. She could have married anyone and gone anywhere – America, New Zealand, Peru – but Bhupati had painted Canada with such a magical palette. In his emails, he had sent pictures of forest trails in colours she had never seen on trees, children laughing in fluffy, sparkling snow, giant houses with swimming pools just like hotels. That was the life she had purchased with her plane ticket and her virginity. That was what she was owed.

Bhupati pretended not to notice her glaring. Like the original Lakshmis, he too could be blind. He too could be indifferent. He placed the goddesses all over the yard, in shallow holes surrounded by dirt and stones, so that when the Haitian grandmother looked down from a drafty bedroom, it appeared that her pinched-faced Paki neighbour had planted so many strange flowers.

Idiot, the old woman thought. Nothing can take root in the mud.

The third time lightning struck Bhupati's shrine(s) to Goddess Lakshmi, it set them all on fire. He had tended to them throughout the summer, rotating an aluminum lawn chair between them to eat his lunch out of styrofoam containers while the baby went to daycare and Maneesha went to work. Even when it started to get colder and the house was inexplicably empty for days at a time, he had continued to visit them in turn, lighting Maneesha's aromatherapy candles when the sun went down, so each Goddess could bask in her own radius of Apple Pie, Linen & Lavender, Ocean Breeze. In the winter, he had dutifully put on his secondhand boots and oversized coat and shoveled a path from one Lakshmi to the next, brushing any freshly fallen snow from where it collected on their shoulders, in their laps. They asked for nothing more. It wasn't raining when the lightning struck, which might have been why it caught him by surprise. He had been watching for warnings, waiting all year for storms. Bhupati was standing where the kitchen table used to be, reading Maneesha's letter. Her friends who were married to cardiologists and radiologists and all the other ists that Bhupati couldn't remember, told her again and again that Parkdale was a bad neighbourhood. The listings she printed at the library were for condos in places called Richmond-Hill and Thorn-Hill, sometimes King-City. "So they are living in King-City and we are living in King-Street. Who can tell the difference, am I right?" Bhupati always chuckled at his own quips, but they left Maneesha's fists and jaw clenching, burning with unspent rage. Stupidity made her furious.

The April sky that morning was the colour of a dirty spoon, distant thunder rolling along its edges. If Bhupati had looked up from the letter, he would have seen the fast-moving flashes between the clouds, may have had just enough time to bring the Lakshmis inside and save them from immolation. As it was, his head only snapped up when the lightning was right on top of them and it was too late to do anything but gape, cartoonish, as it split into ten white tongues, kissing each Lakshmi with fire. They went up in flames as if doused with kerosene, neither awake nor asleep. They burned on instinct.

Bhupati wandered outside in his bare feet and surveyed his garden of dying goddesses. He had looked up the odds of being struck by lightning twice and found they were one in nine million. Once was a curiosity, twice an unlikely coincidence, three times, a curse. What to do? Cremate them. Mark their graves.

He sat in the lawn chair and let them burn to the ground. Maneesha had taken all the tupperware, but he dug through the trash and found ten styrofoam urns from which he shook out the cockroaches and rinsed the grease. When all that was left of his would-be shrines was misshapen remnants mixed with smouldering ash, he carefully scooped the piles into their spongy coffins and buried them in a neat row along the fence, marking each mound with a rock. Bhupati knew he ought to release them somewhere nice, under a tree, into the lake; but in this country, people trapped their dead in boxes under the ground and this country was where he had taken root. Now the Lakshmis were burned and buried. The best of both worlds, in the end.

Bhupati took the subway to the end of the line, then boarded a bus that crossed into the Hills. He had imagined a different landscape entirely – flowering meadows, castles, kites aloft in cloudless skies – but the Hill where he got off the bus and walked to the return address on Maneesha's letter, turned out to be nothing more than an unremarkable suburb, just a little ways north of the city.

He stopped in front of a pink townhouse and stared into an upstairs window where movement caught his eye. A woman in a red t-shirt bounced a small child on her hip, swaying, maybe singing. She turned so that the child's head was obscured and all Bhupati could see was their four arms; two long, two short, all moving as one. A man entered, bent down out of Bhupati's view, and then stroked the woman's hair against a backdrop of blue light. *The more we get together, the happier we'll be.*

Maneesha glanced out the window at a blurry figure on the sidewalk. Whether blind or indifferent, she pulled the curtains shut. She never prayed for lightning again.