

Henri Rousseau,
'Tiger in a Tropical Storm
(Surprised)' (1891).



My Favourite Story

When I Was Young

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One of my earliest memories of being told a fairy tale is that of my maternal grandmother telling me mythological stories and folktales. In northern India, the maternal grandmother is addressed as Naanee, and mine was a woman with a high school education, uncommon for women of her generation. Her name was Shanta Sharma. One of the stories she told me and I loved went like this:

A small girl is going to visit her Naanee and to reach there, she has to walk through a forest. In the forest she comes across a tiger who wants to eat her. The girl is intelligent and thinks of a way to save herself. She tells the tiger ‘Naanee ke ghar jaaongi, ghee-khichri khaaongi, moti ho ke aaoongi, tab tum mujhe khana.’ (‘Am going to my Naanee’s house, will eat ghee-khichri there, will be fat when I come back, then you eat me.’) The tiger was taken in by the offer and let her go. She reached her Naanee’s house, and her Naanee fed her ghee-khichri and many other goodies. She had a great time there as her Naanee loved her very much. Finally, it was time to go back home, and she thought of the tiger waiting to eat her on her way back to her mother. She told her Naanee what had happened in the forest and of her fear of the tiger on her way back. Her Naanee had a solution and said, ‘I will put you in a drum (a cylindrical box) and roll it down the hill. It will go through the forest and the tiger will not even know that you have gone by. When the drum reaches the plain your mother will receive you.’ And so the girl went in a drum and the tiger was successfully befooled.

Does it sound like a version of Red Riding Hood? It is the differing versions that give meaning to interpretations and show the dynamic nature of the oral folk and fairy tales. Whenever I think of this story now, after becoming a folklorist, certain facts of our lives seem to be mixed up in it. My family comes from the Himalayan region of Garhwal in northern India. As such we are people of the hills.

Late 19th- and 20th-century large-scale migrations from the hills to the plains meant that every family has members that live outside of the hills. My Naanee lived in the Himalayan town of Dehradun, while my family lived in the plains of north India. Along with my mother and brother I spent entire summer vacations with my Naanee in the cool climes of Dehradun and Mussoorie. In my Naanee's version of the Red Riding Hood story location is not specified anywhere, but the naanee of the story must have lived on a higher altitude to roll down the drum as there seems nothing but the forest between her and the plains. This is also the real geography of this part of northern India: the foothills of the Himalayas were covered with forests before they hit the plains. These forests were the natural habitat of the Indian tiger. Rivers roll down from the mountains to the plains, and in British times entire forests were cut down and trees just floated down the rivers to be collected by merchants in the plains. Today, of course, this entire landscape is under severe environmental threat, including the existence of the tigers. I wonder what was melting in my Naanee's pot of international tale types; it certainly made our bond stronger and the food tastier for me. The rhyme '*Naanee ke ghar jaaongi ...*' was chanted often, and still resonates in my mind whenever I remember those wondrous summer vacations.



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