



The Tiger Kite

She lay in her bed, not sleeping, listening to the night. Temple music drifted through the shutters, punctuated by the rattling of rickshaw horns. There are no tigers anymore, she thought, not in this place. They have long gone. The lakes are dry, the hillsides are bare, the long grasses cleared for crops, the forests have been piled high on the cooking fire and turned to smoke. Maybe, she thought, between this city and the mountains and the sea, all the tigers in the land could be counted on the fingers of just one hand. You could search behind bushes and boulders, crawl into shaded ravines, peer under tree roots for a hundred miles in all directions, and yet find no evidence of their passing.

Pictures of them, though, could still be seen all around; in old sepia photographs of hunting parties, as decorated emblems on trucks along the highways, on circus posters, in wall paintings – pink tinted tigers fighting pink robed elephants. She recalled the proud face of a tiger emblazoned on a kite. Standing in the awning of the shop, looking up at a wall and vast ceiling of kites, she felt tongue-tied. Kites everywhere. Too many to choose from, she couldn't make up her mind, she couldn't pluck up the courage to select just *one*.

'Maybe tomorrow,' her father said. 'There's no rush, Simran. It's two days before the festival.'

The rocky outcrop that rose to the north of the city was called Tiger Hill, and the citadel that sat on top was named Tiger Fort, but despite this there were no tigers to be seen from this elevation. If you stood there and looked down on the jumble of streets stretching all the way to the hazy horizon, you could observe many things.

You could see a million and more people going about their business. You could see the monkeys dancing on the ledges of the Surja Mandir, placed on a high eastern point to catch the last rays of the setting sun. You could see peacocks, camels, bullocks hauling loads of mustard oil. You could see rusting auto-rickshaws, cars, the gleaming battered metal of old buses, painted vehicles loaded with sacks of grain, scooters, taxi's, bicycles of all shapes and sizes. And kites, more and more rising into the clear blue sky.

She closed her eyes and imagined the kite with the tiger face set free from her small hands, lifting on the breeze, up above the cupolas and rooftops of the city, high over the jewelled and glittering palaces, the dusty feet of the world left far below. Tiger eyes shining in the dark, looking for another of its kind, higher now, blowing over undulating hills and wide valleys, over salt marshes and desolate plains and the wreck and ruin of many ancient cities.

She wondered about the thirty-three million, three hundred and thirty-three thousand and three hundred and thirty-three Gods – and some others that people had probably forgotten about. Gods of Thunder, Gods of Destruction, Gods that shake the earth and crumble buildings with even their softest steps on tiptoe; Gods that call down the heavy rains and Gods that suck the moisture from the land.

All this weight of Gods on the world and yet none, it seemed, to command that tigers were no longer trapped and killed by poachers and smugglers; none to admonish those who carved up tiger bodies in the deep of night and cut away their tiger whiskers to secrete in love potions; not a single God to impede those who ground tiger bones in oil mixed with herbs to make a balm for easing back pains, rheumatism and aching muscles.

She dreamt of the Maharaja of Surguja, in his counting house, surrounded by servants dressed in the finest of silks. They all wore scarlet turbans and scarlet tunics. The Maharaja was not counting coins or precious stones; he was counting the skins of tigers he had shot. He had just reached one thousand one hundred and forty-nine when she awoke to the sound of her older brother's laughter, somewhere in the house.

In the kitchen, she grabbed a paratha and scooped up a few mouthfuls of potato and spinach. She climbed up the concrete steps to the roof. The sun was blinding.

'Hey, look it's sleepyhead!' her older brother Mandeep shouted. 'Guess where we've been?' He stood there with Ranjit and Satwant, their cousins. All three boys had big grins on their faces. Already, their new kites were high on the morning breeze.

'Where's everyone else?' she asked.

'They've gone out,' said Satwant, not looking at her but at the sky.

She went and sat on the wall. She was exhausted by their journey. Her family seemed to extend across half the continent; and why did most of their relatives have to dwell so far off the beaten track, in villages in the back of beyond? She felt more at ease here, in this huge city, where her great aunt lived.

The street below was bustling with activity. From the roof, she could see where it climbed from the marketplace at Chandpol Gate and ran untidily alongside the old city

walls for a time, breaking off into a myriad of rutted lanes and alleys, its cluttered trodden earth finally petering out in the foothills a mile away. There was cinema on the street with a giant advertising hoarding which showed the face of a screaming woman and, approaching her, a horrible wolf-man. Behind the cinema, the temple grounds were crammed between two concrete apartment blocks. There were a jumble of shops nearby, with trays and bowls of spices, rice, nuts and sweetmeats. She could see fish mongers and butchers, wild fowl in cages, tea stalls and an internet café. She expected her father and mother had gone there to mail news of the final leg of their trip to all their friends and relatives in Leicester and Birmingham.

Nearly opposite was the courtyard of an old haveli, which was now used as a hotel for tourists. A ring of trees shaded the courtyard and in the centre was a garden with a huge peepul tree. In the outlying villages, she had seen trees like these festooned with blue, red and silver foil tassels and with baby and children's clothes. Hanging these things on the branches of the tree was believed to act as a charm to ward off evil and sickness. This tree, though, was decorated with dozens of crashed kites. At its foot was a small water shrine, and she knew her great aunt went there each morning to make an offering. Peacocks wandered in the courtyard, along with chipmunks and squirrels.

One of her uncles worked as a taxi-driver for the hotel. She could see him standing by the white cars at the gate, waiting for business. He was talking to three other men, and she could tell they were discussing the virtues of their firkees – the wooden reels around which the kite lines were carefully wound. She could see them weighing them carefully in their hands, passing them back and forth. There was much shaking and nodding of heads. Her uncle had 250 kites ready for the festival. He would start at six in the morning and fly till dark.

The festival of Makar Sankranti marked the end of winter and the beginning of spring, and kites took to the air from every rooftop in the whole city. These were fighter kites, and you flew in competition with others, manoeuvring to cut the strings of opposing kites and bring them down.

Her uncle announced to her that, last year, over 150 children were taken to the hospital with serious injuries. 'You must be very very careful, if you are to fly,' he said. 'It's so easy to fall off the roof! You're so busy concentrating on where all the other kites are, twisting and hovering, diving and rising, running back and forth and side to side on your roof, working your kite.'

She stared for some time at the kite shop down the street, where a crowd had gathered to debate the forthcoming aerial contest. She heard her brother stumble and curse, and turned to see his kite entangled on the power lines draped between the buildings.

He groaned with frustration. 'That's the third one today.'

'Don't worry. We'll get some more later,' promised Satwant.

'When can I have a go?' asked Simran.

They looked at her as if she were completely mad.

Later that day, as the heat subsided, the family went to visit the Jantar Mantar, an observatory built by an astronomer Prince in the 18th century for measuring celestial bodies. Her mother and father were clearly impressed and took lots of photographs at the very top and very bottom of the huge structures for reading altitudes and azimuths. Wearily, trudging up and down what seemed like thousands upon thousands of steps, she half-listened to the guide give extensive explanations of the magnificent sundials, the making of horoscopes, the latitudes and longitudes, all the equations for calculating distances in the sky.

The guide looked down at her. 'What Jey Singh learnt from the stars is not known,' he declared. 'What portents he saw in the night have been revealed to none. How the spirit of unrest fell upon him, the wandering moon alone can tell...'

'This would be great for a school project, don't you think?' said her mother, snapping another picture.

'Yes, Mom,' said Simran, looking around at the monumental objects for exploring the rhythms of the universe and only seeing the kites rise above them, in practice for the big day.

After a lengthy detour to see a demonstration of block-printing on fabrics, they finally arrived at the kite shop, which had become busier as the evening wore on. The boys struggled through the throng of people and chose quickly - half a dozen of these, half a dozen of those. Simran stood at the back, patiently searching the displays.

The kites came in all colours and patterns, or with carefully wrought motifs of Mecca, the Taj Mahal, Medina, Lord Shiva and Ganeshji, Gandhi and Aishwariya Rai, or with designs that incorporated kingfishers or parakeets, lotus blossoms or jasmine. She noticed one design even featured Superman and another some Indian Super-Hero she couldn't identify. These were hand made kites of the first order, diamond shaped, balanced by a small fish-tail, the whole made from paper tissue and bamboo and controlled by a single line.

'I just want the kite with the tiger on it,' she said quietly.

'I can't see one of those,' said her father. 'What about this one?' He picked out a kite with a heart design.

She pulled a face.

'What about this? Or this?' He pointed out a red and yellow striped kite and then a green and black one.

'I'll have one of those, please!' said Ranjit.

She shook her head. 'Dad, I really want the one with the tiger.'

Her father pushed his way through the crowd to the back of the shop where one of the kite makers sat, folding and pasting tissue to the thin wooden frames, carefully making adept joints and attaching thread. The man shook his head and offered up the kite he was making for inspection. They spoke for some time, arguing back and forth.

'Why does everyone have to barter for everything?' asked Simran, a little impatiently.

'That's just the way things are done here,' her mother said.

Her father made his way back to them. ‘I’m afraid they haven’t any of those left, Simran,’ he said solemnly. He saw tears begin to well up in her eyes.

‘But,’ he quickly added, ‘the good news is... they’ll make one especially for you! He’ll bring it to us in the morning. It’ll be a bit more expensive than the others, so you can only have one, ok?’

Simran sighed with relief. She knew it was the best kite of all.

After the evening meal, they sat on the roof and listened to their great aunt speak of the old days. Chewing gutkha, she told of her grandfather, who once kept his kite in the air for 48 days. She told of the Prince who sent an entire cavalry regiment into the Great Unknown Jungle to retrieve his lost kite and how only one man, horribly disfigured, returned to tell the tale. She told the story of the American cowboy who crossed the sea channel between England and France in a vessel towed by kites. She told of the Master Kite Maker, Babu Khan, and his demonstration of how to fly 500 kites from a single line. She told of kites that could mimic birds and kites flown to inflame passion between men and women.

‘Sometimes,’ she winked, ‘romantic verses are written on the kite to send messages to the beloved above whose roof the kite is flown.’

‘They must have pretty good eyesight,’ whispered Mandeep.

‘Great Aunt,’ said Simran. ‘How did kite-flying first come to this city?’

Her great aunt settled back in her chair, rearranging the cushions. ‘Well,’ she said. ‘Once, a great Maharaja was known for the wonderful feasts he held. Great rulers and mighty princes came from far across the deserts and mountains to sit at his table, tasting his delicacies and marvelling at his dancers and musicians. But this Maharajah - who had everything - soon became bored, and one day he decided to entertain the Wind Gods themselves.

‘He called out to the assembled crowds, “With a mighty kite in my hand and the patronage of the Lord of the Winds, what will I have to fear!”

‘So he searched all the known world for kite fliers and makers, and brought them here to his palace with offers of great riches that none could refuse, to conceive and construct the greatest kites the skies have ever seen. And the most magnificent kite of them all - the fruit of all their genius – was to be the Maharajah’s very own kite. This was to be launched from the highest tower. It took 9 days to wind the thread onto the reel, and then four of the strongest men to turn it. It was said the Maharajah wanted to his kite to touch the face of the moon.

‘And it is true that this kite flew up to the highest of heights, and flew on and on as the daylight faded and the moon rose. But, somehow – and no-one knows exactly what happened – the kite became separated from its line and drifted far away into the night.

‘The Maharajah was devastated. He ordered his soldiers to search the land for his kite. He ordered his loyal servants and his people to go forth and pursue it, promising a great reward. But unfortunately it was not to be. The great kite had landed far away in the jungle and in that jungle a hungry tiger pounced upon it, thinking it some strange beast, and tore it to pieces.

‘When the Maharajah learned of this, he flew into a great rage and called on the Grand Master of the Hunt to seek out all tigers and punish them. He ordered the Omrahs to mount their elephants. Accompanied by their finest warriors on horseback armed with lances and game keepers on foot armed with half-pikes, carrying the strongest nets, they set out to hunt down all the tigers without mercy and kill them one by one.

‘It is said, in the depths of the palace, there is a room full only of tiger teeth, and that on the quietest of nights, if you listen very carefully, then you will hear these teeth gnashing against each other, in perpetual torment and hunger...’

‘That’s horrible,’ said Simran.

‘Bedtime, I think,’ said her mother.

Morning could not come soon enough for Simran. Her kite arrived and she was on the roof before the others. Her uncle had not risen early, as he had promised, and he still lay snoring. She smelled the breeze and looked out over the flat rooftops, imagining she could skip across the entire city flying her tiger kite. She pulled out a length of thread from the firkee and tied it to the kite in the way her cousins had demonstrated. She cradled the reel with one hand, held the kite above her head and ran forward from one side of the roof to the other and at the last moment cast the kite into the air. It nose-dived over the corner of the building.

She noticed a boy watching her, standing on the dividing wall of the next apartment. He looked very angry.

‘What are you looking at, little girl,’ he shouted.

She stifled a laugh. Although perhaps the same age, he was much smaller than her. Thin as a branch, she thought. She was surprised the light breeze didn’t topple him from his perch and down into the street below. She knew his name was Shoyab and he sometimes played with her cousins.

What she didn’t know was that Shoyab wanted to be the greatest kite flyer in the land, but he only had a few kites and he had just lost another one. He looked enviously at the splendid tiger kite dangling below.

Simran cautiously hauled the kite up and tried a second time. The kite dipped off the roof and scraped down the wall.

‘That is not kite flying,’ Shoyab said, grinning widely. ‘Better stick to sewing.’ He jumped up and down, holding his belly and scratching his head, letting out greatly exaggerated peals of laughter.

‘That is not a boy,’ said Simran haughtily. ‘That is surely a silly monkey I see before me!’

He stopped and shrugged his shoulders. ‘Are you Satwant’s cousin?’ he asked.

She nodded, slowly retrieving her kite with even greater care.

‘Tell me, what do they teach you in England?’ he asked. ‘Instead of kite flying?’

‘Mathematics. Literacy. History. Geography,’ she replied, inspecting her precious kite for damage.

‘Ah, England has famous soldiers and footballers, explorers and popstars,’ he said. ‘But, I think, no famous kite flyers or makers. Can you name but one?’

‘No.’

‘Tell me, does the Queen have a kite?’

She thought for a moment. ‘She has one thousand kites and a thousand servants to fetch and carry each one,’ she told him. ‘They have special uniforms the same colour of the kite they look after. And she has special castles, one in each corner of the land, with especially high towers from the top of which she flies these kites.’

‘Does she command the four winds also? You need a fine wind for a kite to fly well! I hear the monsoon rains fall all year round in England and the winds blow hard and there is an evil storm spirit hiding behind every hill. And you have to all wear Wellington boots because it is so wet underfoot. It is no wonder you cannot fly a kite!’

‘Well, I have a tiger kite,’ she said firmly. ‘It is a very special kite, one of a kind, and it will fly, you’ll see.’

‘Yes, that is a very good kite,’ he admitted. ‘But this is not your Mother Country anymore. You were born far away. Do Manchester United have the best kite flyers in the land? You are English and the English are *not* a nation of kite flyers!’

‘Or cricketers,’ he added. He folded his arms, as though that were the end of it.

He was beginning to annoy her. She could feel her cheeks burning. She wished her brother and her cousins would come up onto the roof with their kites.

Shoyab looked at his own rather plain looking kites, some of which he had made himself from plastic bags, and back at her tiger kite and seemed deep in thought for a moment.

‘I, Shoyab Qureshi, will teach you to be a successful kite-flyer,’ he announced. ‘On one condition! You will let me fly your tiger kite.’

The deal was agreed. First, they would wander the back streets and she would observe the kites from ground level, and in the afternoon he would teach her to fly. The tiger kite would lie unflown until later in the day, when it would soar into the sky under his direction. In return for his tutelage, it would remain under his control until nightfall.

Her uncle, great aunt, father and mother discussed this arrangement. They soon granted their consent.

‘Ah, don’t think I haven’t forgotten last year,’ said her uncle. ‘At least this way you won’t be under our feet all day long.’

Simran wondered whether he was talking about her or Shoyab, or perhaps both of them. Her brother and cousins also seemed relieved that she would be occupied in this manner.

They set out. He carried the kites. She carried a backpack with a bottle of water and naan bread, alongside which Shoyab stuffed three reels and a penknife. As they wandered, he explained to her that some fliers favoured a weave of nine threads and some six threads. Others coated their line with mixtures of ground glass and glue, herbs, sand and pigeon dung, which - when dry - made it razor sharp and hazardous to

both birds and people. The skill of the kite flyer, the strength of the line and the balance of the kite was, he emphasised, all important.

‘In the sky,’ he told her, ‘there are no borders. You can be as mighty as a Prince!’

He talked about how well the paper kite caught the wind, how this material was better than any other. The wind flowed over the plastic ones like smooth water but the paper kites grabbed hold of the wind and hung on like a monkey leaping from tree branch to branch, with determination and strength, bending the very air to its purpose.

She soon realised the reason for this walking and watching. The sky was a lace work of kites. The battles had commenced. Kites plummeted from the heavens like ripe fruit, trailing from parapets and posts and signs and wires. Everywhere she looked, at every turn of her head, she could see - even in the very corner of her vision - a kite dropping down. Yellow with red squares, green and black striped, purple and orange harlequins. Shoyab ran about excitedly; many were in good enough condition to fly again. Soon they had more than two dozen kites to practice with.

She followed him for some time through the back lanes. She saw a pig scrubbing blindly in some rubbish with its snout firmly stuck through a beautiful kite. ‘Where are we going?’ she asked.

‘Wait and see,’ he said. ‘A very good place to practice!’

They followed a track along an old wall and came out near the royal cremation grounds at the foot of Tiger Hill. They climbed up onto the broken down embattlements of the wall above the deserted white marble chatris of the former rulers of the city.

‘Here, we can fly in peace,’ said Shoyab. He sat down and set about attaching lines to the kites. ‘Until you are ready.’

When they returned, she watched her brother, her cousins and uncle - and even her father and mother - send kites into the firmament and saw them tumble. More and more kites filled the sky through the afternoon; above the high walls and parapets, towers and minarets, above the bazaar of cooking utensils and costume jewellery; above the Square of Moonlight and the Palace of Winds, above the post office and the railway yards; above the gem-cutters quarter, the cloth merchants and the workshops of marble workers. Some, she thought, must have been sailing as high as one thousand feet.

The whole city danced on the roofs with their kites till their legs and arms grew tired. They rested, ate and drank, their eyes always on the sky - then flew again.

‘Come on, Simran,’ taunted her brother. ‘Come and show us how to fly a kite!’

Shoyab pulled a blue kite from his pile. He attached the line and passed it to her. She ran forward and with a little skip cast it upwards, letting the line spool out until it caught a strong gust. Up it leapt, above her brother’s kite. She pulled and twisted on the line and it swooped down. Mandeep could only watch open mouthed as he saw his kite drag to one side, turn over and dive to the ground.

‘Hey!’ he cried out. ‘I think he’s teaching her some cheats!’

‘It’s not a Playstation game,’ she said, letting her kite run on the breeze, before swooping down towards the other kites. Within two minutes, Satwant and Ranjit found themselves staring at their cut threads floating down to the roof.

‘Beginner’s luck,’ said Ranjit. He soon changed his mind when his next kite landed on the front of a scooter.

‘Well done, Simran,’ said her mother.

‘Mom! Dad! She’s got an unfair advantage,’ pleaded Mandeep, after his third kite went down.

‘Well, it can’t just be the colour blue,’ said their father. ‘I think she’s just been practicing very hard.’

‘Have you ever thought, Mandeep,’ said Simran, ‘that you’re just useless?’

‘You better watch out! Or else...’ he shouted.

‘Will you two stop fighting!’ said their mother.

‘They’re fighter kites, they’re *supposed* to fight,’ said Simran.

‘I suppose you have a point,’ said their father. ‘I think it’s great that Shoyab’s helped Simran. You wouldn’t help her, Mandeep. But please, Simran, no showing off...’

‘Tell him to keep out of my air space,’ said Simran.

Their mother laughed.

‘Mom!’ said Mandeep. ‘You’re on her side!’

‘I’m not on anybody’s side,’ said their mother. ‘Look, let’s just agree not to interfere with each other’s kites. OK? We don’t want to be up and down these stairs every five minutes.’

When Simran ran out of kites, which she inevitably did – though, satisfyingly, not as quickly as her brother or cousins - Shoyab climbed over roofs and went up and down the streets, diligently retrieving kites to repair if needed, to re-string and to re-fly. Sometimes he came back with entirely new kites which he said a friend had given him.

Eventually, he picked up the tiger kite, weighing it appreciatively in his hands. He looked at Simran. ‘Our agreement, yes?’

Simran nodded. He climbed up on the wall and took the kite into the air.

‘That boy,’ said her uncle, looking ruefully at Shoyab, ‘cut down twenty of my kites last year. I’m going over to my friend’s roof. Out of his range!’

The tiger kite performed beyond Shoyab’s wildest dreams. It was indeed special. The kite was patient and ruthless, soaring, swooping, turning with immaculate ease, hovering, felling all before it. In truth, he wanted to keep it and wondered if this may be at all possible.

The rosy glow of the day faded. The streets fell into shadow. More and more music began to blare from the houses, a hundred different Hindi pop songs competing at the same time. As the blue slowly leached from the sky, the tiger kite flew higher, getting harder to see in the twilight.

‘Shoyab,’ said Simran gently.

He stood on tiptoe, feinting this way and that, shuffling backwards and forwards like a boxer in the ring, a little ball of energy. 'Not yet! Not yet!' he gasped. 'A little longer! Please...'

In the dusk, kites still aloft, the fireworks began. Blasting off everywhere. Red blossoms of fire, plumes of golden flame, explosions of white and silver sparkles, shimmers of lurid green. Crackles and bangs resonated all around, momentarily drowning out the pop songs. She looked in amazement at the incredible display rising from all over the city as far as she could see.

'Wow! This is better than the show at Cannon Hill Park!' said Mandeep. She had forgotten he was there; he had given up kite flying much earlier.

The earth itself seemed to rumble with the explosions - it sounded like whole buildings were collapsing. She could see firecrackers being casually thrown down from the rooftops, neighbours lighting huge roman candles fixed to TV aerials or anything on high. It was the hugest firework display she had ever seen; many coloured clusters of incandescent light erupting all over the city.

'Shoyab!' she insisted. 'My kite!' Only the tiger eyes were visible against the sky, reflecting the flashes of light.

'Five minutes more!'

She waited. 'Shoyab!' she shouted, tugging hard on his sleeve. 'It's getting late! Our *agreement!*'

He turned his head and frowned at her. 'Mmph, take it,' he said, tossing her the reel.

She didn't catch it. It bounced off her arm and rolled across the roof. She stamped her foot on it to stop it. As she crouched to pick it up, she felt a tug on the line, felt the kite veer powerfully to one side. She tried to pull it in a little. The firkee was slippery in her hands. She peered into the darkness. Too high, too high, she kept thinking. The line went loose, the kite cut away. She saw it one last time, illuminated by a rocket burst, the tiger kite drifting, slowly drifting away.

Her uncle was ready to take them to Delhi airport in his taxi. Their luggage was loaded, and they had said their final goodbyes.

In the courtyard of the hotel, Shoyab sat in the lower branches of the peepul tree. He grinned at her, looking self-satisfied. She was reminded of the story of the Cheshire Cat that her mother had once told her.

'Boy! Get down from that tree!' her uncle shouted. 'You're already in big trouble with me!'

He ignored her uncle's remonstrations and simply pointed higher in the tree. There, in amidst the debris of a hundred other kites, she recognised the tiger kite. Her heart started beating faster. Shoyab fearlessly clambered up into the tree towards her kite. She bit into her lip as he painstakingly removed it from the tangle of foliage and kite remains.

'The Gods are smiling on us!' he called out. 'No damage!' He climbed down slowly and presented the unspoilt kite to Simran. She could hardly believe her eyes.

He shook her hand and said, 'Now you will be the greatest kite flyer in all of England. Better than the Queen! She will write to you and invite you to tea to see you demonstrate your skills.'

'Thank you, oh thank you,' she said.

'When I am older and a champion kite flyer, then I will go to the top of the tallest tower and look over the city walls and over the hills and mountains towards your country. And I will see your tiger kite flying above the Queen's Palace!'

Simran nodded happily.

'How exactly are we going to get that home in one piece?' asked her mother.

'We will,' said Simran confidently.

She already knew where the kite would end its days, after much use - in the branches of an old chestnut tree at the bottom of their garden. It would be ceremoniously placed there, suspended for season after season, through wind and rain, fog and frost. The colours would run, the ink dissipate, the paper turn to shreds, fragments drifting away; the only remains a weathered bamboo frame, a frayed length of cord and the distant memory of a tiger.