

Sleeping with Tigers

by
Laura Bowers Foreman

From the anthology **Memoirs in the Light of Day**, edited by Margaret Dinzler-Shaw and published by Lamberson Corona Press, 2008

As a child I slept with tigers. Lying on that wildcat's back, I traced the labyrinth of black stripes and listened to the bedtime stories my parents told of their India years. The great tiger, with his head rising above the floorboards, snarled into eternity. As I listened, I touched the sharp points of his massive claws. To my father, the tigers and leopards were hunting trophies, but to me, they were real and alive. Their spirits filled our house and my imagination. In my dreams at night I, too, roamed the jungles of prowling cats. When I began to walk, I toddled across those skins and the ghosts of those wildcats guided my every step, just as they have throughout my life.

I was conceived in India when my dad, an Air Force pilot assigned to the embassy as an air attaché, arrived with my mother in New Delhi in 1952. And though India had recently gained her independence from Britain, my parents' experiences would be colored by what my father perceived to be the last of the glory days of the British Raj. But their time there was cut short when my mother, who was childless, nearing thirty and had suffered three miscarriages during their ten years of marriage, became pregnant. Although India's population was teeming with newborns, in their minds, it was not a safe place to have a baby. My dad requested a new assignment in the States and they moved to Hawaii in 1955. It was to be the first of eleven moves during my childhood. And so I was born into a home that always, no matter where it was located, looked and smelled like India.

In my earliest photos, Dad held me as he sat on his tiger skin. Around him was the furniture I would grow to know and love. Woven from bamboo and hemp were stools we called *pookas* and chairs called *moandas*. As I began to talk, these were the words I learned. When my crawling began, I pulled up to stand using the large copper tray that was our coffee table. There I came face to face with the tabletop gods. A black soapstone statute of a benevolent Buddha smiled while Shiva, the destroyer, danced frantically in his ring of fire.

Growing up, I dreamed of traveling, of going to India. I worked and saved my money, and though I was accepted into research programs in both Africa and Antarctica, my father thwarted my every attempt to travel the world as he had done. Only to Europe would he deem a trip worthy of merit. I was baffled and angry, but as a child without connections to an extended family, I chose obedience to the only family I knew. Still, I harbored my hopes of going to India.

I had just turned fifty when I met Joyce Mitchell, an East Indian woman. We soon realized we had been friends all our lives, although we had only just met. In Joyce's home, with its Indian décor and items gathered from a lifetime of traveling the world, I saw my childhood home. My father, at eighty, had just passed away and his parting was still fresh. Though a difficult man, I had loved him dearly. My mother had died of cancer while I was still in my twenties. Feeling every bit an orphan, I immediately bonded with this woman in her seventies. Her features echoed those of her native India and her voice resonated with a British accent. And, like my mother, she was a woman whose skin was a shade darker than my own.

Our friendship deepened and my visits grew frequent. One day I sat in her kitchen as she stood at the stove, stirring a pot of *dal*. As the lentil stew simmered, I looked around Joyce's 1970s era kitchen and smiled, remembering the many times I had sat at my parents' table and talked with my own mother.

"Mom felt most at home in India," I began and then added, "She grew up in Georgia." I hoped Joyce would make the connection between these two statements.

She nodded knowingly as she added a bit more spice to the *dal*.

"Mom's family was part Cherokee and was not willing to claim their heritage. They were afraid." I shook my head wearily. "Her ancestors had called the South home for thousands of years. But *my* mother was considered the *exotic*, the *foreigner* because her eyes were narrow and brown. Her hair was straight and black and her complexion ..." I hesitated. "... was like yours." Worried I may have offended Joyce, I glanced over in her direction. My heart paced nervously in its bony cage as I fingered the edge of the counter.

She nodded and smiled slightly. "Ahhh," she said and tasted the *dal*.

I took a deep breath and, as I took in the familiar, pungent fragrance of cardamom and cumin, I felt as if I was home. "Growing up she was the only mother I knew who wore *chappal* sandals and dresses made from mirror cloth." Emboldened, I swept my arm across the kitchen, "I mean, she cooked like you -

poppadums, *dal*, *curries* and *dutney*." Nervous, but determined to continue, my voice trembled with conviction. At last I was telling my story. "She played Indian music on the high-fi ... and she danced Indian dances, for heaven's sake."

Although I was worried Joyce might wonder why I was telling her this curious story, I listened to the voice within that told me I could trust her. It was as if I had crossed an imaginary boundary and I could no longer turn back. I had to risk the possibility of rejection. "In India, Mom discovered she looked like everyone else and she discovered she was beautiful." I sighed deeply. "It was as if India allowed her to embrace her true self."

I stopped and shook my head sadly, "I could sense the connection of India to her Cherokee heritage, but she just wouldn't go there. Still afraid, I guess. She had been taught to be ashamed of her family's roots. Whenever I asked her about it, her answers were vague and evasive. She only offered hints."

Joyce set bowls of rice and *dal* on the table. She sat down and explained, "I've been to the South. I *know* what it's like down there – even in the 1980s. My husband was white and we soon learned he had to go in first and register at the little B&B's we visited. Once the owners got to know me they were okay, but at first..." Joyce straightened and shook her head.

She reached across the table and patted my arm. As her many silver bracelets slid down her long brown arm she said, "It makes perfect sense that your mother felt at home in India. Last winter I took a group of friends from the Tulalip tribe to my home there." She paused, looked at me and stated simply, "We are both Indian people."

I looked at Joyce and my eyes narrowed as I frowned slightly. With her single statement, plainly spoken, she had uttered a truth I had sensed all my life. In her deep-set, dark eyes, I saw courage. The courage I yearned for. I knew she understood and my heart struggled to open with *all* my blood running strong: Irish, English, Scots, German AND Indian. My breath grew shallow. My heart strained against the cords that had bound it so tightly. Could I, at last, step into this truth or would I continue to carry my mother's shame as if it were my duty?

Joyce sensed my struggle. She raised one eyebrow, slapped the table and declared, "My dear, if you were made in India then, by all means, you may consider yourself Indian."

Tears welled in my eyes and my heart broke open. In her commanding voice I heard the certainty I had always yearned for. There was no doubt. There was no question or degree of qualification. There were no documents required. In the

silence that followed I understood she had spoken the truth I had longed to hear all my life, giving me what my mother had not. Her words were like a warm bath of acceptance. At long last, I could claim my heritage.

With tears coursing down my cheeks, I started laughing. I was free at last. "Thank you. Thank you. You have no idea what you've given me."

Joyce took a deep breath. "Oh, but I do." She reached out and embraced me. In her strong arms I had, at last, found the connection I yearned for with my own mother. In time Joyce would share her story of claiming her own identity with me.

A few weeks later I brought over my parents' India photo album. As we sat on her rattan sofa and flipped through its tattered pages, she recognized many of the famous sights my parents had visited. I told her of their visits with the Maharajah Holkar at his Indore palace. He was the ruling prince of a small region in central India. Many of the images were of my dad as the great white hunter, with his gun in hand and kneeling before yet another downed beast.

Suddenly Joyce leaned in and adjusted her glasses. "Ratlam?" she inquired as she examined the notation my mother had made on the bottom of the photo. It had been taken while on a tiger hunt as guests of the Maharajah. "Does that say Ratlam?"

I nodded.

"My Dear." She stood up and walked over to the large map of India that hung on her wall. She pointed to a small spot on the map. "Look."

I squinted at the small print. It said Ratlam *and* it was near Indore. She turned and faced me. "Ratlam is my village, where I grew up," she said.

Joyce's family was Anglo-Indian, her grandfather British. Her father worked for the Indian railway and they lived in one of many railway colonies scattered across the country and, growing up, she was raised to consider herself British. At eighteen she traveled to England and while there she soon realized the Brits regarded her as Indian, not British. "It was then that I decided to apprentice myself to all things Indian," she later explained. Now an American citizen and a widow, she returns to her family home in India each year to help her older sister.

As Joyce and I stood before the tremendous map of her country and, with her finger pointing to a small village in the very heart of that country, we then realized the full impact of the astonishing series of coincidences between us. She

straightened, drew back her shoulders and lifted her chin. Although in truth, Joyce was shorter than me, she seemed at least three inches taller. In her most commanding British accent, she declared, "It is time to make your dream come true and visit me in India. You must return to your homeland. Come."

One year later, in February 2008, I stepped off the train in the early hours of the morning. I was a fifty-two year old woman, wrapped in a fleece jacket and wearing Teva sandals with socks, and I had just arrived in Ratlam, India. I stood shivering in the cold air. There to greet me, was my dear friend, Joyce. She had arrived a few weeks earlier. I reached out to hug her and, smiling, she opened her arms wide. "Yes, you have come at last." she said.

I had returned home - to this place that was so familiar and yet, was all strange and new. As I stood on the railway platform, I was flooded with memories of a land I had known only from my mother's womb. I could hear the echo of Mom's voice, "The Maharajah had us picked up from the train station in one of his big cars."

I looked at Joyce. She too wore socks with her Tevas. Bundled up against the cold, she wore a stylish wool coat with a faux leopard collar over her thin cotton *salwar kameez*. Suddenly I remembered the fur collar my mother had worn, made from a leopard my father had killed. I reached over and gave Joyce's collar a little pat as I remembered my many efforts to convert my trophy-hunting father to wildlife conservation. His stories of wild cats in India had inspired me to work with cougars in America. And though he would never change, I always found ways to listen to the ghosts of those childhood tigers and leopards and, in my life; I pursued a path of wildcat conservation.

Joyce took my arm in hers and introduced me to Chipu, her house manager and friend. Dressed in western styled clothes, he shook my hand and smiled broadly, his strong white teeth flashing against his nutmeg brown skin. The air was thick with smoke from the night's fires. From that smoke emerged the Indian porters that would assist us, many in turbans and most wrapped in blankets. He and Joyce turned to the other men and, in Hindi, gave them instructions. The blanketed men swung my too-heavy bags, filled with gifts for Joyce's family, up on top of their turbaned heads and off we went, following in tow. In that moment, the black and white world of my parents' life in India came alive in vivid color.

As the porters carried the bags, I thought of a photograph of my father, taken near Ratlam. In it, he kneels beside the tiger he has just shot. His rifle, with its high-powered scope, rests astride his knee. On his muscled forearm is his always-present stretch-band gold watch. And on his head, set at a rakish angle, is his broad-rimmed hunting hat. A hat that, years later, would be described as an

"Indiana Jones hat." Gathered in a semi-circle behind him are the Indian porters who had carried the tiger's body in from the field. They were wrapped in blankets and turbans and their dark, somber faces peer out over their clothing. Unlike my dad, they are not smiling. As a little girl I had wondered if they were afraid of my heroic father. As I grew older and examined their somber expressions, I wondered if they were angry, resentful of the white man who had barged in, killed their wildlife and then demanded service.

Now, as I wrapped my own scarf more tightly, I suddenly remembered that the 1955 hunt had also been in February. At last I understood - those tiger porters, wrapped in their blankets, were like the porters we were now following. They were doing their job and it had been cold. But I still did not know - had those tiger porters been angry? Were these porters now annoyed at having to be in service to me?

The porters crammed our suitcases into what seemed a caravan of tiny auto rickshaws. I turned to them and asked if I might take their picture. They nodded and smiled as I took their photo. I bowed. "Namasté," I said and handed each man a tip that was twice the amount Joyce had recommended. In my heart, I hoped to undo some of the damage of the past.

We squeezed into the backseat of one rickshaw and, with diesel engine sputtering; we bounced along on the uneven pavement, laughing as we made our way to Joyce's home. The house, a large stucco bungalow built in 1933, was Italian art deco in design. By now the sun was bright in the sky, the night fires extinguished and the air was warm and clear.

Later that afternoon, I followed Joyce up a narrow staircase, to the terrace rooftop. A hint of the coming night's chill blew on the breezes. "As children, we sometimes slept up here when it got so hot, before the monsoons arrived," Joyce said and pointed west, towards the jumble of houses behind her own. "Back then, the jungle started at the edge of our gate." She paused and added sadly, "But now, the jungle is all gone. Indira Gandhi took all the land away from the Maharajahs." She sighed, "A mixed blessing, I suppose. Some of them had been good stewards of their land and people. But some had abused their wealth and power."

"Who has the land now?" I asked.

"The government of India. They are distributing some of it, in small parcels, back to the people. This certainly has merit, but as you can see, the population of India is always expanding. Each year the landscape grows more barren, drier ..." her voice trailed off.

I glanced in the direction of the setting sun and tried to imagine the jungle as it had once been. In that jungle my parents had been guests at the Maharjah's hunting lodge, a large stone home where guests drank Scotch and played bridge while waiting to hear reports of a tiger sighted by a *shikari*, a hunting guide. It was on this trip that my dad killed "his" tiger.

The landscape was now arid, with only scant foliage. A few stubborn boughs of bougainvillea arched over fences and rooftops and, like the many women in their colorful saris, the bright orange, fuchsia and crimson blossoms were also coated with dust. I tried to imagine this land as it had once been. Squinting in the last rays of bright sunlight, way off in the distance, beyond the buildings, I could see a few scattered trees. How dense had that wild forest once been? What cover and prey had the tigers that once roamed these hills required for their survival?

I sighed heavily, knowing so much had been lost. In my heart I felt conflicted. I was falling in love with this beautiful land and yet, at the same time I was grieving for something I both knew and did not know. Only in my imagination did the jungles grow thick and lush. Only in my dreams did tigers stalk the blue bull deer that hid in the forest. As I closed my eyes and felt the sun against my lids, I prayed that someday the wild landscape would return. And then I thought of my mother's letter.

Shortly before embarking on my trip, I reread a letter she had written to her own mother about that tiger hunt so many years ago. When I looked at the date I was startled to realize their trip had coincided with what would have been the time of my conception. Now, some fifty years later, I gazed onto the very land where I first came into being. Somewhere in a jungle that had once surrounded Ratlam I had been conceived. *I was made in India*, I whispered. *Right here*. I inhaled deeply and took in the fragrant air.

That night, before we turned in for bed, Joyce showed us the verandah, just off her bedroom. "Early each morning, before I start my day, I come out here and meditate as the sun is coming up. It's a lovely way to begin the day. Do join me if you'd like."

The next morning, just before sunrise I woke to the sound of the Muslim call to prayer. The low, beseeching chant echoed across the village. Wrapped warmly in my snuggly cotton *razai*, I crawled out of bed, padded across the large house and peeked into Joyce's room. True to her word, she sat, wrapped in a blanket as the first rays of sunlight warmed her calm face. In the empty *moanda* chair next to her, I sat down, but I did not close my eyes. I watched as the world awakened.

In front of Joyce's house was a narrow lane but here, all of life passed by. The bright sunlight warmed me and the lingering smoke tweaked my nose. The spices of morning *chai*, whole wheat *dhapattis*, and vegetable *roti* wafted on the air. Women held their children's hands as they escorted them to school. Dressed in saris that are no different from the ones in ancient paintings, they were also bundled in western styled sweaters to ward off the morning chill. Turbaned men honked as they scooted along on motorcycles. A school bus lumbered by, filled with tidy, blue-uniformed children. A man, wrapped in blankets, pushed a large wooden handcart piled high with bright red carrots. Cows, with their horns painted blue so as to gain Krishna's blessing, ambled by. A goat warily studied a barking dog before scooting past him. I watched it all and I knew the world began and ended here.

In that timeless moment I thought of my parents. They had been so young, so full of dreams, bravado and fears. I was the only child they would have. When I had asked my mother about her miscarriages, she had responded, "I finally decided a child would come only when his or her spirit was ready." And so, it was here, in the timelessness of Ratlam, India that, just as a mighty tiger took his leave, my spirit quickened and, in that mysterious moment, our paths crossed and at last, I leapt.