The Red Deer

Based on a traditional Sri Lankan folk-tale

It is said that my people walked to this island from the north; that water now covers their path and the way is closed.

This land is full of magic and mystery. My story is woven into the very air and ground of Lanka; thrice-blessed land.

Hear my story, good people; hear my story of passionate love and magic, surprise and joy. Hear my story and see how the miracles of the heart give power to transform the flimsiest dream into solid reality. Hear my story and follow my path – if you dare.

Who am I that you should listen to my words?

My name?

My name is Valli Amma.

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My life began veiled in magic as in the morning mists of the dawn. It is said I was born of the red deer, and found deep in the forest among the yalli creepers. I know not the truth of this. All I know is that my honourable father, Nambi Raja, chief of the Kataragama people and my beloved mother had prayed to the gods for a child, and they nurtured me as their daughter, and taught me love, and honour and respect for the ways of the gods. It is all I needed to know.

I lived among the Veddha, the forest people, the Wanniyal-aetto. One of them and yet not one of them.

The days of my youth were happy – playing in the lush woodlands, the song of the birds filling my days with music, the bright exotic flowers perfuming my pathways; the blur of the quick footed leopards, and the stamp of Ganesha the elephant blessed my sight. It was a luscious and most wonderful place to blossom – this thrice-blessed island; the jewel of the south.

My childhood was filled with laughter and I had many friends, and many names. They called me Princess, Sweet Potato, Sweetest of Children, and Bright Deer. My father sat me on his knees and stroked my long red hair, my legacy and birth-rite; and as my wide eyes gazed upon him with awe, he told me the ancient secrets, the wonders of the gods and the birth pangs of the world.

No tale was as dear to my childish heart as the stories of the great Mountain-Spirit, Kande Yaka. My body trembled in awe and fear as my father told me of Kande's heroic feats and great strength in battle. My heart melted into quick-flowing lava when he spoke to me of the Mountain-Spirit's wisdom, love and tenderness.

And as time passed and I grew from seed to sapling, the image of Kande Yaka grew within me like a vine weaving its tendrils into every crevice of my being until I could not tell where he finished and I began.

As I looked around my forest world, I knew that none of the Veddha could be as great, as powerful, as noble nor as wise as Kande Yaka. And in a forest clearing one day, I planted a tree-seed and vowed on this new life that I would marry none other than Kande Yaka himself. No other raised my spirits as the image of the great Hunter-god, who carried me high above the soaring canopies flying in multi-coloured ecstasy like the wings of the black-headed Oriole. Now my soul's senses had been awoken to this intensity, the bright feverish burning of delight, how could any other satisfy my soul?

No, if I could not marry Kande Yaka, then I must die. There would be no world for me without his brightness touching my heart. Nothing but midnight darkness would face me without his strength and glory.

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Once, it happened that my friends and I were playing in the glittering stream. Laughter was tinkling among the jewelled droplets of water cascading all around us as we splashed each other in friendly competition. The conversation turned, as ever, to loves and dreams, and every man was compared for favour among my friends. Secret desires were whispered into eager ears and on such a happy day jealousies were stroked into laughter and giggles.

"And you, little Princess Valli! Who catches your eye? Who pulls your heart like a magpie trap, little Doe?"

And startled into truth I gaily called,

"I shall marry none but Kande Yaka!"

The giggles hushed into the sighs of the leaves far above. And their eyes filled my vision with their puzzlement and mocking.

"Kande Yaka?! The great and terrible Mountain-Spirit, the Hunter-god? Kataragama Deviyo with his fire and thunder? How do you propose to do that, sweet Valli Amma? Will you become a shooting star and fly in the night to meet him on the mountain top?"

The girls laughed; but nothing could dissuade me, so I nimbly climbed the nearest tree to answer their jibes and dived perfect as a white-breasted kingfisher chasing a fish into the pool; their laughter ending in sweet screams of delight as water showered over them.

But my declaration only hardened my resolve. I had seen but the shadow of the god in my father's words, and nothing could substitute for the true image.

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And so it fell one day when I was twelve years grown, that my father and brothers were needed in a hunting party and I was honoured to guard the field of millet from the brightly coloured pirates who flew in to steal our hard-won food.

The world of the forest was my home. I was not afraid. I was armed with my voice and my trusty sling to keep away the thieves.

As the sunlight dimmed into the pale cold moonlight, my voice rang clear and true, singing songs old and new to keep the birds at bay. As the light faded, and the crickets and tree-frogs joined in harmony with my tune, so the birds quieted to listen to the music of my voice.

But I did not know that another also listened.

For in the clear night air, my notes flew joyfully straight as my slingshot into the great hearing ears of the wise and ancient Mountain Spirit and Hunter-god, my beloved Kande Yaka.

As he laid resting from his battles, he heard the melody clearer than the call of the Serpent Eagle and wondered at its beauty. He had heard of the vow of the little doe-eyed Princess with the long red hair and his great and majestic heart had been touched by the pureness and intensity of her desire for him. Though he was as old as the skies themselves, he looked upon her and saw the beauty and vigour of youth, and it stirred a great passion in him. With startling clarity he knew there was no other he desired above Valli Amma.

As night turns to day in one blink of the eye, Kande Yaka took the form of a young hunter and came to the forest clearing where I stood watch. But I was blinded by his disguise and did not recognise him. I saw only a handsome young man stalking deer.

My song stopped in my throat to see the stranger approach, knowing my father and brothers were far away. Not knowing any other defence, I held up my sling, and warned him with a shout.

“O Stranger, may you be cursed if you come closer to me. I am a maiden and it is not seemly for you to be here alone with me. My father and brothers are even now returning from their hunt and will as soon shoot you down as a wounded deer if they come upon you thus. Go - go in peace before trouble descends.”

The young hunter looked abashed and took a step back, raising his hand as if in apology, when at that same moment crashing through the undergrowth I heard voices I knew to be my brothers and father. I turned back to the young man with joy and relief, but the hunter was gone. Where he had been standing was a great banyan tree which I had not noticed before.

Before I could cry in alarm, my family called greetings and brought me mangoes and honey to succour me. My father placed his hand on my head and blessed me before leading my brothers forth again to continue their night’s vigil deeper in the forest.

As their sounds were swallowed into the darkness, so was the light from their blazing torches, and I was alone once more. But as I sat to taste one of the mangoes, a movement caught my eye and I saw that the handsome hunter had returned.

Alarmed at the intruder, knowing my protectors to have gone, I again reached for my sling.

“Do not come near me, oh strong and handsome hunter. I have the protection of my voice and this weapon, simple though it is; and I can run swiftly and straight as the deer.”

“Do not fear, oh beautiful Princess Valli. You have the protection of the gods too. I will not harm you. I was hunting a beautiful young red doe that passed this way. I have been watching her a long while before you saw me here.”

The harsh words I had planned died on my lips, and I did not know what to reply. But my voice was saved by the sound of my family returning once more. Surely the gods were with me this night!

As I turned to see my father approach I saw the glimmer of movement and an old man was standing at the forest edge where the tree had so recently stood. The hunter was nowhere to be seen.

On entering the clearing, my father stopped his hefty tread in surprise, and bowed his head to the ancient one.

“Sir,” my father cried, “I know not from whence you came; but you are welcome to stay among us as long as you wish to. My daughter here will provide for all your needs.”

And after delivering further food and honouring the old man as was his due, my father led my brothers away.

“My daughter, I am hungry.” The old man spoke when the others had left.

Uneasy in my heart, I prepared a meal for the old man in the traditional way. As women have done since the stars were born I ground the millet into flour, and baked a honey cake over an open fire.

“Dear daughter, fetch me a drink. This cake has made me thirsty.”

Following me to a nearby stream I carried a bowl of water to the old man and helped him drink. He caught my hand with surprising strength.

“Is there anything else you need from me, ancient and wise father?” I asked, hoping the trembling in my voice would not betray me.

Still gripping my hand tightly in his, he replied, “You have satisfied my hunger and my thirst, my child. Now I have only one more request of you.”

“What is it, oh honoured one? If it can be done, I shall do it gladly.”

“You are more beautiful than all the creatures of the forest. I have watched the beauty and purity of your body as you have prepared these victuals for my delight. Now, more than anything, I wish you to satisfy my love for you.”

At this I stepped back and wrenched my hand away. My anger rose inside me and gushed out of my mouth. The old man’s disguise hid my beloved from me, and I did to know to whom I spoke.

“How dare you dishonour me like this, oh ancient one. Have I not served you well with food and drink? Is this not enough for you? Do you now demand my chastity and innocence? For these I have pledged to another and I swear that only he shall take my jewels from me, gladly offered to him alone.”

Being thus rejected, a great desire stirred within Kande Yaka’s belly. In desperation he called upon the help of his brother god, Ganesha, to help him in his love-craze.

Ganesha honoured the calling and appeared suddenly in the forest clearing, thundering and trumpeting his arrival.

Filled with fear at this unexpected threat I stepped backwards and fell into the arms of the old man. He held me with arms unwithered by age and strong as the broadest banyan. I was not happy, but fear spoke for me.

“Please help me, sir. I have only my voice and my sling-shot to protect me, but this great and noble beast will not be turned by these frail instruments.”

“My daughter, I will save you. But in return you must then marry me. I have no wish to steal your honour. I wish it to be freely given to me.”

In the tumultuous seconds fearing my life was ending, I considered which was worse – a death trampled underfoot this gargantuan beast, or a life yoked with the old man. Time was not in my favour. My heart was drumming, my anger fought with my fear, and lost. Trembling, I agreed to the old man’s bargain and kneeling before my new husband in humble subjugation, I placed my life in his hands.

An explosion of sound and light lit up the clearing in the forest and threw me to the floor. As I laid there I prayed to my dear god to save me from the terrible ordeal now beginning; either death or a loveless life.

And as the sound echoed away, the brightness remained, and fearfully I opened my eyes and raised my face from the ground.

O joy and delight! How the tears gushed from my eyes like a healing river over parched land. My prayers had been bountifully answered, for there in front of me was none other than my lord and beloved Kande Yaka, Murukan, seated gloriously on a peacock, the most wondrous of thrones, whose startling colours flamed out into the forest as a bright rainbow in all directions, and he was haloed in a dazzling multi-coloured light.

My chest constricted, my breath squeezed out in tiny gasps. My head pounded and I felt crushed beneath immense gravity. My legs became jelly and I thought they would not hold me. He was all I had imagined and more, and as he stood and reached towards me, I stumbled gladly forwards in my eagerness to be joined with my beloved at last.

He took my face between his hands and with exquisite tenderness he kissed me under the banner of the canopies far above, waving their foliage in celebration at our consummated love. Our lips melted together and we became one person joined at our hearts, noticing nothing around us, neither noise nor colour, with only each other consuming our whole beings. The world could have been at war, raging tempests struck, fierce animals threatened but we were far away in our world of two become one, and nothing could disturb our stillness and joy.

Our times together were precious. None must know until the time was right, but we met often in that forest clearing. Every moment we were apart was a searing agony, a limb dislocated, the body severed in two. When we were together the hours were like minutes and the minutes, fractions of seconds. No time was enough for us to drink our fill of one another, to caress and be caressed, to listen with rapture to the murmured praises of the other – to offer our love and honour to our beloved.

To keep near to me in my daily life, Kande Yaka kept his disguise as the old man receiving all deference and respect due to an ancient. I would attend to his needs, showing courtesy and kindness as a true daughter of the chief, hiding the brightness and joy in my heart serving my beloved lord and master. Little did the Veddha know it was a god and not an ancient man whom we all honoured. How much worthier of our praise and respect was Kande Yaka, Skanda, the divine general, over an old man.

At the midnight hour we could escape to be our true selves soaring up to the tree tops with our spirits light as the birds, sharing our joy and laughter as we entwined ourselves together with limbs, lips and love. But with every dawn our subterfuge must continue. The sun was our enemy, and the lover’s moon, our friend.

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And then it happened that one fine morning my esteemed father came to me and told me to travel with them for the harvest.

No time was given for me to warn my beloved and with hidden tears of sadness I did as I was bidden.

When the midnight hour arrived, my beloved waited in our meeting place; but I was not there. I was far away, weeping under the same stars and pining for my beloved.

Agony filled Kande Yaka, and he shouted to the moon as he rent his clothing in sorrow and despair. Who had come between his love and him? How had she been stolen away? With voice loud as thunder he called my name, “Valli. Valli Amma! Come to me, my beloved! Do not hide from me Valli, my sweet red doe.”

From my sleeping place far away, I felt his calling, I ached with his pain. I felt cut in two, incomplete. Despair and agony raged down my face in torrents. My tears called to his and we wept together, yet apart, each reaching blindly through the space to feel the other's fingers – too far to be held. I lifted my face to the moon above and called for help from our dear friend. In my heart I called to Kande Yaka to find me. I tugged at the vine that bound our hearts, calling him to follow it for he was at one end and would find me at the other.

Kande Yaka's grief was terrible to behold, and the birds and animals of the forest hid in fear and shame to see such pain. As the eagle rides high on the currents yet can see piercingly into the gloom, so my beloved searched for me from the heights of the mountain, and the tops of the trees.

Our minds and bodies cried out to be reunited, and Kande Yaka – mighty warrior and Mountain Spirit came to me in my distress. He found me in my misery, and our tears mingled as one with our cheeks pressed together in joy and relief. And as each huge droplet of love fell to the ground it became a pearl, solid and beautiful – the evidence of our joining and togetherness.

Never again would we be parted, and with the strength of the buffalo Kande Yaka lifted me into his arms and swept me from that place. Once in the forest I bade him put me down, for there was nothing I loved more than to run beside my beloved with the swiftness of the deer and the wind streaming through my long hair, and we laughed in joy and triumph at our escape. We ran together, the deer and the panther; the doe and the leopard, leaping over vines that would trip us; and when the forest became impassable, he became a great eagle once more and carried me up and over the treetops to safety in the Deviyange Kaele.

As the dawn sun crept over the canopies and light filtered through the foliage on to the village far below, there arose a great cry of rage.

From far away, I heard the cry and knew it was my father Nambi Raja, and I trembled to hear it.

My father raised my brothers and kinsmen, and pursued us with all speed and ferocity. I wept to hear his battle cry. It is the woman's lot to lose father or husband, so rarely to keep both. The competitiveness of man is so fierce.

In Suran Kotte the battle was prepared. I held the arm of my beloved and prayed no harm would come to him. But I wished no harm to befall my esteemed father either, and so how was this to end?

My father shouted. "Give me back what is mine. I warn you, old man" (for that is how he saw Kande Yaka still) "that you will suffer for this dishonour."

"Nambi Raja, chief of the Kataragama! Do not be hasty. Any trouble you give to me will fall back on you tenfold!" My beloved replied in the voice of thunder. At this my father gave a great cry and ordered his men to loose their arrows.

I closed my eyes and hid my face deep inside my lord's robe, waiting for the death blow.

But it never came. Instead, my eyes still shut, I heard the cries and screams of all my kinsmen, brothers and father.

I looked up to se a terrible sight. My own adopted family lay stricken, killed or maimed with their own weapons. Surely Kande Yaka was a powerful warrior god. He has saved us – but at what cost? I ran to my father and wept over him as he rasped painful breaths.

"Father, oh my Father! What have I done to you?" I cried, tears washing the blood in rivulets on his chest and on to the forest floor.

I saw a shadow in my grief. It was my lord, who I loved with all my being and was bound to in this life and all others. We shared one heart, breathed with the same lungs.

Surely if one of us died, the other could not live alone.
A tear rolled down his handsome brown cheek and I reached to take it on to my fingertip.

"Beloved Valli Amma, bride of my heart, how I have caused you pain! You shall restore your family to you. Go, touch each person and they shall be healed. I never want to be the cause of your tears."

And in saying this, he was the cause of more tears, but from a different well, the well of joy.

I sprang to my dear kinsmen and kissed each on their damp forehead to heal them of their wounds. Those in pain were calmed and restored; those already on their next journey were called back and, taking a deep breath, they sucked the life of this world back inside them.

It was a glorious moment.

As they sat in confusion and disarray, Kande threw off his disguise and they saw him in all his wondrous splendour. The brightness of my joy was dim beside the radiance of his majesty, and my father and his men fell on their faces to see the great Mountain Spirit in their midst.

My father trembled from head to foot in fear of the great spirit's retribution, but Kande put his arms around me, and before all the witnesses, asked me again to be his wife. My face shone as the summer sun.

Seeing my adoration for my beloved lord and the honour of the Mountain Spirit's favour, my father wept for joy. With humility and tenderness the Chief of the Veddha approved our marriage and kissed my forehead in paternal blessing.

Now, surely all pain must vanish as my wondrous lord and I will no more be separated, but soon will celebrate in all joy and thanksgiving, in public display, our great and unparalleled love for each other.

And as the parakeets called and the mynahs replied, messengers ran the length and breadth of Wanniyal-aetto calling every person to join the wedding perahera and celebrate with us!

And now on my wedding night, alone with my husband, the greatest of all men and spirits, my heart is full. I cannot have any more, I have no more space within, to love, to laugh, to feel joy or pain.

It is enough.

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And so hear my story, oh you mortals. Come and see the truth of my story for yourself, if you can find us! Maybe we will take the form of the deer and the antelope, or the eagle far above, but whatever our shape – our love will never end. True love is beyond death and nurtures life of its own. Our love will never die. We will never die. We were born to love.

And so hear my story, people with no dreams, people who look down at the ground, seeing only the dry skeletons of last year's leaves. Look instead upwards, to the mountain tops or the stars with their infinite beauty and promise.

It is possible to love a god, and be loved deeply in return.

It is possible to dream a dream –

And see it come true.

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