

A Girl Keeps a Tiger in Her Heart



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Illustrated by Lauren Hughey



World's Children

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There once was a little girl named Anjali. Her family was the poorest in the village, and Anjali had only one dress to wear, and no shoes. Many days she had to walk very far outside the village to fetch water in her bare feet.

One day, Anjali's brother Karthi played a mean trick on her. She had just returned from walking for many hours to collect water for her family. Karthi saw her coming up the path to the village carrying two heavy pots of water, one on her head, and one on her hip.

"Hello Anjali!" he called to her. "Watch out for that elephant charging behind you!"

But when Anjali turned around, there was nothing but a pile of rocks. Then he pushed the pot of water from her head, spilling it all over the ground.

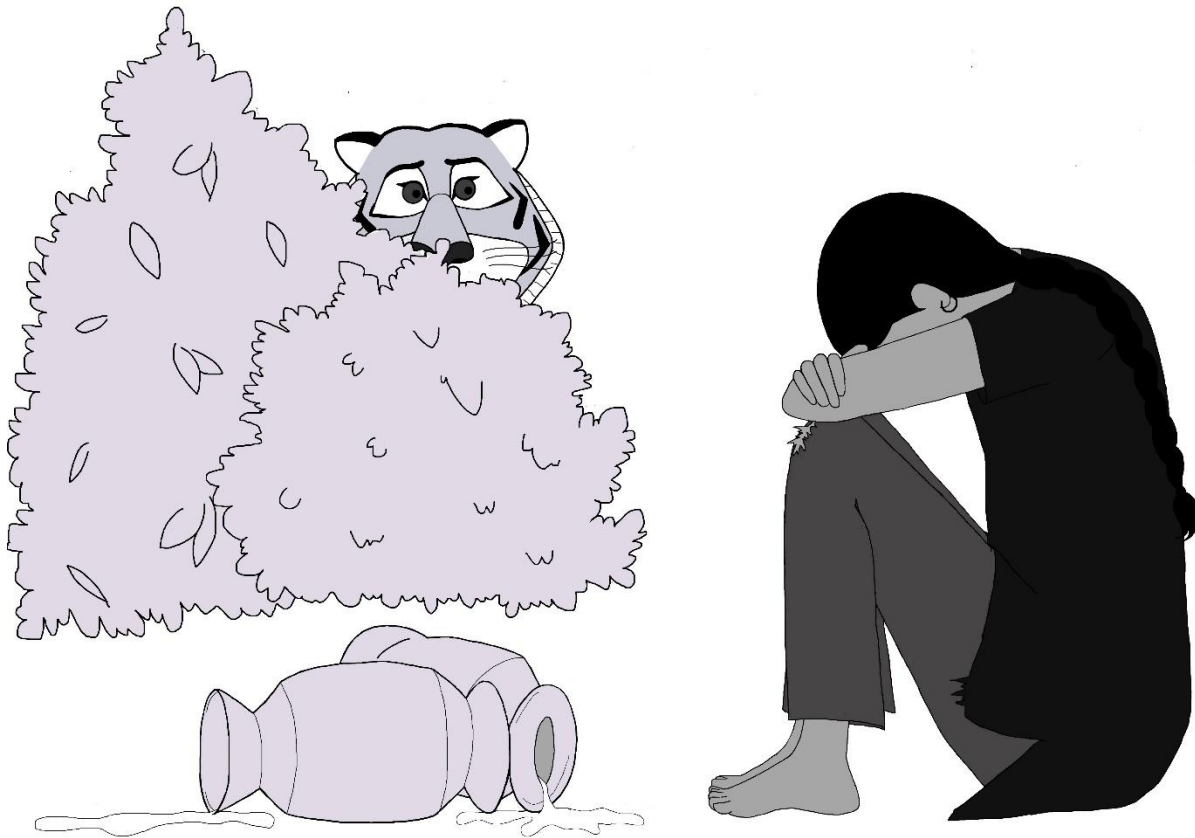


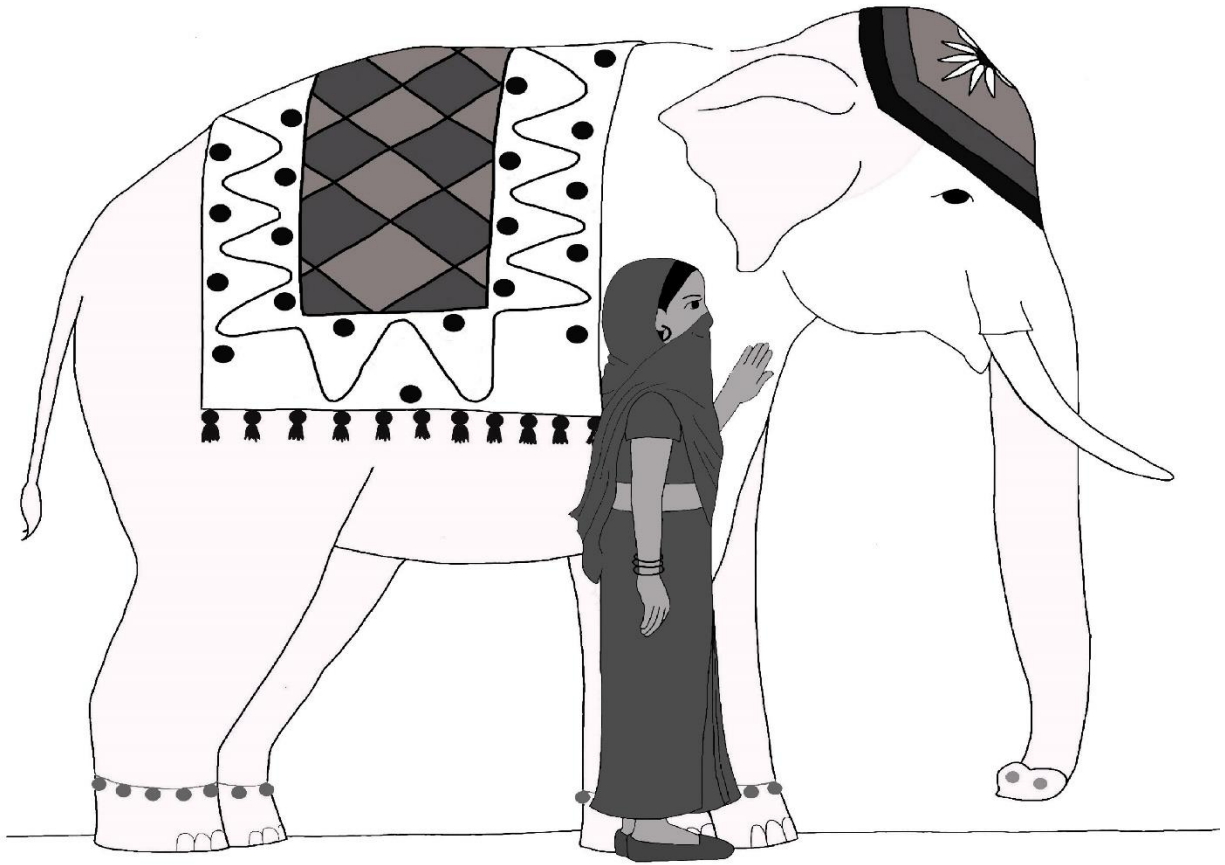
“Oh no!” Anjali shouted, “Karthi, what have you done?!”

But Karthi only laughed at her and said, “You better not come home without any water, Anjali, or Amma and Papa will be angry with you. Go get some more before it gets dark and the tigers eat you!” Then he ran off towards their hut laughing, leaving Anjali alone.

Anjali looked down at the water that was already drying in the dirt. She had walked for so many miles to get that water, and her feet ached. The sun was beginning to set and it would be dark soon. What would she do? She sat down and began to cry.

The sky became dark and the moon was just brightening when Anjali heard heavy footsteps coming up the road. She stood to get a better look and rubbed her eyes. There on the road was a beautiful white elephant, its skin sparkling in the moonlight. A woman dressed in long robes walked beside it.





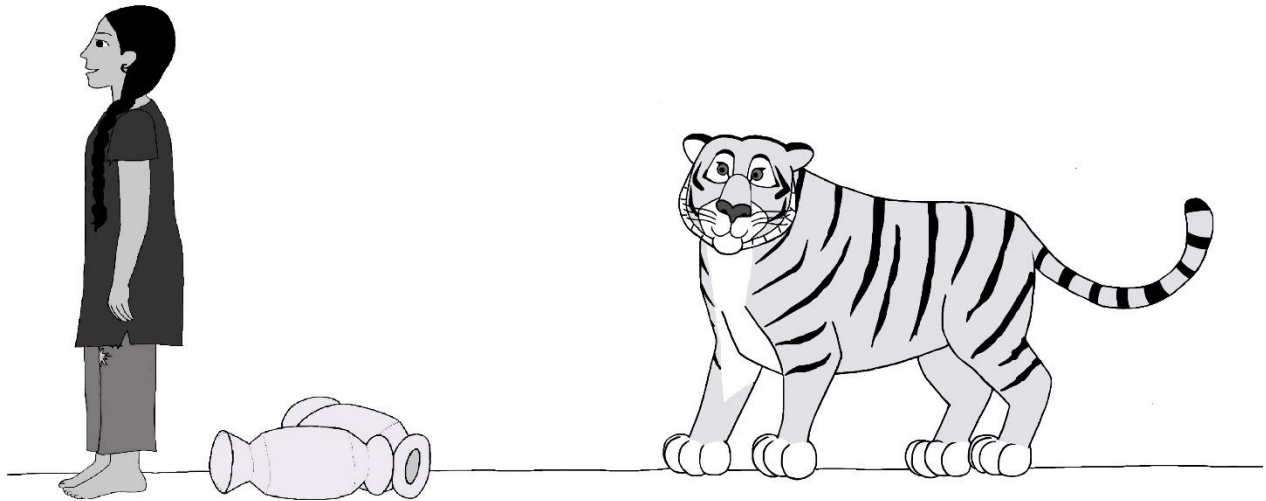
When they came close to Anjali, the woman stopped. She wore a veil that covered her whole face except her eyes. She looked down at Anjali, and Anjali could see in her eyes that the woman was smiling behind the veil.

“Beautiful girl,” she said kindly, “why do you cry?”

Anjali told the woman about what her brother had done, how she was afraid to go home with no water.

The woman was silent a moment, then said, “My child, it is true that boys can be strong and vicious as tigers sometimes; but I will tell you a secret.”

She pointed at Anjali’s chest, “A girl keeps a tiger in her heart. And this tiger does not fight with its teeth, but with the truth. Sometimes, when you are too afraid to speak, you can call upon the tiger to speak for you. Do you understand?”



Anjali nodded.

“What is your name, beautiful girl?”

“Anjali.”

“Anjali, do you wish to go to school?”

“Oh yes, Madam, very much!”

“One day soon, Anjali, I will help you go to school and even university. Then, you must promise to share this secret with every girl in the world. Do you agree to do this?”

Anjali could not believe her ears. Was she dreaming?

“Yes, yes! I promise!” she said, forgetting her tears.

“Very well then, be patient and the time will come,” the woman said.

Then she pulled a carafe out of her robes and filled Anjali’s empty pot with water that tinkled like music as it poured. Then she walked on down the road, the large white elephant following behind.

Many days went by, and Anjali waited but nothing special happened. Then one day, while Anjali milked the cow, her mother said to her, “Anjali, come here and put on this nice saree. Today we will have visitors; your father and I will choose a husband for you.”

Confused, Anjali did as her mother asked. She dressed in a gorgeous saree, as orange as the sunset. Her mother brushed out her long black hair and pulled her cheeks into a smile. But in her heart, Anjali did not smile. Anjali did not want to marry; she wanted to go to school to become a doctor.

She stood in the corner and watched as different men came to visit. They looked at her pretty dress, and her pretty hair. Then they spoke to her parents as if Anjali was not even there. Anjali felt very uncomfortable the whole time.

That night, Anjali was happy to take the saree off, and dress in her rags once again. She pulled her hair back in a braid over her shoulder and prayed that those men found her so ugly they would never return.

Anjali thought her prayers must have worked because for many days no more men came, and her mother spoke only of milking cows and planting rice. Anjali forgot all about marriage until one morning her mother woke her before the sun came up.

“Anjali, you must dress. You will have a man visitor today. He may want to marry you.”

Anjali frowned, but did not want to disobey her mother. Then she had an idea.



When her mother left the room, Anjali dressed in the same orange saree. But this time, she used ash from the cooking fire to draw dark circles under her eyes. She stuck a date over her front teeth so it looked like there was a big hole in her smile. She laughed at herself in the mirror.

When Anjali came to meet her visitor, she hid her face from her parents. When the man greeted her, Anjali smiled as wide as she could, batting her eyelashes at him.

“Ugh!” the man cried, “I could never marry a girl so ugly!”

And he turned and ran out the door. Anjali ran outside pretending to cry. Her parents stood, bewildered.

Once outside, she wiped the ash from her face. She spit out the date, laughing so hard she fell to the ground.

For the next suitor that came to visit, Anjali picked a fresh onion from their garden and rubbed it all over her saree until the smell made tears on her cheeks. Then she took branches from the mango tree and scratched them through her hair until it knotted and stood off her head like palm leaves. She giggled at her shadow.

When Anjali greeted the man, he looked at her with frightened eyes. He could not stop staring at her hair. When she stepped close, his face crinkled and he had to look away, holding his nose. Anjali's parents smelled her, too. They looked at each other, confused.

Anjali sat across the room while her parents offered the man tea. When he looked at her and smiled, Anjali made her eyes go cross and smiled back. The man looked away quickly. He got up suddenly and said he had to leave right away.

"I can't stand that *smell* any longer!" he cried.

Anjali's parents protested, but he left anyway, holding his nose. Anjali smiled to herself.

But her parents had caught on to her games. Anjali's mother scolded her.

"Anjali! What are you trying to do! You are embarrassing us in front of all the good men in this village!" she shouted, "What is wrong with you—don't you want to marry a good man who will feed you and give you children some day?"

Anjali wanted to cry. She was sorry she made her mother so angry, but the truth was she did *not* want to marry. She wanted to feed *herself* someday. And she didn't want to have children. She wanted to become a doctor.

Instead of crying, Anjali remembered what the strange woman with the elephant had said to her: "*A girl keeps a tiger in her heart. And this tiger does not fight with its teeth, but with the truth.*"

She took a deep breath and said, "Amma, I am sorry I upset you. I wanted to talk to you about marriage. The truth is," she swallowed, "the truth is that I do not wish to marry. I wish with all my heart to go to school, so that I may become a doctor someday."

"School? A doctor??" her mother's eyes went wide, "Anjali, you cannot go to school, and you cannot become a doctor."

Anjali's heart raced. "But why not?"

"Because we don't have money to send you to school, we are too poor! That is why you must marry. If you wait too long, we will not even be able to afford your dowry."

"But Karthi goes to school," she said.

"He is a boy, Anjali. Boys go to school so they can get jobs and help their families. A girl will only leave when she marries."

“But it is my right to go to school, if I choose! And I won’t marry. I will not only help my family, but the world because I will share my knowledge.”

“We can’t afford it,” her mother said, “Now stop disrespecting me and fetch some wood for the fire.”

Anjali thought she would never go to school. But one day, a strange woman showed up at their home, with a giant, white elephant.

Everyone from the village came to admire the beautiful elephant.

“Good afternoon, Madam,” the woman spoke to Anjali’s mother. “I would like to make you an offer.”

The woman said she would give Anjali’s parents her elephant, if they let Anjali come to live with her where she could go to school.



Anjali's father began to say no, but to Anjali's surprise, her mother held up her hand.

"Yes," she said, looking at Anjali with a secret smile, "Of course we will take the elephant."

"But she must marry, not go to school!" her father boomed.

Anjali's mother placed her hand on her hip and said, "My husband, your brain must be aging. This elephant will bring us more money than we've ever had. If Anjali goes away, we have one less mouth to feed, and no dowry to pay if she does not marry. It makes perfect sense."

Anjali's father thought for a moment. Then he said to the woman, "Yes, of course we will take the elephant."

Anjali could not believe it, she was so excited. She wrapped the only saree she owned in an old blanket with a photo of her parents and left with the woman that day.

It turned out this woman was a teacher. Her name was Miss Manjula, and she gave Anjali everything she needed for school: pencils, paper, books, and even a blue journal so Anjali could keep notes to study. Anjali loved school, and studied so much that she was first in her class. She graduated from secondary school, then intermediate school, and went on to study medicine at university.

She visited her parents sometimes, to tell them all about the things she was learning in books and they were proud of her.

Anjali graduated from medical university many years later, and finally she was a doctor! She was a very good doctor, and helped poor people for free.

One day, Anjali heard news that the village where she grew up was in trouble. Many people had died from malaria—a disease spread by mosquito bites. She knew from her studies that mosquitoes are most active during the rainy season because they like the wetness of everything.

Anjali worried about her parents and her brother. Were they okay? She was a little bit scared to return to her village—what if she found they had all died? But she remembered the tiger that lived in her heart and this gave her courage. She knew she must use her skills as a doctor to help. She packed her medical bag, some clothes, and naan in a sack and set out for the village early the next morning.

It was a long, muddy journey that took all day because the roads were badly flooded. When Anjali arrived at last, she immediately sensed something was very wrong. There were no children playing cricket or kho-kho in the streets, no women carrying baskets of bananas or papayas for sale. Anjali hurried to her parents' home.

“Oh, Anjali,” her mother hugged her, “we are so glad to see you. But you should not stay here, a curse has fallen over this village. Many have taken ill, and some have died from the mosquitoes. We are afraid to leave our homes.”

“Don't worry, Amma, I will visit the sick and see if I can help them,” Anjali replied. Outside, behind their hut, the great white elephant stood eating leaves off a mango tree.

“It has been a long time, old friend,” she said, stroking the elephant's leg. “I need your help once again.”

The elephant nuzzled her neck with its trunk and laid down on the ground so she could climb atop its mighty shoulders. Carrying a lantern and her medical bag, Anjali set out on the back of the elephant in the rain.

Anjali spent the whole night going from one home to the next, treating the sick with special medicine for malaria. She also gave mosquito nets to every home and showed families how to hang them around their beds at night to keep the mosquitos from biting them while they slept. She explained how mosquitos like water, so they should not leave pots outside their homes to collect the rain, and that they must keep their doors and windows closed in the wet months to keep the mosquitoes out.

The next morning, the white elephant carried Anjali, asleep on its back, to her parents' home. Amma and Papa put her to bed and she slept without dreaming all day and night.

On the second day, Anjali woke to the sounds of singing and music outside her window. When she went to the window, she saw a marvelous scene. Children were dancing and playing kabbadi, men and women were rejoicing and sharing food. The village had returned to the streets!

Anjali gathered her parents, “Amma, Papa—come see!”

When they opened their door, they found a rainbow of gifts had been laid at their stoop. Even their elephant had been decorated with beautiful flowers and golden paint.

The villagers cheered when they saw Anjali, and carried her off in a joyful parade.

“Thank you, Doctor Anjali!” they cried, throwing flower petals on her. “You have saved our village. We did not believe a woman could do such things, but we were wrong. From this day forward, we will make this a day of celebration, to remind us of your strong and big heart.”

Anjali smiled and replied, “Make it also a day to remember your daughters, mothers and wives. For they too have the power to do great things, and it is their right to choose how they wish to live.”

Some years later, Anjali built a school for girls in her village, and taught them all the things she had learned in school.

One day, a little girl with short hair and long arms, came to school crying. When Anjali asked her what was wrong, the girl said that her father had hit her.

Anjali hugged her and looked in her sad eyes.

“I want to tell you a secret, beautiful girl. Do you want to know?”

The girl looked up from her tears and nodded.

“Boys can be strong and mean sometimes, but a girl keeps a tiger in her heart.”



A Girl Keeps a Tiger in Her Heart reminds us that girls can do anything they set their minds to – if they remember to listen to the tiger inside.



If you are a child in India and you need help,
call ChildLine: **1098**



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