

Short Story by Edith Speers

The following short story has not yet been published.
It is one of a series of 'bedtime stories for grown-ups'.

Working title of the whole collection is:
'Fables for the Future'

The Blind Seer

Once upon a time there was a person named Ettra. She lived long long ago and far far away. She lived in a village in the jungle. She was born there and she was born without fear.

In those times people were afraid of many things. They were afraid of the dark because night time was when spirits and devils and ghosts walked on the paths around the village. Also there were wild animals in the jungle all around the village. The people were afraid of these animals both day and night. Sometimes a tiger or a leopard ate a person who went too far into the jungle. There were also snakes that could kill people. The cobra killed by biting with its two fangs. The fangs were long sharp teeth that carried poison. The python was a big snake that killed by dropping out of a tree and wrapping itself around the neck or the body of a person or an animal. Then it squeezed and squeezed tighter and tighter until the person or animal could not breathe any more.

In the day time people were careful to always walk on the clear paths around the village and they were careful not to go too far into the jungle. At night the people stayed in their huts or close to their huts. They did not like to go into the darkness beyond the light from their cooking fires.

The people were also careful to give gifts of food and drink and other things to their gods so that the gods would be good to them. They gave the gifts to a temple where there was a statue of the god. They had many gods and each god was good at doing different things. The god that had the power over bad things was named Kali. She was the god of fear.

There was a god for everything that happened to the people. There was a god for marriage and a god for birth and a god for growing food and a god for making wine and a god for building huts and a god for weaving cloth. Whenever the people did any of these things they gave gifts to the god who could help them. The people did not do these things every day. Each thing was done on a special day and then the god of that thing was given a special gift.

But the people were afraid of something every day. There was no day when people did not feel fear. Because of this the people gave gifts to Kali on every day and the people who took care of her temples became very rich and very powerful. There was no one who did not give gifts to Kali.

At first the only thing that was different about Ettra was her hair. In this time and in this place everyone had brown skin and brown eyes and black hair. Ettra had brown skin and brown eyes but when her hair grew it grew both black and white. It did not grow both black and white mixed together. Her hair grew all black on the left side of her head and all white on the right side of her head.

Ettra's parents were afraid. They were young people and she was their first child. They lived far from the city and far from the big temple of Kali in the city but the priests of Kali visited all the villages at different times to take gifts for the temple from the people. As soon as a priest of Kali came to their village the parents of Ettra took her to him. They were afraid of the way her hair grew black on one side of her head and white on the other side of her head but they were also afraid the priest might want to kill their daughter. He might say she was bad and must die.

The priest looked at Ettra's hair and he looked all over her body for other signs of strangeness. He found nothing strange or different about her except her hair. He gave Ettra back to her parents and told them they could keep their daughter but they must give a very large gift to Kali. The parents gave the priest all the cloth they had woven that day except what was already made into clothes for themselves. They prayed that their daughter would lose her strange hair and grow hair that was all black on both sides of her head. Ettra's hair did not change.

It grew all black on the left side of her head and all white on the right side of her head as she grew up into a little girl. But her parents got used to it. Everyone in the village got used to it.

If bad luck happened to a lot of different people in the village all in a short time then everyone looked again at Ettra and talked about her strange hair. Then they talked about how she was different and perhaps bad. But the parents of Ettra gave large gifts to the priest of Kali every year and the priest liked this. Even when they felt like blaming Ettra for their bad luck the people of the village did not try to hurt her. They were more afraid of the priest of Kali than of Ettra.

By the time Ettra was five years old her parents had two more children. The babies were both boys. There was nothing strange or different about them. The parents had a hard life. Both of them had to work all the time to grow food for themselves and their children and they had to weave enough cloth for themselves and more cloth that they could trade for other things they needed. Also they wove every year a lot of cloth for the priest of Kali.

The parents were very busy taking care of their babies and working every day. There was no older brother or sister to watch over Ettra. Ettra's parents had relatives in the village but they were busy with their own work and their own children. Older children watched over younger children in the village but there were a lot of children and there was no one who watched Ettra all the time.

Ettra was glad of this. She liked to play with the other children when they let her. Sometimes they made fun of her hair and ran away from her. But Ettra also liked to go away by herself sometimes. She chased butterflies through the jungle. At first she chased them along the paths and then stood still and watched them sadly when they flapped their bright wings and flew away into the green jungle. Then she began to chase them into the jungle just a little way and then a little way further.

This was how she found the water pool in the jungle and as soon as she found the pool of water then she came to visit it every chance she got. But she was careful about it. She was careful that no one saw her step off the path. She was careful to go to the pool in a different way at different times so that she made no path. She was also careful to be quick and quiet so that no one could follow her.

It was a beautiful place. Ettra was happy here. She learned to sit still.

It is not easy for a little girl to sit still. But the pool was quiet and the jungle was all around her. She felt safe. She sat and watched the water. The first time a butterfly came and sat on her knee she laughed out loud and bounced and scared it away. She learned to sit still and speak softly to the creatures of the jungle. Because she sat still and was quiet the snakes lost their fear of her. The first time a cobra reared up and flared its hood and licked the air with its tongue right in front of her, Ettra shook with excitement. But she sat still and only showed her joy by crooning to the snake softly.

Ettra sat cross-legged by the edge of the pool. She watched the snakes come to drink the water. She watched

the butterflies and other bright swift insects. She watched the big pink flowers of the lotus that grew out of the pool. The fat green neck of the lotus came up from under the water, bearing the closed bud of the lotus. It came up and also on the stem were big flat leaves. Then the bud opened into a big flower.

Ettra never broke off a lotus flower from its fat green stem. But she thought about it. One day she slipped into the pool near the edge and waded out and touched a flower. She put her hand around its stem below the petals and she thought how she wanted to take this flower to her mother. She stroked her fingers down the stem of the lotus, down along the stem and under the water, and down to where the stem came out of the thick black mud. Ettra felt the thick black mud oozing between her toes. It was nice. The roots of the lotus also went down into the black mud but they went down much deeper than Ettra's feet.

The little girl scooped up some of the mud and brought it up out of the water to look at. Water spilled out of her hand and silky black mud sat in the palm of her hand. She looked at it. It dripped from between her fingers. Then she waved her hand underwater to wash it clean. She went back to the green edge of the pool and sat there with her feet in the water. She waved her feet underwater to wash away the black mud and she rubbed the mud out from between her toes and then she sat cross-legged again until her dress dried out. No one must know that she came to this pool. She must not take a flower to her mother and she must not have the black mud on her hands and feet.

Very soon the snakes and the butterflies and Ettra all got used to each other. They were not friends but they got used to each other. If the cobra came near to Ettra it flicked its tongue to taste the air and on the air it tasted Ettra and because it was used to Ettra, it just slid past her and went to drink from the pool. The python also flicked its tongue and then slid past her. Cobras do not eat humans. Pythons do not eat humans either. It is much easier to eat smaller things and there were lots of small animals for the cobra and the python to eat.

Many of these small animals came to drink from the pool and they also got used to Ettra. Sometimes Ettra laid herself down by the edge of the pool and slept for a little while. Sometimes she slept for quite a long while. Sometimes when she slept the small animals came close enough to sniff at her skin and her hair.

If Ettra woke up and felt a cool nose and a whiskered face tickling her skin or brushing against her hair then she smiled to herself and stayed still. It might be a monkey. The monkeys were very shy and not often did they come down from the trees. They only came down to drink at the pool. The monkeys were easily frightened.

Then it happened one time that when Ettra woke up because of whiskers tickling her she noticed it was getting dark in the jungle. It was not the blackness of night but it was dark enough that she knew she must hurry home. She stayed still though, until the animal that was tickling her walked away. Then she sat up and looked around. Standing with its back to her as it lapped water from the pool was a big orange and black and white striped cat. It was a tiger. It was a she tiger because right beside her was a tiger cub who sat staring at Ettra with big yellow eyes.

When the tiger finished drinking she turned and walked past Ettra. She stopped and sniffed at Ettra again and then walked into the jungle with her cub following behind her. Ettra got up and hurried home. After that she liked best of all to stay by the pool until almost night time. She loved to watch the tigers and leopards come out of the jungle to drink at the pool.

Very soon the tigers and the leopards and Ettra all got used to each other. They became friends. The big cats were smarter than the snakes and they were not so easily frightened as the monkeys. Also they liked to be touched. They liked to be scratched behind their ears and they liked to have their chins rubbed. They liked to have their fur stroked and Ettra loved to stroke their warm soft fur. She loved to rub her face against the warm soft fur of the big cats.

Ettra was also smarter than a snake and she was also not so easily frightened as a monkey. She knew the big cats were wild animals and that they had sharp claws and sharp teeth that could hurt her. But she also knew they did not want to hurt her. She never spoke loudly or moved quickly when she was with them. She never

played with them the rough rolling way that they played with each other. She never touched them unless they came to her and asked to be touched. Then she gladly touched them.

In this happy way a few years went by.

Of course by this time everyone in the village felt that there was something strange about Ettra besides her hair. She did not play the same games in the same way as the other children any more. She did not hurt anyone or say bad things to anyone. No one was her friend. No other parents came to Ettra's parents to talk about marriage. Most of the other little girls of the village already knew who their husbands would be but no one wanted Ettra for a daughter-in-law. Every year Ettra's parents had to weave more cloth for the priest of Kali than for themselves and because no one looked at Ettra as a wife for their son it seemed her parents must bear the burden of her for the rest of their lives.

Worst of all was the way that Ettra disappeared at times. She did not stay close to the village, and the other children told their parents, "She was not with us." Sometimes no one knew where she was until almost dark. Then she walked into the village from out of the jungle as suddenly and as silently as if she were a spirit or a devil or a ghost.

Then it happened one day that she did not come home at all.

Everyone was rather glad. They knew she must be dead and everyone felt easier for it. Ettra's mother wept yet she could not help herself from thinking of how much less cloth she would have to weave for the priest of Kali. All the adults of the village gathered in the morning and put on sad faces. The women wept and wailed to keep company with Ettra's mother. The men went out along the paths around the village to see if they could find a scrap of cloth or some bloodied bones or any sign of what remained of the child.

Because it was day time and because Ettra would become a cannibal ghost if they did not find part of her to burn in a funeral ceremony, the men of the village finally left the paths and went to search in the jungle.

As they walked carefully through the jungle a man suddenly hissed and dug his fingers into the arm of the man beside him. They stared at what they saw.

Ettra stood by the pool with her left arm resting on the shoulders of a black leopard. She stroked his neck with her right hand and she said, "Thank you, my friend. Thank you for staying with me when I woke in the black night. Now it is day and we both can go home." Ettra heard a hiss. She looked up and saw the two men staring at her. Already the panther was leaping away into the jungle. Ettra heard the men yelling for the other men of the village. She knew that this happy part of her life was now finished.

Very sadly she went back to the village with some of the men walking ahead of her on the path and some of them walking behind her. No one touched her, not even her father. At the village her mother cried out and ran toward her with open arms but the men stopped Ettra's mother. They held her back and they told everyone what they had seen.

The village people put Ettra in a hut and guarded it and they sent a messenger to the priest of Kali. The priest came with several soldiers of the temple. They took Ettra away with them.

Ettra's parents waited in fear to hear if they were going to be punished because of their daughter or if their sons, too, might be taken away or if they must give more gifts to the temple of Kali. But nothing like that happened. Instead it happened one day that a messenger came and gave them some silver coins. Now they were richer than anyone else in the village. The messenger said that Ettra was now a seer in the temple of Kali in the big city far away. The parents felt glad to have given their daughter to Kali and also to be rich because of it.

Seven years went by.

Ettra sat cross-legged on a cushion on a stone step. The warm sun soaked into her skin. The stone steps led down to a pool in the garden. In the garden tigers and leopards lay basking in the sun. A few of the younger ones rolled on the grass and fought with each other. Nearby there was a cage but the big cats did not often go in the cage. They only went in there when Ettra called them. She did this once a day when it was time for the servants to bring meat and leave it out for the cats. She also called the big cats into the cage when it was time for servants to carry away old bones and cat spoor or for gardeners to tend the garden.

Except for these times no one but Ettra came into this garden. It was her private place. The steps into the garden led down from her private rooms. Servants came into her rooms but they always were careful to first ring a little bell that hung outside her door. Then Ettra picked up any snakes that were sleeping in her room and put them outside for a while. She closed the door to the garden so the servants would feel safe.

But for her own safety she always made sure to keep a small poisonous snake wrapped around her arm like a bracelet. Sometimes she kept a small python draped around her shoulders and wound along her arm like a shawl. The pythons were well fed and a danger to no one but no one ever believed it.

Ettra was still smarter than a snake and not so easily frightened as a monkey. She knew how to be gentle with wild animals and she also knew how to be not so gentle with priests of the temple of Kali. Ettra was now a graceful and fully blossomed young woman and the priests of Kali were men who noticed this. They did as they pleased with the other young women of the temple but Ettra had the power to pick and choose her lovers. It took only one death by snakebite to prove this.

All the young women of the temple were seers, They were fortune tellers. Each of them was marked by a strangeness. One girl had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. Another girl was an albino. Her skin was ash grey and her eyes were blue and her hair was white. Each girl was different from ordinary people and also different from the other seers. No one else had hair like Ettra's that grew all black on one side of her head and all white on the other.

No one else was able to make friends with wild animals. Every other one of the seers stayed at the temple because of fear. Some feared for their safety if they tried to leave. Some feared for the lives of their families. Some feared the priests. All of them feared Kali herself. Even the statue of Kali in the temple frightened them. It did not frighten Ettra.

Ettra stayed at the temple because there was nowhere else for her to go. She knew her parents did not want her. She knew she could not live in the jungle like a beast. She loved the beasts but she was human and she had to live among humans. Also it was not a bad life at the temple. She had food and drink. She had fine clothes and jewellery. She played games with the other girls. She was not a freak among them because they were all just as strange as herself. She had lovers when she wanted them. She worked a little bit every day and this was also fun sometimes.

When Ettra worked she sat in silence in a little room. She sat with a snake coiled around her arm. Beside her there was a covered basket containing white pebbles and black pebbles. People paid to come and have their fortunes told. They came alone and often veiled or disguised. But the priests always knew who they were. The priests learned a lot about these people and their secrets from the questions they asked. The person asked Ettra a question to which the answer was either yes or no. Ettra listened. She pretended to sit in a trance for a while. The priests told Ettra she should mutter charms for a while but she found that she could make a silence that was much more frightening to people than any charm. Then she reached into the basket and put a pebble on the floor in front of her. White was yes and black was no. People sometimes cried out or wept when they saw the answer.

Ettra did not understand it but somehow her pebbles told the truth. She told the priests what questions were asked and what the pebbles answered. The priests did not bother to tell Ettra what the outcome was or who the people were but of course she had ways of finding out. The temple was full of servants and soldiers and eunuchs and priests and seers and all of them gossiped. Besides, Ettra knew how much money people paid to come and ask questions of her and she knew that year by year she was given better food and nicer clothes

and jewellery. Also the priests themselves were more and more careful of her. She liked all this. It was not a bad life in the temple.

Then something happened to Ettra that changed everything. She fell in love.

The boy was just a few years older than herself and he was no one special. He was one of those who came to tend the flowers and the fruit trees of the temple gardens. He was very beautiful to look at. Because he sometimes came alone to Ettra's garden after she caged the tigers and leopards, it was easy for them to become lovers.

But this was very different for Ettra to be in love. With other men she turned her mind to other things as soon as they left her. But when this boy left her she felt pain inside herself and all the time until the next time they met she could not put her mind onto anything or anyone else. Other men Ettra loved to tease and torment because they were so foolish in their passion for her. But with this boy Ettra was always soft and kind.

Also it happened that this boy wanted her to be his wife.

There was no way that they could marry. Ettra was a seer. She belonged to Kali. There was no way that the priests of Kali would ever let Ettra stop being a seer.

The two young people ran away together. Ettra bought black powder from the old woman who made herbs and powders and charms for the seers of the temple. Ettra mixed the black powder with oil and rubbed it through the white hair that grew on the right side of her head. Then she looked like she had black hair all over her head like a normal girl. Ettra took some silver in small coins from the temple and the two young people ran away together one night. They went to a far away village of the boy and there they were married and built a hut and lived like ordinary people.

Because the village was far from any place where Ettra could buy herbs and powders she had to be very careful to keep her head covered when the black powder was all gone. She tried other things to make her hair black but none of them worked very well or for very long. Also she could no longer buy the herbs that the seers sprinkled into their food every day to stop them from becoming pregnant. Ettra became pregnant and was very glad of it. She had a fat healthy baby boy and she named him Davi. She loved him even more than she loved her husband.

It was because of the baby that Ettra walked into the jungle one day and emptied a little cloth bag onto the ground. Out of the bag slid her snake. It was the snake she kept with her for her own safety. The snake rose up a little and licked the air with its tongue then it slid away into the jungle.

This is how it happened that when the priests of Kali came with soldiers to take Ettra away she had no way to save herself from them. She was sitting cross-legged in front of her hut when they came. She had Davi on her lap and she was making him laugh by tickling his feet and his belly. A shadow fell across Ettra and Davi. When she looked up it was too late. Soldiers grabbed her by both arms and dragged her away. Davi slid from her lap and tumbled to the ground. He was crying.

Ettra screamed and fought. She twisted her neck to look back at her hut and her child but soldiers were all around her. She felt something cool on her arms and she knew it was useless to fight any more but she kept fighting more and more weakly. They smeared on her arms a paste made of powdered herbs mixed with fat and the drug that was in the herbs soaked through her skin and into her blood making her weaker and weaker. Even before she felt the sleep drag her down and darken her mind she knew it was useless to fight. She knew that this happy part of her life was finished forever.

They kept Ettra drugged for a long time. Sometimes her mind floated up from the depths and she was aware of jolting movement and of colours and of voices. But nothing took on any solid shape or made any sense. She knew she was being carried somewhere and that was all.

Then Ettra opened her eyes and saw the statue of Kali above her and she knew that she was back in the temple. She felt cold stone beneath her body and she smelled the old blood that was dried onto the stone. This was the altar of Kali where animals and sometimes people were bled as gifts to Kali. Ettra could not move. She lay on her back with strong hands holding her down. She blinked up at the statue of Kali.

Then hard fingers came down and held her eyelids apart so that she could not blink her eyes. Ettra saw two hands coming down at her face and in each hand there was held a long sharp thorn. It was the last sight she ever saw with her eyes. There was no pain but the world went black.

When Ettra woke she knew she was truly awake and that the drug was gone from her body. But the world was black. She could feel daytime hotness heavy all around her as she lay on cushions. But the world was still black. She sat up and stretched her eyelids open. She opened them as wide as she could. She turned her face in every direction but no matter where she turned the world was still black. Then Ettra rolled off the cushions onto the cool marble of a floor. She rolled onto her hands and knees and she began to strike her forehead against the floor over and over again. She wailed and beat her head against the floor.

From across the room came a cry then heavy feet thudded toward her. She was gathered into a man's arms and held tightly against a man's chest. She was still too weak to struggle free. She bit wildly at his flesh and he gasped with pain but he did not let go of her and he did not hit her. He held her so tightly with her face pressed into his clothes that she could not bite him again. In his deep voice he crooned to her softly. His body swayed so that he was rocking her like a baby. Ettra gave herself up to sleep.

When she woke the second time her heart jumped with fear because the world was still black. Then she lay still for a while and let herself get used to it. Also something strange was going on.

She was outside and lying in the sunshine on grass. Something was tickling her skin. Ettra smiled. She lifted her right hand slowly and across her palm she felt the harsh rasp of a big cat's tongue. She sat up slowly and rubbed under his chin. As she sat up she felt something silken move over her left wrist. She made a turning motion with her left wrist and felt a small snake coil itself around her wrist. She smiled again even though she was thinking of Davi.

From across the garden she heard voices. She knew the men were standing in her room or perhaps on the steps leading down to the garden. The first voice was angry. The second voice was calm. The first voice was the voice of the high priest of Kali and the second voice was the voice of the man who had held her.

The priest said, "Now we cannot get to her. We cannot kill the animals of Kali and unless we kill them she cannot be reached. You fool. She's blind and half starved and still she got away from you."

The other man said, "She must have crawled out there while I was asleep. But what does it matter? She cannot live unless you feed her. She will serve the temple again. There is nothing else that she can do so what does it matter if she is in here or out there. She cannot leave the temple."

There was some more talk of this kind and then the voices went away. Ettra sat cross-legged amongst her friends. She stroked a finger along the silken body of her snake. Once again she was safe from the priests of Kali even though she was their prisoner. She smiled at the anger of the high priest. He was angry because once again Ettra had the power to pick and choose her lovers. He knew she would never choose him.

After a while she heard the voice of the other man. He called out to her, "There is food for you here on the steps. Can you find your way here?"

Ettra stood up and made sure she had a snake on each arm. Then she stepped carefully ahead into the blackness. The man called out to her if anything was in her path and she stopped and felt her way around a marble bench and the pool and other smaller obstacles. She felt her way with her hands and her feet up the steps. The man spoke to her and helped her to sit on a cushion. He put a dish of food into her hands and she ate. She was very hungry. She ate a lot of food before she said anything.

Finally she said, "Why did you make me walk alone? Why didn't you come and get me?" The man said, "Because of the animals, of course." Ettra said, "If you fear them so much then how did you carry me out amongst them? The man was silent a while. Then he said quietly, "We must never speak of that or I am dead. You understand?" "Yes, of course," said Ettra. Then she somehow knew that a smile was taking shape on the man's face. He said, "That is a walk that I want to make only once in a lifetime." Ettra smiled too. Then already she was thinking about this man.

She knew she could never again leave the temple. She knew that if she tried to go home her husband would see her only as a burden. She could no longer be a wife to him nor a mother to their child. She could only be a blind beggar. She knew her husband very well after living with him. She loved him and he loved her but he was an ordinary man. He needed an ordinary wife to cook and clean for him and to bear his children. This Ettra could not do. The only life that Ettra could live was as a seer in the temple of Kali.

She asked the man, "Are you a guard or a priest?"

"Neither," said the man. "I once was a soldier but now, now I belong to the temple. My work is with you. I am your eyes." Then he said, "Also I can be your body servant."

Now Ettra understood. She said, "Then you are a eunuch."

"Yes," said the man.

"But your voice. It is the voice of a man, not a eunuch."

Even as she said these words Ettra could feel the pain that she caused him.

Yet his voice was without feeling as he said "That is because I was still a man until just a few years ago. The others were only boys when they became eunuchs and so they still have the voice of boys."

In her mind Ettra saw pictures. She saw the picture of a young soldier and of a young woman of high birth. She saw them being torn away from each other. She said, "You also have been punished for loving the wrong person.

"Yes," said the man.

The man's name was Sajan. From that day forward he and Ettra were never more than a few moments apart from each other. They lived together in love. The only time they were parted was when Ettra went into her special room in the temple to speak with those who came to have their fortunes told. No longer did Ettra use the black and white pebbles to tell fortunes and no longer did she sit in silence. Now she saw pictures in her mind and the pictures spoke the truth. Ettra became the richest and most powerful seer in the temple of Kali and indeed the richest and most powerful seer in any of the temples of Kali throughout the land. She was still smarter than a snake and not so easily frightened as a monkey. Because of this the priests of Kali feared Ettra almost as much as they feared Kali herself.

In this way Ettra and Sajan lived out their lives in the temple of Kali until they died still together and still in love. For the eunuch and the blind seer, life was good.