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IDENTITTI

Excerpt translated by Lucy Jones

Part One

Fake Blues

Me and the Devil

IDENTITTI

A Blog by Mixed-Race Wonder Woman

About me:

Last time I spoke with the Devil, he was naked, visibly sexually aroused and a woman. So much for social certainties. If you can't even rely on the Devil to be male, you might just as well shed any kind of identity like an old T-shirt! Which I'd be happy to do if I had one to slip into, let alone out of. This is the whole point of meeting my Devil, who is a Devi – an Indian goddess with too many arms and the heads of her decapitated enemies as a necklace. Yes, I'm talking about Kali. 'Demons, the lot of them' she said – in the same dismissive tone of voice which my cousin Priti uses when she says 'men, the lot of them' – and shook her necklace to make the teeth of her murdered foes rattle. And, true enough, Kali's demon heads did look suspiciously like men's heads.

But she had already moved onto other things. 'Let's have a squirting match. Who can ejaculate the furthest?'

I pointed at her hairy vulva. 'How are you going to...?'

'Ah! Jizzing isn't just for cis-men,' Kali shouted so triumphantly that for a moment I didn't even notice she'd just said 'cis.'

'Why are you so surprised? We had three genders ages before your God was even born.'

'But *you're* my goddess,' I reminded her.

'I thought I was your devil?'

'Where's the difference?'

Race & sex. Whenever we met we talked about race & sex. Or to be more specific my relationship to Germany and India, my two neither-father-nor-motherlands. (Remember, Mixed-Race Wonder Whatever). And about ... sex. This blog is basically a transcript of our conversations. And if you keep reading I'll even tell you why I talk to a goddess all the time. My name is Nivedita Anand. You can call me IDENTITI.

Strange Fruit

1

The day hell opened its gorge and spewed howling furies started out like a normal day – if a normal day starts out with a rocket.

It's not a rocket, it's a satellite, Nivedita read, at least that's how she interpreted her cousin's Whatsapp. What Priti had actually written was: *tisno arugula, issaSATELITTE!!!* and then an emoji that looked like a bunch of asparagus. Nivedita stared up at the 19 floors of concrete, balanced precariously on a tiny plinth that related to the rest of the building like the fiery tail at the bottom of a rocket in a diagram of the recoil principle, before she texted back: *Definitely a rocket!*

At the top of the building, right where the Apollo capsule had been located on Saturn V, iron pylons formed a pyramid-shaped arrow pointing into the dazzling grey sky and Nivedita felt both sublime and insignificant in the face of this concrete spaceship. This was Deutschlandfunk and the entrance proclaimed in resolute blue letters: *The News*.

Imagine you're a terrorist who's already killed several people, Priti's next Whatsapp advised her in an even more arbitrary array of letters, *or that you're a terrorist who's already faked that she'd killed loads of people. Then this will be a piece of cake.* And a few seconds later: *A small step for you, a big step for humankind. ROFL LMAO.*

The glass doors glided open in front of Nivedita noiselessly, and she entered the hallowed halls of the broadcasting house. It smelled of wax candles and artificial leather, like a blend of the Inland Revenue and the Secret Service, if MI6 smelled like James Bond films looked. Through the glass

doors, she'd only caught a glimpse of the porter's suit and was shocked when he looked up and she saw that he was no older than she was. But thanks to a piece of black cloth, he belonged to a different generation and danced to a different drum – unless he'd slip off his serious jacket or Nivedita her combination of radical chic and proper dress – which, being completely ignorant of the codes, meant that she had plaited her long black hair into a Dutch braid that morning, from which it had immediately started to struggle free, strand by strand, in a silent but determined protest. 'I'm here to be interviewed about my blog.' She pronounced the sentence she'd been practising for the entire train journey.

'Where?' the porter replied cryptically.

'Er...here?'

He gave her a fatherly look. 'No, I mean, which desk, editorial department?'

For a moment, Nivedita couldn't even remember her own name. She felt like a stuck zip – all skewed and entangled. Then the midnight-blue land-line phone on the counter rang and saved her.

'Nivedita Anand,' she said at the same moment he hung up and announced: 'Someone will be down to pick you up.'

She did what she always did when she was overwhelmed and went to the toilet. Not because she longed for three square feet of privacy, but to look in the mirror and check if she was still there. The frosted glass of the toilet door bore the inscription: '*Frau* (from Old High German *Frouwa* meaning 'lady' or 'mistress'): female adult person. The definition of *F.* varies according to geograp. location, history. epoch, as well as social and cultural type.'

'Are you in?' Priti asked.

'Yes,' whispered Nivedita.

'Why are you answering then?'

Conversations with Priti always followed certain rules, i.e. Priti's rules: soon she'd remember she had something more important to do than chat to Nivedita, even if she was the one who'd called.

Especially if she was the one who'd called. That's why Nivedita didn't go to the trouble of explaining herself or anything and instead just said: 'You should see the toilets here. They are an entry-level course in German philology.'

'That's the spirit!' Priti approved robustly. 'Feel superior to the toilets! Then you'll —wait!

Something's come up, Niv.' If Priti was feeling generous towards Nivedita, she called her Niv, pronouncing it like the Irish name Niamh, that is: 'Nieve'. Priti was from Birmingham and liked that,

not because people in Birmingham had a clue how to pronounce Irish names, but because she could use it to highlight that she was different. As if anyone would dare doubt that Priti was different with a capital O like Other. And as long as she sprinkled Nivedita with the stardust of her acceptance, Nivedita too felt deliciously different rather than simply strange. But Priti's mercurial mood could change as quick as a wink and when she was feeling less bountiful, she'd call Nivedita 'Nivea', like the *white* hand cream brand that regularly caused scandals with its racist advertising.

'Shit!'

'Priti?'

'Gotta go. Call you later!'

Nivedita tapped on the red receiver icon and looked deeply into her own eyes that told her exactly nothing. She wished urgently that she could see herself the way other people saw her. But that was just what she couldn't do. She could not even see herself the way she saw herself. But she *could* smudge her eyeliner to produce more intellectual shadows under her eyes, so that's what she did.

A small woman with a large dog was waiting for her on the other side of the frosted glass door.

'Welcome to Deutschlandfunk, I'm Verena. May I call you Identitti?'

Verena had perfect dimples when she smiled and Nivedita imagined what it would be like to have sex with her. Then she imagined what it would be like to have sex with her dog but lost interest immediately and went back to her first thought. Just like the toilets, the stairwell reminded her of the university – brutalism meets multi-storey car park – and for a second, she felt like Freida Pinto in *Slumdog Millionaire*, until she caught sight of herself in a windowpane and noticed that her eyeliner looked less smokey eye and more crying on the toilet.

Once in the recording studio, Verena gave her an absurdly large headset. The dog lowered itself laboriously down in the corner, all the while fixing her with his mournful brown eyes as if he wanted to express his compassion for the entire human race.

'That's Mona.' Verena introduced the dog and Nivedita mentally corrected her grammar: *she/her compassion*.

'Hi Mona,' she said, whereupon Mona immediately got up again and came over to let herself be petted stoically.

There was a kind of traffic light system in the middle of the recording deck that gave counterintuitive signals.

Green light: wait.

Red light: Recording in progress!

Verena pulled the microphone towards her and began: “Where are you from?” A hot topic these days. Is it racist or just an expression of curiosity? What are we allowed to say? Which words are banned? And what does all this tell us? In the studio today, my guest is the blogger Nivedita Anand, who according to Missy Magazine is one of the PoCs you need to know. Nivedita, before you answer all our questions, could you explain the term PoC, without using the words “people” and “of” and “colour”?

Nivedita stared at Verena as if she had said: can you breathe without inhaling? Or: can you meet your mother without throwing a tantrum over something completely trivial? Or: can you think of India without vertigo caused by the void that opens up inside you immediately? Then she heard her own voice saying: ‘PoCs are the people who always get asked: “Where are you from?”’

‘And where are you from, Nivedita?’

Nivedita was starting to feel that Verena and her dimples were taking the piss. She knew that the question was meant as a joke. Provocation makes for good radio. But she couldn’t provoke back, which was why she answered defensively: ‘From the internet. I live in the internet.’

That seemed to be exactly the answer Verena had been waiting for. ‘Under the name Identitti, Nivedita blogs about identity politics and...’

‘Tits,’ Nivedita added maliciously.

‘More about breasts or more about identity politics?’ Verena exulted. And Nivedita’s defensiveness melted in the sun of her enthusiasm.

‘Not just breasts. I also blog about ... can I say ‘vulvas’ on the radio?’

‘Let’s stick to breasts.’

‘Okay.’ For a brief moment, Nivedita wondered what Verena’s breasts looked like but quickly focused back on her own. ‘It all started with me posting a photo of my breasts. I’d written on them in eyeliner: “In ancient Ireland, the Celts sucked the king’s nipples to show their loyalty.”’

Verena’s dimples jumped upwards like two raised thumbs. ‘Really?’

‘No idea. My cousin Priti heard it on QI and I loved the idea of social nipple sucking. But then a smart-arse posted a long comment about how the story could only be found in the saga of ...’ – Nivedita checked the inside of her forearm where she’d jotted down the most important names and dates – ‘Fergus Mac Léite in the eighth century and was meant as a joke. But obviously, I hadn’t got a sense of humour because I did gender studies. My reply was: ‘I don’t do gender studies – I do postcolonial studies.’ To which smarty pants replied: ‘The only other mention comes from St. Patrick who claims to have refused to suck the nipples of the pagan Irish king and St. Patrick on heathens is as reliable as Donald Trump on Muslims. You should know that with your postcolonial gender!’ But before I could answer, Facebook had blocked my account. Because of the nipples. But by that time the picture had already been shared so often that I knew I had to carry on. By the way, I call my posts a blog, because it sounds so retro, like, um, CD or ... Porsche Carrera or ... hetero marriage, but my website is actually just an archive of my threads and rants and posts and stories and comments because people seem to want to read them chronologically, like a story. Because we are more than just comments in the margins of identity politics.’

Nivedita felt her nipples harden under her T-shirt as if they were saying: ‘All this is down to us. Good, aren’t we?’

‘Great,’ Verena agreed with them. ‘Is that how you came up with the name Identitti?’

‘No, at first my blog was called *50 Shades of Beige* – because of my skin colour.’

‘Why not brown?’

‘Because that’s racist.’

Verena’s dimples vanished, startled. ‘Really?’

‘No idea. That’s what this is all about, that there is no language for people like us. After all, we were illegal, up until very recently.’

‘Illegal?’

‘Illegal,’ Nivedita confirmed. To be completely honest, her internet persona had been born when she had written a term paper on miscegenation laws – or rather, the laws forbidding miscegenation. As fascinating as breasts were, they would never have inspired the overflowing stream of outrage that she distilled into words. Still, it had all started with sex. Legal sex, illegal sex and sex that was so inconceivable that it blew the minds of the lawmakers. ‘The Nazis weren’t the only ones who tried to prevent miscegenation. In the US, *white* and *black* people have only been allowed to marry since...’ – again, she glanced at her arm – ‘1967 and in South Africa, since 1985. When my mother was pregnant with me her doctor warned her – here in Germany! - that ‘half-castes’ were more

susceptible to depression ... than full-castes presumably. But when I told all this to my' – she hesitated imperceptibly – 'boyfriend, Simon just said: "You and your Identitti." And somehow the name stuck.'

As if on cue, Mona unstuck her long doggy legs but lay down again immediately on a sign from Verena. 'Apart from your Twitter handle 'Identitti', you also write as 'Mixed-Race Wonder Woman'. And one of your superpowers is that you're able to talk to the gods, or at least one of them. to Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction. Most of your posts are conversations with her. Why?'

Verena might as well have asked Nivedita to dive down into the depths of her soul and resurface with the egg of ultimate truth. But even if she had been capable of that, it wouldn't have helped her because ultimately, there was no egg, only shell and sticky liquid from which a creature with feathers might eventually emerge. Feathers were one of Kali's attributes, but Kali had so many attributes that Nivedita had long given up keeping track of them. Verena was looking at her expectantly. How long already? In a hurry, Nivedita answered: 'Because I have to talk to someone about these things. And most people haven't a clue. Neither have I. So I need someone to explain it all to me.'

But Verena hadn't really been interested in Kali. She just needed her as a link to the next question: 'From one goddess to another, from Kali to Sarasvati. Not the Indian goddess of wisdom, but the professor of Intercultural Studies and Postcolonial Theory at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf.'

Nivedita felt her heart in her ribcage.

'Sarasvati, right.' *Charismati Sarasvati*, as Priti called their mutual professor. But Priti's irony was feigned because even she could not resist Sarasvati's charm and her sheer intelligence.

'Why just Sarasvati, by the way? Doesn't she have a surname?'

Nivedita shrugged, which made the headset slip slowly but unstoppably off her head and become a torc around her neck. 'Beyoncé doesn't need a surname either,' she said, trying to simultaneously speak into the sticking out microphone and push the headset back up as noiselessly as possible. 'Or... the Queen.'

'But both of them *have* surnames.'

'Sure. Knowles and ...Habsburg?'

'Windsor,' Verena corrected her.

'If you say so. Of course Sarasvati *has* a surname but she doesn't *need* one because she *is* Sarasvati – and everybody knows who she is.'

'That's right!'

Nivedita watched Verena pick up a sheet of paper without the slightest rustling and read out: 'In 1999, Sarasvati published her first book, *Decolonize Your Soul*, which was an immediate bestseller, and earned her a professorship in Düsseldorf. But she isn't just read in academic circles. Sarasvati is pop – so much so that her second book is called *Pop Post-Colonialism*. And as befits a pop star, it ignited fierce debates, especially on social media.'

Nivedita shrugged again and remembered just in time to hold onto her headphones. 'No one takes you seriously as an intellectual until you've had a shitstorm.' And no one who's met Sarasvati could not take her seriously. Simon, Nivedita's (for want of a better word) *boyfriend*, always said: Priti has an innate compass for power, which is why her inner needle is unwaveringly attracted to Sarasvati. Just as Nivedita was unwaveringly attracted to Sarasvati's promise to decolonise her soul. And that was exactly what Nivedita had been trying to do for the last three years since she'd begun studying with Sarasvati as her tutor.

'But Sarasvati doesn't just stir up the hornet's nest that is the internet. There are also regular complaints of racism about her at the university. And there's even a lawsuit regarding the way she treats white students.'

'The people who accuse her of racism...' Nivedita toyed with the idea of saying: *should suck their own nipples*. In the end, she decided on: '...just don't understand Sarasvati. And particularly they don't understand what *being white* means for Sarasvati.'

In less than 24 hours Nivedita would wish she had never said those words.

'This is what her hotly debated essay is all about. It is called "White Guilt. Why No one Wants to Be White",' Verena read from another rustle-free sheet of paper. 'Last month, it was published in the *TLS* as well as the *LRB* and the German and French editions of *Lettre Internationale*. The *TLS* advertised it with the tagline: "An essential text at a time when the term old white man' has become an insult." Is it really true that no one wants to be white anymore?'

'Well, I don't,' Nivedita lied. Half her life she'd wished for nothing else, while she'd spent the other half wishing she was darker than she actually was. Anything but this hybrid half-and-half that slipped through every framework and category, and was so impossible to grasp that even the colour itself was described by comparing it to something liquid: cognac.

'Why not?'

Where to begin? 'That's because of its etymology. Up until the 17th century, the term *white* didn't even exist except as a way to describe clouds or...' – Nivedita couldn't think of anything other than – '...sheep. All this changed with the transatlantic slave trade. The Europeans needed to justify why they went around kidnapping and selling people off. So they hit on the idea of claiming the superiority of the *white* race. But to do this, they first had to *invent* the white race.' Nivedita had not just read 'White Guilt'. She had read it like the bible, like holy writ, just as she had read all of Sarasvati's texts. 'Before that, Europeans didn't identify as *white*, they identified with the part of Europe they came from, or with their language. Where was I?'

'*White* supremacy.'

'Right.' They talked a lot about white supremacy in Sarasvati's classes. White supremacy was the original sin in postcolonial studies, the epicentre of the earthquake whose tremors were still reverberating. 'That's why the word *white* is inextricably linked with the idea of white supremacy. *White* has never had another meaning. So there is no other way for *white* people to relate to their *whiteness* but through the lens of *white* supremacy. They haven't got any *white* culture or *white* music, because everything is *white*, like a snowstorm. Black people still suffer discrimination, no doubt about that, but we also associate black with revolution, subversion and Black Power. *Whiteness* doesn't have any of these progressive notions. Sarasvati concludes that *being white* is therefore something that restricts *white* people as well.' For a moment, Nivedita felt so close to her professor that she could almost sense the weight of Sarasvati's ubiquitous dupatta across her shoulders, and the tendons in her collarbone pulling upwards thanks to Sarasvati's signature ballerina pose and raised chin. Sarasvati had said to her once. 'Your neck aches at the back – mine at the front.' So Nivedita lifted her head and appraised Verena with a searching look under lowered eyelids. 'What do *you* think? Do *you* feel restricted by *being white*?'

Verena threw back a naked, unprotected look and Nivedita thought: *So that's how Sarasvati does it.*