

AMRITA

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*The fascinating story of the Frida Kahlo of India*

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*"Art is long; life is short."*

Hippocrates

*"Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing at all."*

Helen Keller

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## **PART ONE**

*“Oh, are not the pleasures in life, in this daily round, trifling compared with the pains!”*

Plautus, *Amphitryon*

**1**

László Guttman was an elderly man, stooped and full of wrinkles, with incredibly dark brown eyes and a white moustache, a long nose and a very pale complexion. Despite his age, he was still physically fit. He was of Hungarian origin, although he had lived in Paris for most of his life. His childhood had been very intense; his father had died suddenly, and his mother had been arrested by the Nazis for being a Jew. One day she was taken away and he never saw her again. Shortly after this, László joined the resistance and was eventually deported to the concentration camp of Buchenwald where he remained until it was liberated by the allied troops. During his time as a prisoner he made numerous charcoal sketches depicting the horrors of the camp, the most well-known of them were the corpses being taken out of the gas chambers. His drawings were in fact used as evidence against the Nazis in the post-war trials. When the war ended, he completed his studies in Fine Arts and went on to work as a professor at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris for almost a decade, until he retired.

He lived on his own in the quartier of Montparnasse. Just as he did every Sunday, he went out in the morning with his hat and walking stick, to stroll through the *Jardin des Tuileries* and on the way, he bought a paper at his usual newspaper stand.

That day, curiosity drew him to a square where there was a flea market being held, selling everything from stamps to collectors' toys, clothes and small second-hand appliances, and especially antiques and books. With the help of his walking stick, with tiny, light steps, he let himself be carried along by the crowd, browsing the goods for sale. Suddenly he stopped in his tracks: something had caught his eye at a stall selling reproductions of classic paintings and antique frames.

The seller was deep in discussion with a potential customer holding the hand of a little girl who had her heart set on a picture of a young girl on a swing. It was a cheap reproduction of a famous work by a Renaissance painter. László kept quietly to one side, observing from a careful distance that slyly allowed him to see and hear what was going on. He realised that the seller, a stout man in his forties and wearing a ridiculous beret as if to give off the image of the stereotypical bohemian artist, knew nothing about art, nor the origins of the merchandise he was selling. László therefore quickly seized the initiative.

After inquiring as to the price of some canvases, sketches and digital reproductions that did not interest him in the slightest, László waited until he could sense that the seller was fed up of answering the senile old man's barrage of questions. Then he pointed out the painting that had caught his eye. With the cunning of a seasoned buyer, he acquired it at a laughable price. The seller clearly wanted to shake off the old man as quickly as possible and even gave him a fifty percent discount if he left the frame, which he thought was more valuable than the painting itself. What he did not know was that the portrait depicted none other than a young László himself, and the artist who painted it was Amrita Sher-Gil.

With the canvas wrapped up in an old copy of *Le Figaro* and tucked under his left arm, the old man made his way into the crowd once more, pondering his good fortune. A miracle? Destiny? Karma? The following day, at number 15, rue Alfred Dehodencq, László was sitting in a waiting room heaving with all kinds of people: Sikhs with their colourful turbans and black beards; Muslims with their white caps and long shirts; young Hindus boasting their maturity with the moustaches of late adolescence. They were all Indian immigrants with one thing in common: they were all hoping to obtain the help of the consulate to stay longer in France. There were also employees of specialist India travel agencies, carrying large piles of clients' passports; young chatty students wanting to wrap up the painfully slow bureaucratic process enabling them to travel to India; backpackers with their *on-a-shoestring* travel guides, totally absorbed in reading exotic leaflets advertising places beneath the

heading *Incredible India*, with pictures of dreadlocked hippies on them.

Just then, a loud beep sounded, a number appeared on the screen and a mechanical voice announced '1-4-8'. It was László's turn, so he made his way up to the corresponding window. He told the young French woman behind the counter that he would like to have a meeting with the cultural attaché or consul, and told her the reason why. But the impatient woman did not pay any attention to the bizarre story he was telling her, while he showed her the painting he had bought the previous day. A young student queueing at the next window seemed interested in the odd sight of this old man with his outlandish explanation, and snapped a photo of him with his mobile phone, which exasperated the young French woman even more. She sighed and looked at her neighbouring colleague as if begging for help. Her colleague shrugged, as if to say, "Do what you think is best". The woman told László to take a seat again and decided to make a phone call. After almost an hour of waiting, he was called up again and the employee asked him to go to the Embassy in a neighbouring building. There, the receptionist told him to wait, and after a few minutes he was ushered into the cultural attaché's office.

The young Indian man behind the desk appeared to be a kind, gentle sort of person. László gave him a brief introduction to his past as a professor of art, showed him the portrait and assured him that it had been painted by none other than Amrita Sher-Gil, as he himself had been the model. Talking nervously, rapidly, as if his allotted time was running out, he explained to the cultural attaché the significance of Amrita in terms of the History of Art and that the painting he was showing urgently needed to be sent to the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, so it could be added to the collection of the artist's work kept there. The young man's serenity had a calming effect on him and so, convinced that his story must be interesting, he rattled on about the style and composition of the painting. He finished by reiterating the fact that, in his opinion, that painting should be surrounded by the artist's other works. Suddenly, the fixed line telephone on the desk rang, cutting the conversation short. The Indian man let it ring four times before he answered, and when he

did, his whole countenance changed; he was talking in Tamil, he seemed aggressive, so different to the way he had first appeared to László. While he was talking, a mobile phone started to ring, playing deafening music from a Bollywood film and vibrating in unison on his desk. This increased the civil servant's impatience even more. When he hung up the fixed line phone, he answered the intermittent musical ringtone, and idly waved away the old man with the ridiculous and implausible story. He gestured to László to leave the painting in a corner, near some magazines piled up on a shelf. Holding the mobile phone away from his ear, he asked him to be patient, and told him that the painting would be sent in the next diplomatic mail to New Delhi to be examined. Glancing at the mess and dirt heaped up in that corner, László realised that the man had not believed a single word of his story. He quietly stood up and as he headed to the door, he apologised in a low, composed voice that he would take the painting with him because he wished to show it to one of his History of Art colleagues at the Sorbonne. The Indian man reclined on a faux leather sofa, and still holding the phone responded with a gesture that seemed to say, "Do what you want". Deeply relieved, László hurried out of the Indian Embassy building in Paris.

After this episode, he stopped for a coffee to rest and recharge, then walked to the Hungarian Embassy with renewed energy. There were fewer people than in the last one, and his turn came around far sooner, but the response was also faster, far more cutting and demeaning. When László showed the Hungarian consul the painting, the man thought, in utter disbelief, that the old man was attempting to sell him a portrait he had painted himself, and could not stifle his laughter. László was so embarrassed that he bashfully wrapped up the painting left the room. As he did so, he heard the peals of laughter from the civil servant explaining to his secretary that some old fool was trying to get him to believe that this childish painting could be worth almost half a million euros.

He sat down at a nearby bus stop surrounded by cheerful schoolchildren in uniform, carrying their school bags on the backs. With his arms folded on his walking stick, his head bowed, he felt utterly disparaged at the way he had been treated. He was immersed

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in a gloomy silence, when his mobile phone rang in one of the deep pockets of his heavy green overcoat; it was his niece letting him know that she was coming over the following morning to give him his medication. On the way home, as he looked at the city out of the bus window, he wondered how people would feel when they heard his story. Of course, if he were someone from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and he heard such a bizarre story, he would think that he was just an old Parisian, bourgeois and bald-headed, who had lost his marbles. Absorbed in his thoughts, he was suddenly struck by the creative impulse behind most art forms: melancholy.



## 2

László decided to keep it. He skilfully reframed it himself with a decent frame and hung it on the wall in what he considered to be the most privileged spot in his apartment: his study full of books and photographs. The room was illuminated by large bay windows, equipped as a workshop and filled with small unfinished sculptures, paints, brushes, tools and other DIY utensils. He rolled the desk chair over and settled into it to admire the painting, immersed in his memories. A whole bygone era began to stir in his mind. After a short while, he slowly got up, moved over to sit at his computer and, with trembling fingers, started to type: 'Amrita was a woman...' but he immediately paused. He looked at the painting, reminding himself that he was nothing but an old man who had acted in haste. Whether he handed over the painting to the Hungarians or the Indians, or whether he went out of his mind, the world would keep on turning. After a brief pause, he erased what he had written and tried to continue: 'Amrita was an exceptional artist. I met her at the École des Beaux-Arts...' He stopped again. All this activity felt like a strain; he was tired. He found using the computer tedious. He realised that he had no desire to write his memoirs. He did not want to communicate with anyone. He lost interest. With a tremulous hand, he removed his glasses, got up and went to relax sleepily on the sofa. He immediately entered the world of dreams, the world in which people spend a third of their lives, and which some pessimists consider to be a premonition of eternity.

He met Amrita in 1930 at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where he was a student. The day she came into the class for the first time there was utter silence; her powerful presence oozed charm. László was thirteen years old, although he looked older because of his height and his lean physique. She was perhaps sixteen or seventeen. He was completely amazed at how well she painted. "My

name is Amrita...". She said it as if she were a French Empress from a previous century. He fell in love with her instantly.

László only attended that school for one year. He had to change schools for financial reasons, but during that year he posed several times for Amrita. At that time, László was poor and lived with his mother, who had been widowed at a very young age. Given that he appeared older than he was, he lied when he enrolled in school and was never found out. He and Amrita belonged to different worlds, but even so, they still formed a friendship of sorts. Once, she invited him to her house, which was renowned for the gatherings of intellectuals that her parents organised. Amrita's mother, who came from high society, told him out of earshot, "Don't you touch her," referring to her daughter. From her tone and her words, he knew that there would never be anything between them apart from a brief and limited relationship. Amrita felt a special inclination towards him. She only liked him because he was poor and different to her other friends, with whom she galivanted in the famous bohemian clubs and restaurants among the artists of the time. These were places he could not afford to go to, although more than once he dressed as a young high society artist and went to the Latin Quarter with the intention of accidentally bumping into Amrita and being able to strike up a relationship that was more than mere friendship. But he never did manage to find her amid the nightlife of Paris.

Amrita, for her part, used to take advantage of László's attention to flirt with him. Before he went on holiday to Hungary, as he did every summer, he went to her house and left his phonograph and records for her. Even the young man's mother had posed for her on more than one occasion. He remembered how sad his mother had been when she heard Amrita had died so young, at the age of twenty-eight. It was rumoured that her own mother, Marie Antoinette, was the one who poisoned her. Although some people also claimed that it was her Hungarian husband, Victor Egan, who caused her death by forcing her to have an illegal abortion in India.

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László remembered Amrita's younger sister. She was very beautiful, but less attractive than Amrita. Her name was Indira. And as for her mother... her mother was a fearsome character.

Before he changed schools, László wanted to confess his feelings, but Amrita cut him short, saying that she was in love with a first cousin from Hungary who was studying medicine. She was very astute; aware of the boy's fondness for her, she stopped him from pouring out his feelings, so as not to hurt him. It had been much better that way; László did not regret the fact he had not pushed the matter, nor did he have any remorse.

Awake now, standing in front of the painting, he remembered his life with enormous, secret admiration. He had known and loved many beautiful women. "If I had the chance to be born again, I would repeat my whole life without changing a thing," he thought to himself. How he would love to be a historian, so he could relive the past in the present, to involve those who were not there, to make them understand, to arouse their curiosity. Because when you tell the truth about what happened, the truth is not usually told. You must wait until another narrator wants to tell the truth, or knows how to. But then the historian appears and does not tell us the truth either: that is history for you.