

CHAPTER ONE

Stories of Beginnings: Kāmadeva and His Wives

THE BIRTH OF KĀMADEVA

The story of the birth of Kāmadeva is told in several purāṇas, but most prominently in the *Śiva Purāṇa*¹ and the *Kālikā Purāṇa*.² The frame narrative for the description of the birth of Kāma is, appropriately enough, a story about the creator god, Brahmā, doing his work of creating. Brahmā's particular technique is to think beings into existence. Brahmā conceives of a particular nature and appearance, and, in that thought-instant, Brahmā's conception begins functioning in the world as a separate being. In this way, the mind of Brahmā mentally churns all of existence into being.

An obvious commentary on the power of the mind to create its own idiosyncratic universe, the story of Kāma's emergence, within Brahmā's creation story, narrates how the mind of Brahmā quite literally gives life and form to his own desires. One thought-filled instant produces a beautiful woman, his own body in a state of arousal, and desire embodied in a young man. In the *Śiva Purāṇa*, Brahmā himself tells us what happened.

Creation of Kāmadeva

After creating the guardians of creatures, the Prajāpatis, as well as Dakṣa and other gods, I considered myself higher than others and was delighted.

[But] O sage, as I created Marīci, Atri, Pulaha, Pulastya, Angiras, Kratu, Vasiṣṭha, Nārada, Dakṣa, and Bhṛgu—my mental sons of lordly stature—a beautiful woman with handsome features was born of my mind.

She was variously called Sandhyā,³ Divakṣantā, Śayam Sandhyā, and Jayāntikā. She was very beautiful with well-shaped eyebrows capable of captivating even the minds of sages.



1.1 Kāmadeva and Rati with sugarcane bow, Kailash rock-cut temple, Ellora. *(Photo by Cathy Benton, 2003)*

Neither in the human world nor among the gods was there such a woman of complete perfection in all ways. Nor was there such a woman in the nether worlds, or in the three times [past, present, future].

Just as I was thinking like this, another amazingly beautiful being appeared out of my mind.

He had a golden complexion. His chest was stout and firm. His nose was fine. His thighs, hips, and calves were round and plump. He had blue [blue-black] waves of hair. His eyebrows were thickset and tremulous. His face shone like the full moon. His hairy chest was broad like a door. He was as huge as the celestial elephant Airāvata. He was wearing a blue cloth. His hands, eyes, face, legs and fingers were red in color. He had a slender waist and fine teeth. He smelled like an elephant in rut. His eyes were like the petals of a full-blown lotus. He was fragrant like the filaments [of a flower]. His neck was like the conch. He had the emblem of a fish. He was tall. He had the makara⁴ for his vehicle. He was armed with a bow and five flowers for arrows. His glance was very seductive, as he rolled his eyes here and there. O dear one, his very breath was a fragrant wind. He was accompanied by the sentiment of love [śṛṅgāra rasa].

On seeing that being, my sons were struck with curiosity, fascination, and eagerness.

Their minds immediately became crooked [perverted] and confused. Smitten with love, they lost their mental resolve.

On seeing me, the creator and lord of the worlds, this person bowed down, his shoulders bent in humility, and said:

“O Brahmā, what is the work I am to do? Please assign me an honorable task. Please tell me. What is my honorable and suitable place? Who will be my wife?”

The poet added:

On hearing these words of the noble-souled Kāma, the creator did not say anything for a short while, surprised at his predicament. Then, steadying his mind and abandoning his surprised demeanor, Brahmā, who was already a victim of Kāma, spoke the following:

In this form and with your five flower-arrows,⁵ you can enamour and captivate men and women, carrying on the eternal task of creation.

In this universe, consisting of the three worlds and both mobile and immobile beings, no living beings, not even the gods, will be able to defy you.

O best of beings, even I, Brahmā, Vāsudeva, and Śiva will be in your control, not to speak of ordinary living beings.

Invisibly you will enter the hearts of living beings, excite thrilling feelings of pleasure and carry on the activities of creation that are to last forever.

The minds of all living beings will become an easy target for your five flower arrows. You will be the cause of elation.

So have I assigned you the task of facilitating creation.⁶

The storyteller places a confession in the mouth of the creator god *Brahmā*, an admission that the god of desire slipped fully formed out of his own passion-filled mind. According to *Brahmā*, in the moment that male and female beheld one another, desire simply happened. Overwhelmed with the beauty of *Sandhyā*, *Brahmā* looked up to see *Kāma*, fully formed and well armed, with his own beauty, five flower arrows, and a seductive gaze.

Significantly, even the creator god whose powerful mind is the source of all creation cannot control the coming and going of desire. In this story, *Brahmā* conceptualizes beauty, projects it onto his creation, and then falls in love with this beautiful creation of his mind. Using this same logic, the story may be explaining that we, too, project our ideal attractive qualities onto another person, with whom we proceed to fall in love. Convinced that this person embodies our ideal, we fall in love, like *Brahmā*, with our own creation. But unlike *Brahmā*, who knows that *Sandhyā* is the fabrication of his mind, over which he ultimately has control, we are permanently confused about who our lovers are. How much of my lover have I created and how much is truly a separate being? Caught between our mental image of our ideal lover and the real person standing before us, we find ourselves untangling infinite emotional knots trying to make sense of someone who is and is not the reflection of ourselves. And, again like *Brahmā*, we look up to find *Kāma* witnessing all.

The story pushes us to understand this desire that broke *Brahmā*'s mental concentration and continues to break our own. How is it that we are pulled so quickly and completely into chasing and longing and sighing? In the Indian religious tradition, understanding the fundamental principles of cosmic order gives the knower control over some aspects of existence. The Vedas prescribed rituals in which priests reneacted creation in order to preserve the cosmic order. Contemporary religious rituals, from daily *pūjās* to pilgrimages, are performed to maintain individual and societal harmony, with the understanding that the rituals reflect deeper cosmic realities. Similarly, the stories of *Kāmadeva* offer insight into the nature of desire, empowering those who hear them to keep this element of the cosmos in balance.

The story of *Brahmā* and *Kāma* teaches that desire originates in the mind, and that human beings often desire those who reflect elements of themselves. However, in the next episode, the relationship between knowledge and power becomes more complicated. *Brahmā* learns that even his knowledge as creator of the universe does not empower him to easily resolve his predicament with *Sandhyā*. Simply understanding the nature and origin of desire does not reduce

its power over us. Although Brahmā understands every dimension of this being created by his mind, he cannot escape the power this creature wields. No one is exempt from Kāma's power, not even his creator. And Brahmā's lack of control mirrors the human condition. Examples abound of situations in which the knowledge of destructive consequences has no effect on controlling the act that precipitates the damage. Smoking a cigarette or agreeing to meet an abusive lover just one more time are self-destructive acts repeated over and over because the desire for even elusive satisfaction has greater motivational power than the knowledge of negative consequences.

In the next episode, the mesmerized Brahmā, his senses tingling with arousal in Sandhyā's presence, longs to draw her to him. Ostensibly, Kāmadeva is responsible, but who created Kāma?

Deciding to test the power given to him by the creator, Kāmadeva stood in the archer's position [*ālidha*] with the right knee advanced and the left leg retracted, and shot his arrows into all those assembled: Brahmā, his mind-born sons, the Prajāpatis, and the woman, Sandhyā. (15–19)

Brahmā continues his narration:

The sages [his sons] and I were enamoured, feeling great changes in our mental states.

We began to stare at Sandhyā frequently, passion depraving our minds. Our lust was heightened. . . .

Making us feel thoroughly enchanted, Kāmadeva did not stop till all of us had lost control over our senses. . . .

She [Sandhyā] too began to manifest the instinctive gestures of side-glances and the pretences of concealing her feelings, the result of being hit by Kāma's arrows as she was being stared at. . . .

[While all the sages are in this state of sensual excitement, Brahmā's son, Dakṣa, begins to meditate on the god Śiva to protect himself. This petition draws Śiva into the scene.]

Brahmā continues:

When Śiva saw me and the others in such a mental state, he laughed, mocking us.

In the midst of his laughter, making all of us blush with shame, the great god spoke these consoling words:

Alas, O Brahmā, how is it that you were overwhelmed with lustful feelings on seeing your own daughter? This is highly improper for those who follow the Vedas.

Sister, brother's wife, and daughter are like one's mother. A sensible man never looks at them with such reprehensible vision.

The entire path of the Vedas is present in your mouth, O Brahmā. How could you forget [the Vedas] under the influence of this momentary passion?

O god with four faces, O Brahmā, your mind should always remain strong and alert. How did you undo your mind for this dalliance in passion?

How is it that your mental sons, Dakṣa, Marīci, and others who forever practice yoga in isolation and meditation, have become enamoured of a woman?

This Kāma is a fool. How is it that he has begun to torment all of them with his excessive power? (verses 39–45)

Brahmā continues:

On hearing Śiva's words, I, lord of the world, perspired profusely in shame.

Although the desire to seize Sandhyā of such attractive features still lingered, fearing Śiva, I curbed my aroused senses.

From the drops of sweat that fell from my body rose the *manes*, beings who had not performed sacrifices while living on earth. They shone like split collyrium and had eyes resembling full-blown lotuses. They were meritorious ascetics who had given up worldly activities.

The *manes* were sixty-four thousand in number, and those called *Barbīshads*, seated on the grass, were eighty-four thousand.

From the drops of sweat that fell from Dakṣa's body, a splendid woman endowed with good qualities was born.

She had a slender body with symmetrical hips. Her waist was well-shaped, small curly hairs embellished it. She was soft in body with fine teeth and a shining golden complexion. Along with her perfect body, her face shone like the full moon and the full-blown lotus. Her name was Rati, Delight, and she was capable of captivating even the sages. (verses 46–53)

Brahmā's story allows us to sigh with relief, to put our own desires into perspective. Sweating in his intense struggle to resist lust, and producing hundreds of thousands of new beings out of this struggle, Brahmā assures us that resisting desire is inherently difficult, if not impossible. Seeing Brahmā and his meditating sons succumb so completely to desire allows the audience to smile at Brahmā and at themselves.

Brahmā mirrors too the embarrassment we feel when caught. We reach into cookie jars filled with desires that we know should be curbed. Yet we watch our arms reach again and again, and hope that no one is looking. Śiva tells

Brahmā that Kāmadeva is a fool, but even more poignantly, Kāma turns others into fools, as they attempt to satisfy inherently insatiable desires. But the Indian audience also know the irony of Śiva's remarks as they foreshadow his own fall to Kāma's arrows in a few more verses.

Clearly the odds are in Kāma's favor whenever he takes aim. When Kāma arouses the passions within us, internal battles ensue: caution versus adventure, good sense versus indulgence. Brahmā models such an internal struggle. Through a strenuous effort of will, Brahmā does counteract the effect of Kāma's arrow, but his internal conflict produces new creatures who must be reckoned with. Though satisfying one's desire always promises gratification, or even happiness, this process often requires compromise or produces conflict in other areas of one's life. For Brahmā, as for us, the hope to simply gratify desire with no eventual consequences is naïve. Kāma's presence in Brahmā's universe brings inevitable internal struggle.

By contrast, for the god of desire, practicing his newly bestowed archery skill with Brahmā and his sons brought him a beautiful wife. One of these sons, Dakṣa, produced an abundance of sweat as he struggled to restrain his own desires. Appropriately enough, from the droplets of his sweat emerged another enticing woman called Rati, meaning delight or sexual pleasure. But this woman was immediately handed off to Kāmadeva to be his wife. Formed by droplets of desire literally sweated out of the pores of Dakṣa's body, Rati embodies carnal desire and sexuality, a perfect marriage partner for Kāma. Born of desire-ridden sweat, Rati also carries the obvious association with the bodily fluids produced during sexual activity. But her association with bodily secretions implies a certain irony in the context of Indian standards of purity and pollution. As all bodily fluids are considered polluted and polluting substance, Rati necessarily embodies this pollution. However, being joined with the auspicious god of desire, Rati was transformed from polluted substance into auspicious goddess. Indeed, both Kāma and Rati are welcome sculptures on temple walls throughout India, along with other figures representing good fortune and prosperity.

As the scene ends with the wedding of Kāma and his bride, the storyteller again reminds us that desire has a dark side with the foreshadowing that Kāma will soon die, leaving his beautiful wife a widow. The cycle of desire will repeat itself in a constant round of passion and grief.

KĀMADEVA'S WIFE: RATI

As discussed earlier, Kāma's wife, Rati, whose name connotes sexual delight or pleasure, is his constant companion, almost always depicted with him. The *Śiva Purāna* story continues with a description of Rati and her interaction with Kāma as his wife, as seen through Brahmā's eyes.

Brahmā describes what happened next:

After marrying the beautiful daughter of Dakṣa who could enchant even sages, Kāma rejoiced greatly.

On seeing Rati, his auspicious wife, Kāma was pierced by his own arrow and overpowered by the pleasure of dalliance.

His wife of fair complexion, tremulous side-glances, and fawn eyes was admirably suited to his love of pleasure. She offered him ample sport.

[But] on seeing her eyebrows, doubt arose in Kāma's mind: "[Perhaps] Brahmā has given her these two [perfectly arched eyebrows] in order to excel my bow and undo its power!"

Watching her rapid-roving glances, he no longer thought his arrows swift.

Inhaling the naturally sweet fragrance of her steady breath, Kāma lost faith in his Malaya breeze.

Seeing her face resembling the full moon with all its [auspicious] marks, Kāma was sure there was no difference between her face and the [perfect] moon.

Her pair of breasts resembled the buds of golden lotuses with nipples shining like bees hovering round them.

Certainly Kāma had set aside and forgotten the bees that formed the string of his own [sugarcane] bow that buzzed with their tumultuous hum. He had forgotten because his eyes were riveted to the auspicious necklace made of the wide-eyed feathers of a peacock's tail. This necklace was resting on her firm protruding plump breasts and suspended over them to her umbilical cord.

His eyes were covering her skin with their gazing. The skin around her deep orifice⁷ shone like red plums.

Her thighs were lovely like the cut off trunks of plaintain trees, and Kāma looked at them as though they were his javelins.

Her heels, along with the tips and sides of her feet, were tinged with red. With these hennaed feet, she truly looked like the companion of Kāmadeva.⁸

Her hennaed hands with nails like [red] Kumsuka flowers were very beautiful with well-rounded tapering fingers.

Her arms were perfectly shaped, like lotus-stalks, glossy and soft. They resembled corals putting forth beams of splendour.⁹

Her glossy hair was blue like a rain cloud and fluffy like the tail of a Camari deer. The wife of Kāmadeva glowed with beauty.

Just as Lord Śiva accepted Gangā,¹⁰ flowing from the snowy mountain, Kāmadeva married Rati. She carried a discus and a lotus in her hands, with arms as fine as lotus-stalks. Her eyebrows formed small waves, and her side-glances moved up and down like gentle tides. Her eyes resembled blue lotuses, and her curly body hair was like the mossy growth in the river. With mind expanded like a tree, Rati glowed. The depth of her orifice was like a deep eddy. Rati's body glowed with beauty. In fact, she appeared as the abode of beauty itself, like the beautiful goddess Lakṣmī.

She had twelve varieties of ornaments, and was expert in the sixteen types of amorous gestures. Capable of charming the whole world, she illuminated the ten quarters, the universe.

Seeing Rati like this, Kāmadeva eagerly accepted her, just as Viṣṇu accepted Lakṣmī when she approached him with passion. (verses 7–29) . . .

Having reached the epitome of happiness, Kāmadeva thought all miseries were at an end. Dakṣa's daughter, Rati, also was extremely delighted to receive Kāmadeva as her husband. Like a cloud at sunset mingled with sparkling lightning, the sweet-voiced Kāma rejoiced with Rati.

Kāmadeva took Rati to his chest in happy delusion, like a yogi with his knowledge. Having secured this fine husband, Rati's face shone like the full moon, just as Lakṣmī's face had shone when she secured Hari [Viṣṇu]. (verses 32–34)

The goddess Rati is both the wife of the god of desire and his assistant as he engenders desire in creatures large and small. Indeed, Rati enchants the god of love himself. But she also helps him ensnare others, using her sensuous appearance to arouse sexual feelings in those around her. In this *Śiva Purāṇa* narrative and that recounted in the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, the text dwells on the details of Rati's body, beginning with the shape and movement of her head and face, moving down her body to her genital area, and further down to the decorated sides of her feet. Aside from her seductive appearance as Kāma's consort, Rati is significant in the story of Kāmadeva for her role in pleading for his resuscitation after he has lost his body, a series of actions discussed more fully in the following chapter.

For Indian storytellers, sexual desire functions as a paradigm for all forms of desire. This paradigm offers a clear way to discuss how desire works, in this case highlighting the senses as the primary vehicle for arousing and attempting to satisfy the urges of desire. The detailed description of Rati allows the storyteller to spend lots of time reveling in desire's sensuality. The Indian epistemological tradition explains that we gather information through six, not five, senses: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch, and the mind. So in meeting Rati, we see her feet dyed red with henna like a bride, hear the jangling of her ankle bells (in some

versions), feel the softness of her hair, smell the fragrance of her breath, and can almost taste her presence as it might fill a room like the light of a full moon. The poet wants us to experience our own “sensuous delight” as we learn about Kāma’s consort. He wants us to know her through our senses so that later we will grieve with her when she loses the desire that motivates her, her Kāmadeva.

A minor character in any drama involving Kāmadeva, Rati in some ways represents an attribute of the god of desire. Rati personifies sexual delight, but only this aspect of the sexual encounter. She has no connection with other typical wifely duties such as childbearing and childrearing. Rati remains only the delight that accompanies the arousal and satisfying of desire. Because the existence of this delight is so fundamentally rooted in the presence of desire, when Kāma is burned to ashes, Rati’s existence also is curtailed.

KĀMADEVA’S COMPANIONS: VASANTA AND THE MĀRAS

In order to persuade the great ascetic god Śiva to marry the beautiful Pārvatī, Brahmā commands Kāmadeva to fill Śiva with passion. Although not in a position to refuse the creator’s command, Kāma is nervous about attacking the great yogi. Worried that his arrows will incur the great god’s wrath, even as they are deflected by his internal discipline, Kāma asks Brahmā for a stronger weapon. Brahmā, knowing that Kāma’s fear is well-founded, ponders what weapon might be strong enough to penetrate Śiva’s asceticism. But with a sense of despair, Brahma sighs.

Out of this sigh steps Vasanta, Spring, covered head to toe in clusters of flowers. The narrative continues in Brahmā’s voice.

While I was agitated with this thought [of whether Kāma could excite the passions of Śiva], I heaved a deep sigh. Out of this sigh, Spring [Vasanta] appeared, fully clothed in clusters of flowers.

He was [aglow] like a red lotus with eyes resembling full-blown lotuses. His face shone like the full moon rising at dusk, and his nose was well shaped.

His feet were arched like a bow, while his hair was dark and curly. Wearing two earrings, he looked as bright as the morning sun.

His gait was majestic like that of an elephant in rut. His arms were long and stout, with raised shoulders. His neck resembled the conch-shell, and his chest was broad. He had a full and finely shaped face.

Vasanta was beautiful in appearance, dark-complexioned and endowed with all the characteristic marks of beauty. He was very handsome to look at, capable of heightening feelings of desire [kāma] and enchanting everyone.

When the Spring season, endowed with all these features and storehouse of flowers, arose, a very fragrant wind blew. All the trees began to blossom. . . . (verses 37–42)

Just as wind is the friend of fire, helping it everywhere, so Spring will always help you.¹¹ (verse 46)



The Spring with all its characteristics—brightly colored flowers blooming, fragrant breezes blowing, birds calling to their mates—creates a readiness to receive Kāma's arrows. Like Rati, Vasanta accompanies the god Kāmadeva to make him more effective. But unlike Rati whose very essence is desire, Vasanta emerges from a sigh of frustration, anxiety over how to make Kāma more effective in the face of the great ascetic's power. In a quandry about how to make a more powerful weapon for Kāmadeva, Brahmā's agitated sigh produces Spring: full-blown and fully formed like Kāmadeva, a young man clothed in the flower petals of his season. Because Brahmā creates unconsciously, the beings who spring from his mind surprise him, and the audience of the story. Like a creative thought that appears fully formed, Vasanta emerges from the mind of Brahmā as he ponders how to penetrate Śiva's ascetic discipline, how to soften his yogic concentration. In the powerfully fragrant and gentle breezes of Spring, perhaps Śiva will weaken for a moment, long enough for Kāma's arrows to enter.

As the story continues, Vasanta prepares the way for Kāma, causing flowers to bloom on trees and gentle scented breezes to blow through Śiva's hair as they tickle the glassy surfaces of spring-fed lakes in his mountain retreat. Spring, with his flowers and breezes and mating calls, now runs ahead of the god of desire, who hangs back to approach his target more slowly, armed with beautiful but sharp arrows. However, Vasanta is not Kāma's only assistant. Kāma receives less charming attendants later in the narrative, beings who are violent and loud and ugly, types more difficult to reconcile with charm and seduction.

As the story resumes, Kāmadeva has reported to Brahmā that he has been unsuccessful in his attempt to pierce Śiva with an arrow. Even with the help of Rati and Vasanta, Kāma has not been able to stir the great ascetic. Now Brahmā sighs again, but this time more intensely and in sadness, despair producing beings very different from Vasanta. These sigh-beings shout, "Kill! Kill!"

Brahmā tells us:

The gusts of wind generated by my deep sighs were variously formed and very violent. They were terrifying and appeared to have shaking fiery tongues.

They played on different musical instruments such as drums, with terrible natures and loud sounds.

Groups of beings issued forth from my deep breaths and stood in front of me [Brahmā] shouting, "Kill! Cut!" . . .

Kāma asked, “Who are these terrible creatures? What is their task?”

So Brahmā explained:

Even as they were born shouting “Kill” [māraya] their names will be “Māras,” Killers, bringers of death.

This group of beings will hinder the activity of every other creature but you; they will be engaged in the activities of desire [kāmarata].

Their chief occupation will be to follow you, O Kāma. They will assist you always. Wherever you go to fulfill your purpose they will always follow and assist you.

They will create confusion in the minds of those who fall to your weapons. They will hinder seekers on the path of knowledge, in all possible ways.¹²

These Māras become Kāmadeva’s troops, his *gaṇas* (paralleling Śiva’s *gaṇas*) always at his beck and call. As a warrior, Kāmadeva needs troops of soldiers for his battles. As a psychological force, Kāma’s troops symbolize the force of his power, the force of desire. The name of these troops, the Māras, is derived from the causative form of the verb *mṛ* (to die), meaning “to cause to die” or “to kill.” Desire works always in the shadow of death. In the language of the story, the Māras connect desire and death, a theme developed in other tales and texts.

Literature of all cultures is filled with characters who ultimately destroy themselves in a passion that becomes more important than life. In western literature, from Dickens’s Miss Havesham in *Great Expectations* to Flaubert’s Madame Bovary and Pasternak’s *Zhivago*, these characters are familiar to us. Yet, when Brahmā gives the Māras to Kāma as his troops, we cringe. Does the story really mean to say that desire carries the power to kill? Though the text does not recount any episode in which the Māras take an active role, this story of their emergence from the sorrow of Brahmā clearly associates desire with death. The Māras raise the stakes of entering the ring with Kāma. They warn that passion obsessively seeking satisfaction can lead to death.

In the Indian epic, the *Rāmāyana*, the hero Rāma in his passion for truth in its purest form sends his beloved wife, Sitā, to her death. In the same epic, Rāma’s father, Daśaratha, makes a promise in the heat of his passion for a woman that ultimately ends his life. The examples are endless both in literature and in life. The same beings that inspire passionate desire can also chant death knells as they accompany the god of desire.

KĀMADEVA’S OTHER WIFE:

PRĪTI/KARṢOTPALĀ (SKANDA PURĀNA)

In contrast to the somber tone of the Māras, other aspects of Kāma evoke the well-known feeling of being elated in love. Aside from his seductive wife, Rati, Kāma is often portrayed with a second wife, Prīti, whose name connotes images

of pleasurable sensation, gratification, and affection. More a figure noted in visual representations of the god of desire than in story literature, this second wife is presented in one story, the tale of a maiden called Karṇotpalā. The name *Karṇotpalā* means one who wears a lotus flower fastened to her ear as an ornament.

As the tale begins, we find Karṇotpalā praying and performing penance to the goddess Gaurī, beseeching her for a husband. However, Karṇotpalā is praying not for her own happiness but for the welfare of her father. In despair over not finding a husband for his daughter, who is growing old, Karṇotpalā's father himself has taken up ascetic practices. Engaged in severe penance, her father has given up the ruling of his kingdom and is wasting away without his family to care for him. For the sake of her father's well-being, Karṇotpalā begins her own ascetic practice in devotion to the goddess. After some time, the goddess appears to Karṇotpalā and prescribes a ritual whereby she will have her youthfulness restored and gain a husband. As Karṇotpalā is performing the ritual in the specified manner, the goddess inspires Kāmadeva to go to see the newly youthful Karṇotpalā. As soon as he sees her, Kāma is completely smitten and proposes to her on the spot. But she does not immediately agree to become his wife. As the story closes, Karṇotpalā gives the god of desire a nuanced response to his plea that she become his wife. "If you go to my father and [hear that] this marriage is his will, then what choice does a maiden have?"¹³

Full of admonitions for daughters and their fathers, the tale assures the fathers of "old" daughters that if they and their daughters are virtuous, they may indeed still find a husband for them, even a husband as handsome as Kāmadeva. Speaking to unmarried women "past their prime," the story tells them to persevere, specifically for the welfare of their fathers. If an unmarried woman performs these rituals to Gaurī, goddess of the golden form, the goddess will restore her youthful beauty and attractiveness so that a man will desire her as his wife. Finally, by this devotion to Gaurī, such a woman will protect the well-being of her father and be filled with affection for a husband.

In the cycle of stories in which desire is personified, Karṇotpalā is easily joined to Kāmadeva as his second wife, Prīti. Kāma tells Karṇotpalā, "Because I have come to you out of affectionate pleasure (prīti), O Beauty, you will be called Prīti." Because the text makes it clear that Kāma is attracted to Karṇotpalā's attractive youthful body, the connection between physical attractiveness and desire allows the audience to immediately accept Prīti as Kāma's second wife. In other texts, this wife is referred to only as Prīti.

WHO IS KĀMADEVA?

A deity with two wives, Rati (Sensual Delight) and Prīti (Affectionate Pleasure), a companion, Vasanta (Spring), a troop called Māras (Killers), and a quiver of arrows that heat, intoxicate, and madden, the god of desire is presented in the story tradition as a handsome young man whose beauty and dashing manner

knock people off their feet. While the great gods, Brahmā and Śiva, are not immune to his charm, human beings are lost immediately.

However, the story of desire is never so simple or straightforward. Brahmā does manage to exert yogic control over his senses, though only with intense effort. Śiva, the divine yogi, who appears to have no problem with desire, easily disposes of the nuisance known as Kāma in one story. Yet, in another tale, Kāma's arrows do find that chink in his armor, and even the great god is overwhelmed by the elation and grief that inevitably accompany passion.

In the story literature, Kāmadeva arises from the mind of the creator god, dies in the fire of the god who is an ascetic, and is resuscitated without body by various deities including the great goddess. Each of these stories instructs us further about the nature of human desire. Where does it come from? Why does it appear out of nowhere? Does desire really have such power over us? Why are we compelled to pamper ourselves, feel more powerful, want more comfort, more success? How do we release ourselves from the desires that destroy us? How do we enjoy those that pleasure us? When should we walk away? When should we stay and indulge? These are the questions that give rise to the telling of these stories. We may like, or not like, the descriptions of ourselves that we find in them, but at the very least the stories allow us to smile as we recognize the fundamental components of human nature, of ourselves, within these narratives.

In the following chapter, in the most well-known story of the god of desire, we see Kāmadeva in action as he proceeds to do his part in Brahmā's great drama of continuing creation.

The Tale of Karṇotpalā and the Karṇotpalā Tīrtha

1. The ṛṣis spoke: Tell everything about the woman who is standing in tapas [ascetic practice], the woman you mentioned by the name of Karṇotpalā. Tell us why she is doing tapas in the water.
2. The poet responded: She stood at the foot of Gaurī,¹⁴ with the highest devotion. The Goddess [Devī], Girijā, beloved of Śaṅkara [Śiva], was so pleased [with her devotion] that . . .
3. She spoke [to her]: Child, I am pleased. Tell me your wish. Tell me what is clouding your peacefulness, even if it is something difficult to resolve.
4. Karṇotpalā spoke: O Goddess, for the sake of [finding] a husband for me, my father is distressed. He has given up his kingdom and comfort, depriving himself of the care of a family.
5. Indeed, he is performing tapas and become completely passionless [because] I have entered old age while still remaining a maiden.
6. For this reason, let there be a husband for me. O Lady of the Heavens, through your kindness, let him be someone known among gods and men as richly endowed with beauty.
7. Through your kindness, let him have the most beautiful youthful form. Let him come so that my ascetic father may be happy again.
8. The Goddess spoke: On the third of the month of Magha, on the auspicious day of Saturn, in the nakṣatra of Vāsudeva, you should concentrate on a youthful form.

Skanda Purāṇa, Bombay: Veṅkaṭeśvara Steam Press, 1867, 1910. Nāgarakhaṇḍa (VI).127.1–19.

9. You should take a bath here in the water of great merit. Imagine a beautiful divine form in this way, and without a doubt you will become youthful.¹⁵ This is the truth.
10. O Fortunate One, other women too who bathe on this day, in this place, will receive such beauty.
11. The poet spoke: Having spoken these words, the goddess disappeared. [Following these instructions] on the third day, Karṇotpalā
12. In the nakṣatra of Vāsudeva,¹⁶ concentrated with great effort on Devī, the goddess who grants all desires [Gaurī-Devī].
13. On the third day, she performed the ritual as it had been described by the goddess.
14. Then, concentrating on her desire for a young and handsome husband of good fortune, she entered the water at this place [to do an ascetic practice] at midnight.
15. When she emerged from this place [in the water] with a divine form glowing with youthfulness, people were astonished.
16. Purposely aroused by the voice of Gaurī, Bhagavan Kāma then came to this place yearning with affectionate desire [prīti] for a wife. He spoke [to Karṇotpalā]: O Fortunate One, I am Kāma himself who has come.
17. Pārvatī has directed me to [you as my] wife. So be mine always.
18. O Beauty, because I came to meet you through affectionate desire [prīti], as my wife you will be called Prīti.
19. Karṇotpalā spoke: O Smara, if I go to my father [to tell him about your proposal] and if [this marriage to you] is his will, how can a maiden not follow?