

**V&Q
BOOKS**

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IDENTITTI

A novel

Mithu Sanyal

*Translated from the German
by Alta L. Price*

**V&Q
BOOKS**

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FOR DURGA – AND MATTI

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PART 1:

FAKE BLUES

THE DEVIL AND ME

IDENTITTI

A BLOG BY MIXED-RACE WONDER WOMAN

About me:

The last time I spoke to the devil he was naked, visibly aroused, and female. So much for social certainties, right? If you can't even count on the devil being male, you might as well shed all forms of identity like you would a worn-out T-shirt – which is precisely what I'd like to do, if only I had one to slip into, let alone out of. That's exactly what all this was about, just like every other encounter with my devil, who's actually a devi – an Indian goddess with too many arms, wearing a necklace made of her enemies' severed heads. Yes, I'm talking about Kali. 'Demons, the lot of 'em,' she said, in the same dismissive tone my cousin Priti would use to say, 'Men, the lot of 'em,' and then she shook her necklace until her slain foes' teeth chattered. Sure enough, Kali's demon heads all looked suspiciously like men's heads.

But she'd already moved on to other things. 'Let's have a squirting match, whoever shoots farthest wins.'

I nodded at her hairy vulva, taken aback. 'How do you plan to ... ?'

'Hah! Jizzing isn't just for cis men,' Kali shouted, beaming so triumphantly that for a moment I didn't even notice she'd just said cis. 'And why would it be? We had three genders eons before your god was even born.'

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

'I thought I was your devil ...'

'What's the difference?'

Race & sex. Whenever Kali and I talked, it was always about race & sex. Meaning – for lack of a more accurate term, or any term whatsoever that won't send us down a rabbit hole – it was about my relationship to Germany and India, my two neither-mother-nor-fatherlands (remember, I'm Mixed-Race Wonder Whatever), and ... sex. This blog is mostly transcripts of our conversations. If you read on, I'll eventually tell you why I'm always talking to a goddess. My name is Nivedita Anand. You can call me IDENTITTI.

STRANGE FRUIT

1

The day hell's jaws opened and spewed out a slew of howling furies started out like any other day, if any other day normally starts with a rocket launch. *It's not a rocket, it's a satellite*, Nivedita read, at least that's how she interpreted her cousin's WhatsApp message. Priti had actually written *tisNArocket, issaSATEL-LITE!!!* plus an emoji that looked like a bunch of asparagus. Nivedita gaped up at German Public Radio's twenty-story concrete tower. It was perched precariously atop a spindly plinth that looked like a fiery plume, which seemed to be propelling the building skyward. She texted back: *obvs a rocket!*

At the building's peak, where the Saturn V rocket housed the Apollo spacecraft, flying buttresses formed an iron arrow in the glaring grey sky. Nivedita felt simultaneously sublime and insignificant in the face of this concrete spaceship whose entrance was crowned by a blue inscription: *The News*.

Imagine yr a terrorist who's killed several people, Priti's next WhatsApp message advised, in an even more arbitrary array of letters, *or that yr a terrorist who already faked killing piles o' peeps*

– *this'll be a cinch. Seconds later, 1 small step for you, 1 ginormous leap for humankind ROFL LMAO.*

The glass doors silently slid open before Nivedita, and she entered the hallowed halls of national radio headquarters. It smelled of candle wax and pleather, a blend of HMRC and CIA, if news broadcasters could smell like James Bond films looked. She'd only caught a glimpse of the receptionist's suit through the glass doors, so when she strode over and he looked up, she was shocked to see he was no older than she. But that black uniform signalled that he belonged to a different generation and danced to a different drum – a rather more conformist one than she – unless he were to slip off his staid jacket or she were to shed her radical-chic-meets-I-mean-business outfit. Clueless as she was of the codes, Nivedita had done her long black hair up into a braided crown that morning and, strand by strand, it had been struggling free in silent yet staunch protest all day.

'I'm here to be interviewed about my blog,' she said, enunciating the phrase she'd practiced the entire train ride there.

'Where?' the receptionist replied cryptically.

'Uhh ... here?'

'No, I mean, which department?' he asked, giving her a fatherly glance. For a second Nivedita couldn't even remember her own name. She felt like a snagged zip, suddenly stuck, but then the midnight-blue phone on the receptionist's desk rang, coming to her rescue.

'Nivedita Anand,' she said, just as he hung up and announced, 'They're on their way.'

Then she did what she always did when she wasn't feeling up to the task – she went to the toilet. Not because she needed privacy, but so she could look in the mirror and make sure she was still there. The toilet's frosted glass door bore an inscription, '*Frau* (from Old High German *Frouwa*, 'lady' or 'mistress'): adult female. Definition varies according to geo. loc., hist. era, as well as societal and cultural norms.' Her phone buzzed.

'You in?' asked Priti.

'Yeah,' whispered Nivedita.

'Why you answering then?'

Conversations with Priti were always on Priti's terms. At some point she'd invariably remember she had more important things to do than chat with Nivedita, even if she was the one who'd called. Actually, especially if she was the one who'd called. That's why Nivedita didn't bother explaining herself or anything else, and instead said, 'You should see this bathroom, the door alone is a veritable intro course in German.'

'That's the spirit!' Priti cheered, 'Feel superior to the toilet! Then you'll ... Wait! Something's come up, Niv.' When Priti was in the right mood she'd call Nivedita *Niv*, like the Irish name Niamh, pronounced 'Neave'. Priti was from Birmingham and had come up with this nickname not because anybody there had a clue how to pronounce Irish names, but because it highlighted that she was different. *As if anyone would doubt Priti was capital-D Different, capital-O Other!* As long as Priti sprinkled her with the stardust of her approval, Niv felt capital-N Noteworthy rather than Not Worthy. But Priti's moods were mercurial, and when she was feeling less generous she'd call Nivedita *Nivea*, like the *white* skin lotion whose racist advertising regularly sparked scandal.

'Shit!'

'Priti?'

'Gotta go – I'll call you back.'

Nivedita tapped the red receiver icon and looked deep into her own eyes. They didn't betray a thing. She desperately wished she could see herself how others saw her, but she just couldn't – for God's sake, she couldn't even see how she saw herself. But she *could* smudge her eyeliner to cast a more intellectual shadow around her eyes, so she did just that.

On the other side of the frosted glass door, a petite woman and large dog were waiting for her.

‘Welcome to RadioNew, 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 quickly lost interest, and went back to the first option. Much like the toilet, the stairway reminded her of college – brutality meets parking garage – and for a second she felt like Freida Pinto in *Slumdog Millionaire*, until she glimpsed her reflection in a window and noticed her eyeliner was less smoky-eye and more I-cried-in-the-bathroom.

When they got to the recording studio, Verena handed her a laughably large headset. The dog plopped down in a corner, all the while keeping his mournful brown eyes aimed at her, as if trying to convey his compassion for the whole human race.

‘That’s Mona,’ Verena said by way of introduction, and Nivedita mentally corrected her grammar: *she/her compassion*.

‘Hiya, Mona,’ she said, whereupon the dog shot right up, came over, and stoically let Nivedita pet her.

A lit display in the middle of the recording console gave counterintuitive signals: green light = wait, red light = on air. Verena pulled the microphone closer and dove right in.

“Where are you from?” is a loaded question nowadays. Is it a form of racism, or just curiosity? What are we still allowed to say? What should we never, *ever* say? What does it all mean, and what does all this say about us? Today’s guest is blogger Nivedita Anand, one of *Missy* magazine’s ‘Must-know POCs.’ Nivedita, before answering all our questions, could you explain the term POC, without using the words *people* or *of or colour*?’

Nivedita stared at Verena as if she’d said, ‘Can you breathe without inhaling?’ or, ‘Can you and your mother hang out without you flipping out about something totally trivial?’ or, ‘Can you think of India without feeling a vertiginous void opening up

inside you?’ Then she heard her own voice saying, ‘POCs are the folk who always get asked, “Where you from?”’

‘And where are you from, Nivedita?’

Nivedita was beginning to suspect Verena and her dimples were messing with her. She knew the question was a joke – goading makes for good radio. But she couldn’t exactly prod back, so her answer came out sounding defensive, ‘I’m from the Internet. I live online.’

Which seemed to be the precise answer Verena was waiting for. ‘Indeed, under the name Identitti. Nivedita blogs about identity politics and ...’

‘Tits,’ Nivedita added. *Two can play at this game.*

‘Let’s go with *boobs*. Would you say it’s more boobs, or more identity politics?’ Verena beamed. Her sheer gusto dissolved Nivedita’s defences.

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

‘Let’s stick to boobs.’

‘OK.’ For just a second, Nivedita wondered what Verena’s boobs looked like, but then quickly directed her brain back to – her own. ‘It all started when I posted a selfie of my boobs. I’d written on them in eyeliner, “In ancient Ireland, the Celts proved their loyalty by sucking the king’s nipples.”’

‘Really?!’ Verena’s dimples flashed as if to signal this was a two-thumbs-up titbit.

‘No idea. My cousin Priti heard it on a game show, and I just adored the notion of nipple-sucking as a form of social exchange. But then some smart-arse posted a comment about how “that story could only be found in the saga of ...” – Nivedita peeked stealthily at the inside of her forearm, where she’d jotted down key names and dates – “Fergus mac Léti, in the eighth century, and even there it was meant as a joke, but obviously” I “have no sense of humour because my degree was in

gender studies.” So I replied, “I’m not into gender studies, I’m into postcolonial studies,” to which smarty-pants replied, “The only other mention comes from Saint Patrick, who supposedly refused to suck the pagan Irish king’s nipples, but relying on the word of Saint Patrick when it comes to heathens is about as wise as relying on Donald Trump when it comes to Muslims, but surely you know all that, what with all your postcolonial gender studies!” Before I could even answer, Facebook had blocked my account because it showed nipples, but by then the image had been shared so far and wide that I just knew I had to keep going. By the way, I call my posts a *blog* because it sounds so retro, like CDs, or GTOs, or opposite-sex marriage, but my website is actually just an archive of my threads, rants, posts, stories, and comments because people seem to want to read them chronologically, like a *herstory*. Because we humans are more than just a bunch of random comments on identity politics, you know?’

Nivedita felt her nipples perking up under her T-shirt, as if to boast: You’ve got us to thank for that – you’re welcome.

‘That’s just outstanding,’ Verena concurred. ‘Is that how you came up with the name Identitti?’

‘Nah. First my blog was called *Fifty Shades of Beige*, because of my skin tone – y’know, beige.’

‘Why not brown?’

‘Saying *brown* is racist.’

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

‘I dunno. But that’s really what all this is about: the fact that we don’t have the language to talk about people like me. After all, until quite recently we were strictly *verboten* – forbidden. Like fruit.’

‘Forbidden?’

‘Forbidden,’ Nivedita reiterated. In all honesty, the college paper she had written on the various ‘anti-miscegenation laws’

– actually, on all the laws forbidding ‘miscegenation’ – was the real genesis of her Internet persona. Intriguing as nipples are, they’d never have sparked such a lasting, steady stream of verbal indignation. Anyway, it had all begun with sex, actually: legal sex, illegal sex, and sex that was so utterly unthinkable that it caused the heads of the lawmakers to explode. ‘Nazis weren’t the only ones who tried to prevent so-called interbreeding. In the United States, *whites* and *non-whites* couldn’t marry until ...’ Nivedita peeked at her forearm again, ‘nineteen sixty-seven, and in South Africa they couldn’t until nineteen eighty-five. And here in Germany, when my mother was pregnant with me, her doctor warned her that *Mischlinge* are more prone to depression. But when I told that to Simon, my ...’ she hardly hesitated, ‘boyfriend, he just said, “It’s always all about you and your Identitti,” and somehow Identitti just kind of stuck.’

‘You write under two alternating pen-names, Identitti and Mixed-Race Wonder Woman. One of your superpowers is that you can speak with the gods – or at least one of them, Kali, the Hindu Goddess of Destruction. Most of your blog entries are conversations with her. Why?’

Verena might as well have asked Nivedita to take a deep-dive into her own soul, find the golden egg containing life’s ultimate truths, and resurface with it intact. But even if such a thing were possible, it wouldn’t have changed Nivedita’s speechlessness at this very moment – after all, no such egg exists. At best, there might be a shell, and some kind of liquid, which might later turn into some kind of being with feathers, but there’s no guarantee. And feathers are indeed one of Kali’s attributes, but then again Kali has so many attributes that Nivedita had long since given up trying to keep track. Verena looked at her expectantly – how long had it been already? So Nivedita quickly jumped in, ‘I have to process all this with somebody. Most people have no clue how to talk about this stuff. Me neither. So I need someone