

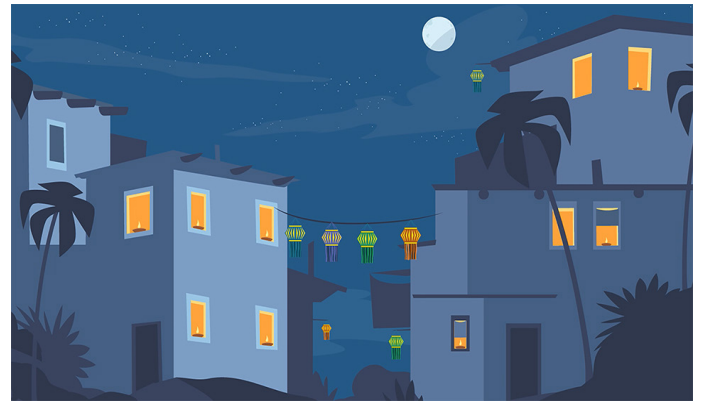
Lakshmi and the Clever Washerwoman

Part one



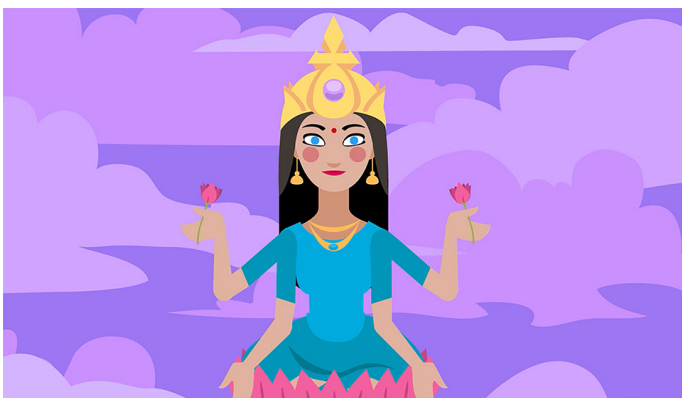
Each year at Diwali people would put little lamps in their windows and place lanterns outside, hoping that Lakshmi would see their homes in the darkness of night, and bless them with good luck.

Long, long ago a King lived with his wife, the Queen, in a huge palace at the heart of a great city. The palace was built of pink stone and stood in magnificent gardens, where palm trees swayed and peacocks roamed the perfect lawns.



The King and Queen were getting ready to celebrate, for it was a special time of year. Tomorrow it would be Diwali: the festival to honour Lakshmi, the gentle goddess of wealth and good fortune.

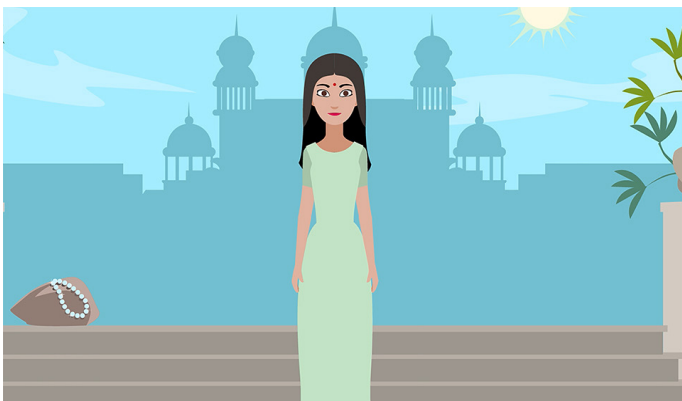
Every year, on the day before Diwali, the King would buy the Queen an expensive present. One year he had given her an elephant to ride around the palace gardens. Another year he had given her a sari covered in jewels. And this year the King's present to the Queen was no less grand: a beautiful necklace made of pearls!





'I can't wait to show it off to everyone!' said the Queen, as she took her husband's present without a word of thanks, for - in truth - she was rather rude and ungrateful.

Each morning the Queen would go for a swim in a nearby river. Of course, she couldn't risk damaging her valuable necklace, so this morning when she arrived at the river, she took it off and left it on the riverbank under a bamboo tree.



'It will be perfectly safe there,' thought the Queen. 'After all, no-one would ever dare to steal from the Queen!' And with that she stepped into the cool water to swim.

The Queen was quite right of course. No person would ever dare to steal from the Queen.



But a crow isn't a person and on this day a crow, perched on a branch in the bamboo tree, looked down and spied the necklace glinting in the sun. In a flash, it swooped down, grabbed the precious treasure in its beak and flew away.

'Stop! Stop!' cried the Queen - but it was too late! Away flew the crow, further and further, until it was gone from the Queen's sight.



Some distance away, another woman was also by the river. Like the Queen, this woman came to the river every morning but, apart from that, she couldn't have been more different to the Queen. She was a washerwoman and every day she came from her home in the poorest part of the city to crouch down on the bank and wash clothes for the people who paid her.

The washerwoman was scrubbing a sari when she looked up and saw a crow overhead.



The crow had something glinting in its beak, something which the crow dropped, something which landed on the riverbank.

The washerwoman could hardly believe it! There, right beside her, glinting in the sunlight, was a necklace! She picked it up, to look at it more closely. It was very precious – she was sure of that – why, it looked like it was made from real pearls!



'Who could such a valuable necklace belong to?' she wondered. 'And what should I do with it? If I sell it I'd be rich. I'd never need to scrub another sari for as long as I live!'

Then the washerwoman shook her head. 'But the necklace isn't mine to sell. One thing I do know. It needs to be kept safe. I shall take it home with me, until I can decide what to do with it.'