

## **Buddha's Wife**

**By Sarah Gibbard Cook**

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They married me to him on my thirteenth birthday, clad in red and jewels. Seven times we walked around the fire. We were shy with each other at first. They gave us every luxury, even more than my parents had been able to provide.

Bit by bit we got to know each other's bodies. But as I came to feel more and more attached to him, he seemed more and more abstracted. Distant. Kind and gentle, but as though half his attention was being drawn by some faraway call. When I asked him about it, he just snapped to attention and brought his focus back to me, the way an old man jerks his head on awakening after dozing in his chair. For minutes then he would be unusually attentive, but then I could see his attention drift.

My rival wasn't another woman but something more nebulous, something more ethereal. Something more threatening. I would not see him for hours at a stretch. And then one day he was gone. Simply vanished. Not dead, thankfully; nobody has tried to throw me on a funeral pyre. Under palace law I am still married, abandoned but unfree. I must act the part of a dutiful palace wife with no one to be wife to.

One night before he left for good, he had disappeared for a few hours and then come back and whispered to me – in a tone of astonishment – that outside the walls there was such a thing as suffering. Silly boy. You don't have to go outside the walls to see that. Just look in the eyes of the people who cook your lentils and sweep your floors. Just look in the eyes of the girl who gave up her freedom for love on her thirteenth birthday and now has lost them both.