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Nectar in a Sieve

Chapters 13, 14 & 16

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A Novel by

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13

THAT year the rains failed. A week went by, two. We stared at the cruel sky, calm, blue, indifferent to our need. We threw ourselves on the earth and we prayed. I took a pumpkin and a few grains of rice to my Goddess, and I wept at her feet. I thought she looked at me with compassion and I went away comforted, but no rain came.

"Perhaps tomorrow," my husband said. "It is not too late."

We went out and scanned the heavens, clear and beautiful, deadly beautiful, not one cloud to mar its serenity. Others did so too, coming out, as we did, to gaze at the sky and murmur, "Perhaps tomorrow."

Tomorrows came and went and there was no rain. Nathan no longer said perhaps; only a faint spark of hope, obstinately refusing to die, brought him out each dawn to scour the heavens for a sign.

Each day the level of the water dropped and the heads of the paddy hung lower. The river had shrunk to a trickle, the well was as dry as a bone. Before long the shoots of the paddy were tipped with brown; even as we watched, the stain spread like some terrible disease, choking out the green that meant life to us.

Harvesting time, and nothing to reap. The paddy had taken all our labour and lay now before us in faded, useless heaps.

Sivaji came to collect his master's dues and his face fell when he saw how much was lost, for he was a good man and he felt for us.

"There is nothing this year," Nathan said to him. "Not even gleanings, for the grain was but little advanced."

"You have had the land," Sivaji said, "for which you have contracted to pay: so much money, so much rice. These are just dues, I must have them. Would you have me return empty-handed?"

Nathan's shoulders sagged. He looked tired and dispirited. I came and stood beside him, Ira and the boys crouched near us, defensively.

"There is nothing," Nathan repeated. "Do you not see the crops are dead? There has been no rain and the river is dry."

"Yet such was the contract, else the land would not have been rented to you."

"What would you have me do? The last harvest was meagre; we have nothing saved."

Sivaji looked away. "I do not know. It is your concern. I must do as I am bid."

"What then?"

"The land is to be given to another if you cannot make payment."

"Go from the land after all these years? Where would we go? How would we live?"

"It is your concern. I have my orders and must obey them."

Nathan stood there sweating and trembling.

"Give me time," he said at last humbly, "until the next crop. I will pay then, somehow."

"Pay half now," Sivaji said, "and I will try and do as you wish." He spoke quickly, as if to give himself no time to repent of his offer, and hurried away even before my husband had assented.

"No easy job for him," I said. "He is answerable, even as we are."

"That is why he and his kind are employed," Nathan said bitterly. "To protect their overlords from such unpleasant tasks. Now the landlord can wring from us his moneys and care not for the misery he evokes, for indeed it would be difficult for any man to see another starve and his wife and children as well; or to enjoy the profits born of such travail."

He went into the hut and I followed. A few mud pots and two brass vessels, the tin trunk I had brought with me as a bride, the two shirts my eldest sons had left behind, two ollocks of dhal and a handful of dried chillies left over from better times: these we put together to sell.

"Rather these should go," said Nathan, "than that the land should be taken from us; we can do without these, but if the land is gone our livelihood is gone, and we must thenceforth wander like jackals." He stared awhile at what we had to sell, and made an effort to say something and tried again and at last he said, choking. "The bullocks must go. Otherwise we shall not have enough."

But when we had added them and reckoned and re-reckoned, there was still not enough. "There are the saris left," I said. "Good ones and hardly worn, and these we must sell."

I brought out the red sari that had served for both my wedding and my daughter's, and the sari and dhoti I had bought when Thambi worked at the tannery, made a parcel of them and set out.

"Ah, Rukmani," said Biswas with false welcome. "What brings you here? I have not seen you for a long time, nor had any of your succulent fruit. Would that be what you bear with you?"

"No indeed," I answered shortly, his voice grating on me as always. "For the earth is parched to dust and all that I grew is dead. The rains failed, as you know."

"Yes, yes, yes," he said, looking at me with his cunning eyes. "These are hard times for us."

Not for you, I thought. You thrive on others' misfortunes.

"We need money for the land," I said. "I have brought the two shirts my sons no longer need, being away, two saris I never wear and my husband's dhoti to sell to you. The saris are very finely worked, and worn but a few times." I took them out and laid them before him.

He fingered the rich stuff, and measured the borders between outstretched thumb and little finger, and lifted up the silver threads to examine them the closer, and held up the shirts to the light for sign of wear.

"How much do you want for these?"

"It is for you to make the offer."

"Tell me first how much you want and I will see what I can do."

"Enough to pay the land dues."

"How much is that?"

"It is my business."

He was silent for a while, and I said to him exasperated, "Tell me if you are not prepared to buy and I will go elsewhere."

"Always in haste," he rebuked me in that gentle, oily voice of his. "Yet I think this time you will have to await my pleasure, Rukmani."

"What do you mean?" I said, ruffled. "There are many who would be pleased to buy such good material."

"I think not," he said. "I think not. For, you see, the wives of other men have come to me, even as you have, and have gone away as you threaten, yet they have to come back to me because nobody else can afford to buy in these hard times."

"As no doubt you can," I said with contempt, and then an inspiration came to me and I went on: "Unless you pay a fair price I shall take these saris elsewhere. There is the Muslim wife of a tannery official whom I know, and she will buy from me as she has done before."

"Indeed," he said, a little disconcerted. "Well, Rukmani, since we have done business for a long time, and because you are a woman of spirit whom I have long admired, I will give you thirty rupees. Nobody could be fairer."

"Fairer by far," I retorted. "I will not take one pie under seventy-five rupees. Take it or not as you please."

I put the clothes away, making a pretence of going to the door. I hoped he would call me back, for in truth I did not know where else to turn, but if not—well, thirty rupees was too far from our needs to be of use, and if I did not get what I asked I might as well keep the saris.

As I got to the door he called to me. "Very well, Rukmani. I will pay you what you ask, since it will help you."

I waited. He disappeared into another room and came

back in a few minutes with a sour face and a small leather pouch full of money. He pulled the drawstrings and took from it notes and silver, counting them twice over to make sure.

"A very rare price," he said, handing me the money. "Remember always the good turn I have done you."

I tucked the money away, making no reply, and I went back with a lighter step than I had come out.

Nathan had returned too, having sold the pots and pans, the food and the bullocks. We pooled the money and counted it, and there was in all one hundred and twenty-five rupees, not even the half we had to pay.

"There is still the seed," Nathan said. "We must sell that."

"What of the next crop?" I said. "If we sell the seed we may as well give up the land too, for how shall we raise a new crop?"

"It is better to be without the seed than bereft of the land in which to plant it. Seed is cheap, it can be bought. I can earn a few rupees, or perhaps my sons . . ."

How? I cried to myself. How? Is not my son every day at the tannery, and no one will look at him because of his brothers! And you, my husband, what chance have you when so many young men are festering in idleness!

"It will mean only a few rupees," I said. "Let us not sacrifice the future to our immediate need."

"What is the alternative?" he shouted. "Do you think I am blind and do not see, or so stupid as to believe that crops are raised without seed? Do you take me for a fool that—"

He was not shouting at me but at the terrible choice forced upon us; this I knew, yet could not prevent my throat contracting, or force the tears back into their wells.

"Let us only try," I said with the sobs coming fast. "Let us keep our hope for a next harvest."

"Very well, very well," Nathan exclaimed. "Let us try by all means. We may be kicked for our pains, but what of that! Anything to stop your wailing. Now go, do not cross me further."

He is worried, I thought, smothering my sobs. He is distracted and does not mean to be harsh.

I went inside and lay down, with the money tied to my body, and at last dozed off into a troubled sleep.

In the morning Sivaji came, and my husband took the money and counted it out in front of him.

"One hundred and twenty-five rupees," he said. "Not half what we owe, but the best we can do without selling the seed for the next sowing."

"It would raise only a few rupees," I pleaded. "Let us but keep it, and we will repay you twofold."

"It is not for me," Sivaji answered. "You make payment to another. What shall I say to him that I bring so little? You made promise of half."

"Give us a little grace," Nathan said, dragging the words out. "We will make full repayment and over after the next harvesting."

So we stood and argued and begged, and in the end Sivaji agreed to wait. He took the money and turned to go, then he hesitated and said, a little wistfully: "What I do I must, for I must think of my own. . . . I do not wish to be hard. May you prosper."

"May you prosper too," I whispered, hardly able to speak, for his words had left me defenceless. "May the Gods give you their blessing." And so he departed.

The drought continued until we lost count of the time. Day after day the pitiless sun blazed down, scorching whatever still struggled to grow and baking the earth hard until at last it split and great irregular fissures gaped in the land. Plants died and the grasses rotted, cattle and sheep crept to the river that was no more and perished there for lack of water, lizards and squirrels lay prone and gasping in the blistering sunlight.

In the town a water reservoir had been built for the tannery workers and their families, but now others were allowed a limited quantity as well. So thither I journeyed every morning, and, when I said how many we were, perhaps half a mud pot would be doled out, sometimes a little more, depending upon who was in charge. Then some of the women in their greed began to claim to have more children than they had, and non-existent relatives, and there were jealousies and spite and bitter argument.

Until at last it was decreed that each person must come in his own right only, not for others, even children and old men, and this put an end to the cheating and quarrelling; but it was hard for many who had not their full strength.

Then, after the heat had endured for days and days, and our hopes had shrivelled with the paddy—too late to do any good—then we saw the storm clouds gathering, and before long the rain came lashing down, making up in fury for the long drought and giving the grateful land as much as it could suck and more. But in us there was nothing left—no joy, no call for joy. It had come too late.

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As soon as the rains were over, and the cracks in the earth had healed, and the land was moist and ready, we took our seed to our Goddess and placed it at her feet to receive her blessing, and then we bore it away and made our sowing.

When a few weeks had gone by, the seed sprouted; tender shoots appeared, thrusting upwards with increasing strength, and soon we were able to transplant the seedlings one by one, and at first they stood out singly, slender, tremulous spires with spaces between: but grew and grew and soon were merged into one thick green field of rustling paddy. In that field, in the grain which had not yet begun to form, lay our future and our hope.

Hope, and fear. Twin forces that tugged at us first in one direction and then in another, and which was the stronger no one could say. Of the latter we never spoke, but it was always with us. Fear, constant companion of the peasant. Hunger, ever at hand to jog his elbow should he relax. Despair, ready to engulf him should he falter. Fear; fear of the dark future; fear of the sharpness of hunger; fear of the blackness of death.

Long before the paddy ripened we came to the end of our dried-fish stocks. There was no money left—every pie had gone to pay the land dues. Nothing left to sell. Nothing to be had from my efforts, for the vines and vegetables had withered in the long weeks of drought.

At last no option but to draw upon my secret hoard: a small stock of rice, ten ollocks in all, shielded from every

temptation to sell or barter, kept even when the need to hold our land had squeezed us dry of everything else. Now I brought it out and measured it again, ten ollocks exactly. Then I divided it into several equal portions, each of the portions as little as would suffice for one day, and counted the portions, of which there were twenty-four, so that for nearly a month we would not starve. For a long time I hesitated, wondering whether we could do with less, thus making thirty divisions, but finally I decided against it, for Kuti was already ailing, and we needed to preserve our strength for the harvest.

For at least twenty-four days we shall eat, I thought. At the end of that time—well, we are in God's hands. He will not fail us. Sometimes I thought that, and at other times I was seized with trembling and was frightened, not knowing where to turn.

The nights were always the worst, and not for me alone. Peace then seemed to forsake our hut and I could hear my husband and children moving restlessly in their sleep and muttering, whether from hunger or fear I do not know. Once Nathan cried out loudly and sprang up in his sleep. I went to him, and he woke then and clung to me.

"Only a dream," I said. "Sleep, my dear one."

"A nightmare," he said sweating. "I saw the paddy turned to straw, the grain lost. . . . Oh God, all was lost."

His voice was stark, bereft of the power of dissembling which full consciousness brings.

"Never fear," I said with a false courage lest panic should swoop down on us. "All will be well."

He composed himself for sleep again.

"You are a good wife," he murmured. "I would not have any other."

I drifted at last into uneasy sleep, and dreamt many evil dreams, and in one I saw a shadowy figure with no face creeping into our hut and bearing away the ten ollocks of rice. I knew it was but the result of an overburdened spirit, but the following night I had the same dream. As the days passed I found myself growing increasingly suspicious. Except for my family, I trusted no one. Only at night when there were no passers-by, did I

feel completely safe. Then I would bring out the rice, and measure it, and run the grain through my fingers for sheer love of it, fondling it like a simpleton. When I had taken out the allotted portion for the next day I would bury the remainder: one half, tied in a white cloth, in a hole I dug some distance from our hut, the other half in our granary.

Several times I thought of going to Kenny, and twice I did go. He would have helped us, of that I am sure, but each time I was told he had gone away . . . the townsfolk had not seen him for many weeks. I would have gone again and again, but I had not my full strength; it was no longer easy to walk to the town and back. We might have borrowed from Biswas, but there was nothing left to pledge; in any event, we would not have been able even to pay the interest he demanded.

Seven days went by and seven precious portions of rice were eaten. On the eighth day Kunthi came as I was cooking the rice water.

I had not set eyes on her for a considerable time—not since the day I had seen her in her nakedness; and she had changed so much I scarcely recognised her. I gazed at her hardly believing. The skin of her face was stiff and shiny as if from overstretching, elsewhere it showed folds and wrinkles. Under her faded sari her breasts hung loose; gone was the tense suppleness that had been her pride and her power. Of her former beauty not a vestige remained. Well, I thought. All women come to it sooner or later: she has come off perhaps worse than most.

"Sit and rest awhile," I said. "What brings you hither?"

She made no answer, but walked to the pot on the fire and looked in.

"You eat well," she said. "Better than most."

"Not well. We eat, that is all."

"You still have your husband?"

"Why, yes," I said staring at her, not quite taking her meaning. "Why do you ask?"

She shrugged. "I have lost mine. I wondered how you had fared."

Poor thing, I thought. She has suffered. I looked at her pityingly.

"I do not want your pity," she said savagely, "nor does my husband. He is alive and well—he is living with another."

I thought of her husband, slow, sturdy, dependable, rather like an ox, and I could not believe it of him; then I thought of Kunthi as I had once seen her, with painted mouth and scented thighs that had held so many men, and I wondered if after all these years he had not at last found out about her. Perhaps the truth has been forced upon him, I thought, looking at her with suspicion, and I gazed again upon that ravaged beauty.

"Stare your fill," she said scornfully. "You always lacked graces, Rukmani."

I averted my eyes hastily. I hardly knew what to say.

"I have come," she continued, "not to be seen, or to see you, but for a meal. I have not eaten for a long time."

I went to the pot and stirred it, scooped out a little, placed it in a bowl, handed it to her. She swallowed it quickly and put the bowl down.

"I must have some rice too. I cannot come every day . . . as it is I have waited a long time to make sure you were alone."

"There is no rice to be given away," I said. "I must think of my husband and children. These are not times of plenty."

"Nevertheless," she replied, "I will have some. The damage will never be repaired while I hunger. There is no life for me until I am whole again."

She is mad, I thought. She believes what she says; does not realise there is no going back for her.

"Listen," I said, "there is none, or very little. Drink our rice water, come here daily, but do not ask for rice. I have a daughter and sons, even as you have, to consider. What I have belongs to us all. Can you not go to your sons?"

"My sons," she said, looking at me speculatively, "are not mine alone." Seeing my bewilderment she added, "They have wives. I would never approach them now."

"What are sons for—" I began.

"Not to beg from," she interrupted with a flicker of

contempt. "I can look after myself; but first the bloom must come back."

I was mute: I had said all there was to say and now there was nothing more.

"Well," she said, breaking the silence, and with an edge to her voice. "How much longer have I to wait?"

She came close to me and put her face near mine. I saw the grey, drawn flesh and the hooded eyes, deep sunken in their sockets, and I made to turn away but she held me.

"I have not so much patience," she said. "I will have the rice now or your husband shall hear that his wife is not as virtuous as he believes—or she pretends."

"He believes what is true," I said with anger. "I do not pretend."

"Perhaps he has not seen what I have seen," she said, and there was menace in her voice and threat in the words. "Comings and goings in the twilight, and soft speech, and gifts of milk and honey such as men make to the women they have known."

"Stop," I howled at her, and put my hands to my ears. Thoughts kept hurtling through my head like frenzied squirrels in a new-forged cage. With sudden clarity I recalled my daughter's looks that far-off day when I had gone to Kenny; my son's words: "Such men have power, especially over women"; remembered my own foolish silences. I closed my eyes and sank down. She came and sat beside me.

"Which is it to be? Which is it to be? . . ."

Her words were hammering at my brain, the horrible syllables were beating the air around me, the whole place was full of their sound.

I need you, I cried to myself, Nathan, my husband. I cannot take the risk, because there is a risk since she is clever and I am not. In your anger or your jealousy, or even because you are not yourself after these long strained months, you may believe what she says and what she means. Because I have deceived you and cannot deny all she proclaims, you may believe the more. I will kill her first, I thought, and the desire was strong. I felt myself

shaking. I raised my hands to my eyes and there was a quivering redness there. Then I heard a cry, whether of bird or child or my own tortured self I do not know, and the redness cleared. I felt the water oozing through my closed eyes, through my closed fingers. I took my hands away, and there was Kunthi waiting by my side with the patience of one who knows what power she wields, patient, like a vulture.

The ration of seven days to Kunthi, and eight already eaten. There is still enough for nine days, I thought, not with comfort but with desolation, and hatred came welling up again for her who had deprived me of the grain, and contempt for myself who had relinquished it.

I waited a long time that night before going out, for fear that Kunthi might be watching. There is nothing she would not do, I thought, lying there in the darkness. I must wait, and walk with care, and return unseen. I will match my wits against hers, I thought cunningly, lying and listening to uneasy slumber about me, and I will yet win; clever though she is, she shall not have all. . . . I rose at last and went out softly, and looked about me, and went quickly to the hole I had dug, and clawed away the earth until I saw the bundle, white under the starlight. I squatted down, crooning silently, untied it, ran my fingers through the grain: and I knew then there was no more than a handful left—a day's supply, no more, not the nine days' supply I had looked to find.

My stomach lurched, blood came pounding to my head, I felt myself going dizzy. Who could have known, who had done this to me? I heard a voice moaning and it was mine and the sound was terrifying, for I had not meant to speak. I looked about me wildly, seeking to see even in that darkness. Nothing in sight, not a sound except my own loud heart beats. I dug my nails into my palms, striving for calm, trying to think. Who could have done this? Kunthi?—but she only knew of the granary, not this other hiding place. My own family? No, I thought with despair, thrusting aside the small core of suspicion each time it formed. Surely not. Who else? Who?

A long time passed; when at last I rose, my limbs were

stiff and prickling, and darkness had given way to the first grey beginnings of dawn.

Nathan was not in the hut when I went back: I saw him sitting beside the paddy fields as he often did when he could not sleep. The boys were still asleep, the two older ones side by side, Kuti squeezed close to Ira and she with her arm thrown across him. I shook her by the shoulder, and Kuti woke first and began to cry. I picked him up and took him outside and left him there, and when I went back the others were awake. I looked at the three faces and I thought bitterly. One of them has done this to me. . . . Which one? Which one? I thought, questioning, looking at the three faces as if to read their thoughts; but there was nothing to see save alarm; they shrank a little from my vehemence.

"I must know," I shouted. "I must know who has done this thing."

They looked at me as if I had lost my senses. Ira said timidly, "We would not take what belonged to us all."

"Tell me I am imagining the loss," I stormed at her, "or that I myself have eaten it."

They stared at me in silence, amazed. Outside Kuti was bawling. Attracted by his cries, Nathan had come up, now he called to me.

"See to the child," he said frowning. "Can you not hear him? He will choke."

"So much the better," I said. "It will be one mouth less to feed."

"You are ill," he said. "You do not know what you are saying. "He picked up the child, soothing him in his arms, and then gave him to Ira.

"My heart is sick," I said. "I have been robbed, and by one of my own children, of rice, which above all things is most precious."

"Is that what you have said to them?"

I nodded. I saw his face wither.

"I took it," he said at last.

"You? My husband? I do not believe it!"

"It is true."

Silence fell like a shroud. I listened to it locked in my

own brooding bitterness. Then it was rent by a sound so raw, so painful, that my nerves began screaming in response. I looked up and it was Nathan. His face was working, from his throat came those dry hideous sobs.

"Not for myself," he was muttering, trying to control his treacherous voice, "for another. I took it for another. There was no other way. I hoped you would not notice. I had to do it."

I went to him. I did not want to know any more why he had done it or for whom, it was no longer important; but he was still speaking: it was as if he could not stop.

"Kunthi took it all, I swear it. She forced me, I did not want you to know."

Presently he was quiet.

"She has a strange power, this woman," I said, half to myself.

"Not strange," Nathan said. "I am the father of her sons. She would have told you, and I was weak."

Disbelief first; disillusionment; anger, reproach, pain. To find out, after so many years, in such a cruel way. Kali's words: "She has fire in her body, men burn before and after." My husband was of those men. He had known her not once but twice; he had gone back to give her a second son. And between, how many times, I thought, bleak of spirit, while her husband in his impotence and I in my innocence did nothing.

"It was a long time ago," Nathan said. "I was very young, and she a skilful woman."

"The first time was before our marriage," he said.

"One did not see the evil for the beauty," he said.

At last I made an effort and roused myself.

"It is as you say a long time ago," I said wearily. "That she is evil and powerful I know myself. Let it rest."

It became possible for me to speak as well. I told him of her earlier visit and the grain she had extorted from me also; and it seemed to me that a new peace came to us then, freed at last from the necessity for lies and concealment and deceit, with the fear of betrayal lifted from us, and with the power we ourselves had given her wrested finally from Kunthi.

Now that the last of the rice was gone it was in a sense a relief: no amount of scheming and paring would make it go any further: the last grain had been eaten.

Thereafter we fed on whatever we could find: the soft ripe fruit of the prickly pear; a sweet potato or two, blackened and half-rotten, thrown away by some more prosperous hand; sometimes a crab that Nathan managed to catch near the river. Early and late my sons roamed the countryside, returning with a few bamboo shoots, a stick of sugar cane left in some deserted field, or a piece of coconut picked from the gutter in the town. For these they must have ranged widely, for other farmers and their families, in like plight to ourselves, were also out searching for food; and for every edible plant or root there was a struggle—a desperate competition that made enemies of friends and put an end to humanity.

It was not enough. Sometimes from sheer rebellion we ate grass, although it always resulted in stomach cramps and violent retching. For hunger is a curious thing: at first it is with you all the time, waking and sleeping and in your dreams, and your belly cries out insistently, and there is a gnawing and a pain as if your very vitals were being devoured, and you must stop it at any cost, and you buy a moment's respite even while you know and fear the sequel. Then the pain is no longer sharp but dull, and this too is with you always, so that you think of food many times a day and each time a terrible sickness assails you, and because you know this you try to avoid the thought, but you cannot, it is with you. Then that too is gone, all pain, all desire, only a great emptiness is left, like the sky, like a well in drought, and it is now that the strength drains from your limbs, and you try to rise and find you cannot, or to swallow water and your throat is powerless, and both the swallow and the effort of retaining the liquid tax you to the uttermost.

"It will not be long before the harvest," Nathan would murmur, and I would agree with him, stifling the query whether our strength would last till then, saying, "Ah yes, not long now; only a little time before the grain is ripe."

It happened to me too, but I could not see myself, only what happened to others: saw their flesh melt away and their skin sag and sink between their jutting bones, saw their eyes retreat into their skulls, saw their ribs curve out from under the skin; and what withered the young bore doubly hard on the old and they were emaciated twice over.

But of us all Kuti suffered the most. He had never been a healthy child; now he was constantly ailing. At first he asked for rice water and cried because there was none, but later he gave up asking and merely cried. Even in his sleep he whimpered, twisting and turning endlessly, permitting no one to rest. Ira was gentlest with him, and tirelessly patient, nursing him in her skinny arms and giving him most of what came to her. But more often than not he turned away, unable to take the rough food we offered, and then she would hold him against her and give him her breast, and he would pull at the parched teat and be soothed, and for a while his thin wailing would die away.

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ONE day Raja went out as usual and did not come back. At dusk they brought his body home slung between two men, one at the head and one at the feet. There was a small trickle of blood running from his mouth, fresh and still bright red, and more blood from a cut in his head, dark and congealed here and matting his hair.

They laid him on the ground. They bowed their heads and shuffled their feet and spoke in low voices and then they went away. It was real; yet it seemed a nightmare, it could not be true that my son lay dead before me. Thus my thoughts, dazed and confused, injecting pain where there was numbness; and my mind, furtively touching the edges of realisation, then fleeing from it in terror.

He had been caught, they said; something about money. What had my son to do with money, who had not a pie of his own! He was not very strong, they told me. They merely laid hands on him, and he fell. As if I did not know how thin and brittle he had grown! But why should others lay hands on him? They told me, but the sense of their words escaped. They told me, but I could not remember. They repeated themselves again and again, but I kept forgetting. I heard Ira begin to sing a low dirge; she was rocking gently back and forth, and she was crying.

"What are you crying for?" I said. "You have little enough strength, without dissolving it in tears."

She looked at me stupidly, and away, and down at her brother. Her sorrow flowed to me; the numbness began

floor to emphasize his point, "that no fault attaches to us. Absolutely none. Of course, as my friend has said, it is your loss. But not, remember, our responsibility. Perhaps," he went on, "you may even be the better off. . . . You have many mouths to feed, and—"

The thinner man raised his hand to check him, appalled by the words, yet scared by his own daring. Poor little mouse, that gesture must have taken all his courage, he had none left for speech. His aggressive companion stopped short; the look of surprise spreading over his face was quickly replaced by displeasure. He turned to me.

"I did not intend to wound you. But sometimes the truth must be stated, unpalatable as it is."

I nodded. There was no sense in agreeing or disagreeing, the gulf between us was too wide; it was no use at all flinging our words at each other across that gaping chasm.

"So you agree," he insisted. "No responsibility attaches to us."

"Yes," I said, my lips felt stiff.

"I am glad everything is settled then. An unpleasant matter, but amicably settled." He drew his lips back, imitating a smile, and turned triumphantly to his companion.

"Did I not tell you there would be no trouble? You always fear the worst. I told you they would be reasonable."

The other did not look triumphant: if anything, he seemed to have shrunk a little, he avoided looking at me altogether; but as they went out together he glanced at me quickly, once, and in that brief moment I saw that his eyes were grieving.

"You should not care," I said very softly to him alone. "It does not matter."

He heard me and half-turned, his eyes clearing a little. "I am very sorry for you," he said in a low voice. "May you find peace."

He went, his face overlaid with shame and misery.

16

THERE is the reaping," I said, "and the threshing and winnowing. How shall we manage when the time comes?"

"When the time comes," Nathan said with a gleam in his eye, "the strength will be forthcoming, never fear."

I looked at him doubtfully: thin and drawn, with thighs and arms so puny that no muscle showed even when he flexed them. The rice would have to be lifted plant by plant, and the grain separated from the husk, and the husk beaten for the last few grains . . . it meant working long hours in the flooded fields with bent back, and much labouring thereafter converting the paddy into rice. It was no task for weakened bodies.

"You will see," he said with confidence. "We will find our strength. One look at the swelling grain will be enough to renew our vigour."

Indeed, it did our hearts good to see the paddy ripen. We watched it as a dog watches a bone, jealously, lest it be snatched away; or as a mother her child, with pride and affection. And most of all with fear.

As we sat there Irawaddy came to us, stepping softly. "It is hot within," she said forlornly. "I could not rest."

She went and picked a head of paddy before sitting down beside us. I saw her fingers parting the husk, feeling for the grain within.

"How much longer?"

The same question, the answer to which she already knew, who had lived on the land since birth.

"Three weeks," Nathan's reply, grave, sincere, absolutely honest where another might have been tempted to easier words.

"It is not long to wait," I said, trying to hearten her. "And if the Gods are kind it may even be sooner."

That was what we prayed for—that it might not be too late. The tears that brightened Ira's eyes, the silences of my husband, the twitching face of Selvam, all came from one thing, the thought, imprisoned in the brain but incapable of utterance, that Kuti might not live to see the harvesting. The rest of us might struggle on, our endurance was greater; but he was only a child, not yet five, who had already waited a long time and who had suffered more than any of us. Whether from the unsuitable food, or from the constant restless movement of his body, he had developed a thick, irritating rash which he kept scratching; and where his nails caught, sores and blisters began, destroying whatever little peace he might have had. Sometimes after moaning for hours at a stretch he would fall into an exhausted daze—it could not be called sleep, it was nothing so sweet—and I would go to him with beating heart to see if the fight was ended; but again and again he struggled back to consciousness, took up again his tormented living; almost I wished it otherwise.

Some two or three days later I noticed a change in Kuti: his eyes lost their dullness and the whimpering that had been so harrowing to listen to lessened and stopped. I thought it was the end—a brief rallying, a frothing up of the last reserves of strength when there is no longer any need to hold back, like the sudden brilliant glow of an expiring taper—since we gave him nothing, there being nothing to give, that might account for the change. The following day, however, the improvement continued, and that night he slept peacefully. I gazed at the small tired face, soothed by sleep as it had not been for many nights, and even as I puzzled about the change, profound gratitude flooded through me, and it seemed to me that the Gods were not remote, not unheedful, since they had heard his cries and stilled them as it were by a miracle. Irawaddy crept up to me as I watched, and smiled at me and the child; and I whispered, "He is better," but there was no need as she, of all people, knew.

Through relief and exhaustion I slept well that night, waking refreshed before daybreak with a renewed hopefulness. Soon all will be well, I thought. We shall eat and the strength will come back to us, and there will be no more fear. This has been a bad time but it is passing as all things must, and now it is not joy, which passes in a trice, but sorrow, which is slower in the going, and so one must be patient. A few more days' waiting, a few more days' anxiety—it is not beyond enduring, it is not too much to ask. This I thought as I lay there, listening to the sounds of sleep and lost in my own imaginings.

The darkness was lifting when I heard the sound of footsteps, wary, soft, less heard than felt as a slight tremor of the ground. If it had been a reverberating gong, that sound could not have had more violent effect. My fancies fled headlong from me; in their place a cloud of black and grey arose, revolving before my eyes and assuming fantastic shapes and forms until at last one stood out clearly away from the swirling mists and with a face to it. Kunthi. No one but Kunthi, coming stealthily by night to thieve from us what little we had, unashamed as she was and always had been.

The footsteps were coming nearer: I raised myself on my elbow the better to listen, trying to still the thudding in my eardrums which impeded my hearing. Nearer and nearer. I stood up, bracing myself for the encounter, and stepped from the familiar darkness of the hut into the greying night outside. The figure was there, soft and blurred in outline, but a woman's. I threw myself at it, pinioning the arms savagely; thrust at it and beat it to the ground; fell on it with fury; felt the weak struggles of the body beneath mine like the feeble fluttering of a trapped bird, and exulted. The air was full of harsh sounds, but whether they issued from my throat or hers, or existed only in my imagination, I do not know. The being that was me was no longer in possession: it had been consumed in the flames of anger and hatred that

raged through me in those few minutes; what took its place I do not know.

Then I heard a thin, shrill scream. "Mother! *Mother!*" Hands were dragging me away. I felt myself pulled and thrown to one side. "Fiend! Madwoman!" Nathan was shrieking. "Accursed mother!" He was bending over the form, doing something to it. I saw he was quite naked and wondered at it, forgetting he had come straight from sleep. He turned to me.

"Are you out of your mind? Your own daughter, you have killed her. Murderess!"

He and Selvam carried her in. I slunk after them, disbelieving. It could not be Irawaddy. It was some monstrous mistake they had made, not I. I crept to her side and saw it was Irawaddy. Her face was puffed and bore horrible marks, one lip was bleeding where her tooth had bitten down. I closed my eyes. Red circles opened out before them, receding into an endless blackness. I shook myself clear of them and went to aid my husband. He had a pot of water beside him and was wiping the blood from her body. Her sari was stained with blood. I took the cloth from him.

"I will see to her."

He thrust me aside. "Get away; you have done enough harm. You are not fit."

"I thought it was Kunthi," I whispered.

He moved a little, making room for me, but remained near, not wholly trusting.

She had been badly cut. A long jagged gash showed in her left side, there was a similar one on her left wrist.

"These wounds," I said. "I did not make them." I did not expect him to believe me.

"I know. The bangles broke."

Bangles? How could she have bangles, who had not a pie of her own? I stared at him, not knowing amid these unreal happenings whether those were his words or only what I had heard. He pointed.

"Do you not see the glass—there and there. She was wearing bangles."

They had broken against her body, which had pro-

tected me from injury. I began to swab. The cuts were full of glass, some of it in splinters, some of it in powder like shining sand. When I had cleaned them I bound the two largest gashes. For the rest there was nothing I could use, but these were smaller and mercifully soon stopped bleeding. The sari I had taken from her was soaked with blood and grimy where dust clung to the wet cloth. I took it down to the river intending to wash it, shook it clear of dust and broken glass. As I did so, something dropped from the folds, fell in the muddy water, sank and was lost; but not before I had seen that it was a rupee.

I went on with my work, scrubbing the bloodstains, rinsing the cloth, laying it on the grass to dry: then I came back, swept and cleaned the hut, cleared the courtyard, removed all signs of the struggle that had been. The sun was moving to midday by the time I had finished. Now that there was nothing more to do, the thoughts I had so far avoided came crowding in on me in agitated turmoil. Who had given her the money? Why? Had she stolen it, and if so how and who from? Why did she have to walk by night wearing glass bangles? I kept very still, not to waken my sleeping daughter, while the thoughts went galloping through my head, and question after question, unanswered.

Kuti, lying in a corner of the hut, began to moan. Ira heard and opened her eyes, gesturing vaguely towards him. I went to her first.

"Lie still; the cut will open again."

She looked at me sombrely: "Feed him; he is hungry. Take the rupee you will find in my sari."

I knew then that it was she who had been responsible for the improvement in Kuti, not I, not my prayers.

Nathan was about to say something, to question her perhaps. I gripped his arm, forcing him to silence. Ira was struggling to rise. I went to her.

"Lie still," I said again, laying restraining hands on her. "I will see to him."

I picked up the moaning child and took him outside, trying to quieten him. It was useless. Ira had fed him and freed him from hunger, the taste was with him still

and he would not be quietened. I walked away from the hut with him in my arms, and at length his sharp cries sank into soft whimpering and finally into silence.

The lips of her wounds had hardly drawn together when Ira was on her feet again.

"Where do you go?" I said to her. "Rest a little longer; the marks are still livid."

"Rest!" she said contemptuously. "How can I rest or anyone rest? Can you not hear the child?"

"Where do you go?" I repeated. "Tell me only where you go."

"Do not ask," she said. "It is better that you should not know."

She was combing her hair, letting it fall away from her neck, first one way, then another, until the whole, head and hair, was sleek and shining. She had not troubled so much since she was a bride.

I saw her go out in the dusk, sari tightly wrapped about her. Saw her walk to the town, along the narrow lane which ran past the tannery, following it to where it broadened with beedi shops along one side and tawdry stalls on the other, where men with bold eyes lounged smoking or drinking from frothing toddy pots. She moved jauntily, stepping with outrageous fastidiousness amid the litter of the street, the chewed sugar cane, the trampled sweetmeats, the red betel-nut spittle; jauntily, a half-smile on her lips answering the jeers and calls that were thrown at her, eyes darting quickly round searching, then retreating behind half-drawn lids. At each turning leading from the street—and there were many of these, dim lanes and alleys—she paused, and advanced a little along it, and waited, lost in the shadows.

"I must know," I said, imploring. "It is better that I should know than that I should imagine."

Ira gave me a sidelong glance: "Your imagination would not travel that far."

"You do not know me," I said, troubled. "And I no longer understand you."

"The truth is unpalatable," she replied.

I pondered awhile, searching my memory: then it came to me: the man who had called after Raja's death. He had said the same thing. The truth is unpalatable.

Nathan came in from the fields at sundown as Ira was setting forth. He had been clearing the irrigation channels and strengthening the dams, the fork he carried was caked with soil and water. He thrust it into the earth and leaned on it.

"Where do you go at this hour?"

"It is better not to speak."

"I will have an answer."

"I can give you none."

Nathan's brows drew together: she had never before spoken to him in this manner. Looking at her, it seemed to me that almost overnight she had changed; she had been tender and modest and obedient, now she had relinquished every one of these qualities; it was difficult to believe she had ever been their possessor.

Nathan was groping for words, stumbling a little over them.

"I will not have it said—I will not have you parading at night—"

"Tonight and tomorrow and every night, so long as there is need. I will not hunger any more."

"Like a harlot," he said. "A common strumpet."

The veins in his forehead were standing out, on each temple a pulse throbbed fiercely. Ira stood defiant before him, uttering no denial, fingers plucking at the fringe of her sari. I closed my eyes, I could not bear to see them thus.

"These are but words," she said at last. "There are others, kinder ones, which for decency's sake—"

"Decency!" he spat at her. "Do not speak of decency!"

She was quiet for a moment, and he said with deliberate cruelty, "No man will look at you, defaced as you are."

"The cuts will heal," she retorted. "Men do not seek my face."

I think he laid a restraining hand on her: for I heard her say, "Let me pass," and there was a slight rustling sound as she withdrew from his grasp.

Well, we let her go. We had tried everything in our

power, there was nothing more we could do. She was no longer a child, to be cowed or forced into submission, but a grown woman with a definite purpose and an invincible determination. We had for so long accepted her obedience to our will that when it ceased to be given naturally, it came as a considerable shock; yet there was no option but to accept the change, strange and bewildering as it was, for obedience cannot be extorted. It was as simple as that: we forbade, she insisted, we lost. So we got used to her comings and goings, as we had got used to so much else.

With her earnings Irawaddy was able to buy rice and salt, and milk for the child, who was too weak for anything else. After the roots and leavings we had existed on, I was grateful enough for the food, but of what she bought Nathan would not touch a morsel. Day after day he went out as before, delving and scraping for food, as thin and dry as a hollow bamboo stick.

"What is done is done," I said, urging him to eat. "There is no stricture on you, for you have tried."

"I will not touch it," he said, eyeing me steadily. What bitterness was behind this I do not know, or what condemnation of his powerlessness to feed his children; but this I do know: his spirit was very strong, and he was an upright man.

For the first few days after Ira resumed feeding Kuti with milk, he seemed to grow better, but the improvement—if improvement it had been: I do not know, for he ceased to cry and we took this for improvement—did not continue. Soon it became clear that he was sinking. His eyes grew larger in his pinched face, there was a brightness in their soft brown as if all that was left of life was concentrated there; and indeed they seemed to be the only active part of him. From his corner, when he was no longer capable of any other movement, his eyes constantly followed us, seeming never to tire in their restless wandering. Otherwise he lay quiet like a bruised fledgling, with the dry, parched lips of exhaustion and a body which could struggle no more.

Only once I heard him call: a slight whisper that barely reached me.

"Ama?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I cannot see you—I cannot see anything."

"I am here my son, very near you."

There was a feeble movement of his arms, and I knelt beside him and clasped them round my neck, holding them there, for he was too weak.

"Sleep, dearest. Soon you will be better, and then you will be able to see again. I promise you, you will see again."

He seemed content; he accepted the lies I told him and sighed a little—perhaps in relief, for who knows what fears tormented his child's mind? Soon I felt him relax and loosing his hands gently drew away from him. A little later I heard a slight sound and turning saw that he had opened his eyes and was gazing at Ira, staring at her unwinking. I went to him and saw that his eyes were sightless; already a thin film was over-spreading them. I picked him up and held him to me; his limp, emaciated body, so light I might have been holding a handful of leaves, not a child, sagged lifeless against mine. I crooned to him, forgetting he was dead, until the cold came creeping through his limbs and he began to stiffen; then at last I laid him down, closing his eyes and pushing back the fronds of hair that clung damply to his brow. He looked tired but very calm, with the signs of suffering taken from his countenance. Nathan came and knelt beside him with harsh sorrowing face and bitter eyes. Our last child, conceived in happiness at a time when the river of our lives ran gently, had been taken from us; I knew too well what he felt. Yet, although I grieved, it was not for my son: for in my heart I could not have wished it otherwise. The strife had lasted too long and had been too painful for me to call him back to continue it.