

THE
INNER COURTYARD
stories by Indian Women

EDITED BY
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'Vital and illuminating'
—Sara Maitland

ATTIA HOSAIN

Attia Hosain was born in Lucknow, India in 1912, and belonged to an aristocratic Taluqdari or landowning family. Her education combined English liberal schooling at La Martinière and Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow, with traditional lessons in Urdu, Persian and Arabic at home. Influenced in the 1930s by the nationalist movement and the Progressive Writers Group in India, she became a journalist, broadcaster and writer of short stories. She came to England in 1947. She presented programmes for the BBC Eastern Service and appeared on television and the West End stage.

Attia Hosain is best known for her collection of short stories *Phoenix Fled* (1953), in which 'The First Party' appeared, and the novel *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961). Both books essentially draw upon a pre-Partition, pre-Independence India, in the middle of huge political and social change.

The First Party

After the dimness of the verandah, the bewildering brightness of the room made her stumble against the unseen doorstep. Her nervousness edged towards panic, and the darkness seemed a forsaken friend, but her husband was already steadying her into the room.

'My wife,' he said in English, and the alien sounds softened the awareness of this new relationship.

The smiling, tall woman came towards them with outstretched hands and she put her own limply into the other's firm grasp.

'How d'you do?' said the woman.

'How d'you do?' said the fat man beside her.

'I am very well, thank you,' she said in the low voice of an uncertain child repeating a lesson. Her shy glance avoided their eyes.

They turned to her husband, and in the warm current of their friendly ease she stood coldly self-conscious.

'I hope we are not too early,' her husband said.

'Of course not; the others are late. Do sit down.'

She sat on the edge of the big chair, her shoulders drooping, nervously pulling her sari over her head as the weight of its heavy gold embroidery pulled it back.

'What will you drink?' the fat man asked her.

'Nothing, thank you.'

'Cigarette?'

'No, thank you.'

Her husband and the tall woman were talking about her, she felt sure. Pinpoints of discomfort pricked her and she smiled to hide them.

The woman held a wineglass in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She wondered how it felt to hold a cigarette with such self-confidence; to flick the ash with such assurance. The woman had long nails, pointed and scarlet. She looked at her

own – unpainted, cut carefully short – wondering how anyone could eat, work, wash with those claws dipped in blood. She drew her sari over her hands, covering her rings and bracelets, noticing the other's bare wrists, like a widow's.

'Shy little thing, isn't she, but charming,' said the woman as if soothing a frightened child.

'She'll get over it soon. Give me time,' her husband laughed. She heard him and blushed, wishing to be left unobserved and grateful for the diversion when other guests came in.

She did not know whether she was meant to stand up when they were being introduced, and shifted uneasily in the chair, half rising; but her husband came and stood by her, and by the pressure of his hand on her shoulder she knew she must remain sitting.

She was glad when polite formality ended and they forgot her for their drinks, their cigarettes, their talk and laughter. She shrank into her chair, lonely in her strangeness yet dreading approach. She felt curious eyes on her and her discomfort multiplied them. When anyone came and sat by her she smiled in cold defence, uncertainty seeking refuge in silence, and her brief answers crippled conversation. She found the bi-lingual patchwork distracting, and its pattern, familiar to others, with allusions and references unrelated to her own experiences, was distressingly obscure. Overheard light chatter appealing to her woman's mind brought no relief of understanding. Their different stresses made even talk of dress and appearance sound unfamiliar. She could not understand the importance of relating clothes to time and place and not just occasion; nor their preoccupation with limbs and bodies, which should be covered, and not face and features alone. They made problems about things she took for granted.

Her bright rich clothes and heavy jewellery oppressed her when she saw the simplicity of their clothes. She wished she had not dressed so, even if it was the custom, because no one seemed to care for customs, or even know them, and looked at her as if she were an object on display. Her discomfort changed to uneasy defiance, and she stared at the strange creatures around her. But her swift eyes slipped away in timid shyness if they met another's.

Her husband came at intervals that grew longer with a few gay words, or a friend to whom he proudly presented 'My wife'. She noticed the never-empty glass in his hand, and the smell of his breath, and from shock and distress she turned to disgust and anger. It was wicked, it was sinful to drink, and she could not forgive him.

She could not make herself smile any more but no one noticed and their unconcern soured her anger. She did not want to be disturbed and was tired of the persistent 'Will you have a drink?', 'What will you drink?', 'Sure you won't drink?' It seemed they objected to her not drinking, and she was confused by this reversal of values. She asked for a glass of orange juice and used it as protection, putting it to her lips when anyone came near.

They were eating now, helping themselves from the table by the wall. She did not want to leave her chair, and wondered if it was wrong and they would notice she was not eating. In her confusion she saw a girl coming towards her, carrying a small tray. She sat up stiffly and took the proffered plate with a smile.

'Do help yourself,' the girl said and bent forward. Her light sari slipped from her shoulder and the tight red silk blouse outlined each high breast. She pulled her own sari closer round her, blushing. The girl, unaware, said, 'Try this sandwich, and the olives are good.'

She had never seen an olive before but did not want to admit it, and when she put it in her mouth she wanted to spit it out. When no one was looking, she slipped it under her chair, then felt sure someone had seen her and would find it.

The room closed in on her with its noise and smoke. There was now the added harsh clamour of music from the radiogram. She watched, fascinated, the movement of the machine as it changed records; but she hated the shrieking and moaning and discordant noises it hurled at her. A girl walked up to it and started singing, swaying her hips. The bare flesh of her body showed through the thin net of her drapery below the high line of her short tight bodice.

She felt angry again. The disgusting, shameless hussies, bold and free with men, their clothes adorning nakedness not hiding it, with their painted false mouths, that short hair that looked

like the mad woman's whose hair was cropped to stop her pulling it out.

She fed her resentment with every possible fault her mind could seize on, and she tried to deny her lonely unhappiness with contempt and moral passion. These women who were her own kind, yet not so, were wicked, contemptible, grotesque mimics of the foreign ones among them for whom she felt no hatred because from them she expected nothing better.

She wanted to break those records, the noise which they called music.

A few couples began to dance when they had rolled aside the carpet. She felt a sick horror at the way the men held the women, at the closeness of their bodies, their vulgar suggestive movements. That surely was the extreme limit of what was possible in the presence of others. Her mother had nearly died in childbirth and not moaned lest the men outside hear her voice, and she, her child, had to see this exhibition of . . . her outraged modesty put a leash on her thoughts.

This was an assault on the basic precept by which her convictions were shaped, her life was controlled. Not against touch alone, but sound and sight, had barriers been raised against man's desire.

A man came and asked her to dance and she shrank back in horror, shaking her head. Her husband saw her and called out as he danced, 'Come on, don't be shy; you'll soon learn.'

She felt a flame of anger as she looked at him, and kept on shaking her head until the man left her, surprised by the violence of her refusal. She saw him dancing with another girl and knew they must be talking about her, because they looked towards her and smiled.

She was trembling with the violent complexity of her feelings, of anger, hatred, jealousy and bewilderment, when her husband walked up to her and pulled her affectionately by the hand.

'Get up. I'll teach you myself.'

She gripped her chair as she struggled, and the violence of her voice through clenched teeth, 'Leave me alone', made him drop her hand with shocked surprise as the laughter left his face. She noticed his quick embarrassed glance round the room,

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then the hard anger of his eyes as he left her without a word. He laughed more gaily when he joined the others, to drown that moment's silence, but it enclosed her in dreary emptiness.

She had been so sure of herself in her contempt and her anger, confident of the righteousness of her beliefs, deep-based on generations-old foundations. When she had seen them being attacked, in her mind they remained indestructible, and her anger had been a sign of faith; but now she saw her husband was one of the destroyers; and yet she knew that above all others was the belief that her life must be one with his. In confusion and despair she was surrounded by ruins.

She longed for the sanctuary of the walled home from which marriage had promised an adventurous escape. Each restricting rule became a guiding stone marking a safe path through unknown dangers.

The tall woman came and sat beside her and with affection put her hand on her head.

'Tired, child?' The compassion of her voice and eyes was unbearable.

She got up and ran to the verandah, put her head against a pillar and wet it with her tears.

KAMALA DAS

Kamala Das was born in 1934. Her mother was Balamani Amma, a well-known poet in Malayalam.

Kamala Das has published many collections of short stories under the name of Madhavi Kutty. She is best known in India for her collections of poems in English (*Summer in Calcutta*, *The Descendants* and *The Old Playhouse*). Her poetry has won her many awards and has been translated into Serbo-Croat, Swedish, French, German and Russian.

The house described in the story 'Summer Vacation' belongs to a tarawad of the Nayar caste of Kerala. A tarawad is a matrilineal household made up of a woman, her brothers and sisters, and the children of all the sisters. The term tarawad also refers to the family house and estate which were originally held in common by all its members, and administered by the eldest brother. To be a tarawadi, to belong to a tarawad, was also to belong to an aristocratic lineage and to possess certain attributes of honour and integrity.

Here Muthassi lives alone, helped only by the house steward. Ammu will be the last of the tarawad.

The old houses were built around a courtyard: the vadakkini and tekkinni were the rooms facing north and south. The coconut grove referred to at the beginning of the story marks the boundary of the cremation ground where the ancestors were cremated facing south, in the direction of Yama, god of death.

Summer Vacation

It was always there, as long as I could remember, a small, emaciated tree, somewhat bent and with shrivelled up branches. That was a summer with no hint of rains. I watched the tree, its leaves, and above the few leaves, the spider's web hanging from a bare, sickle-shaped branch.

That tree was the only one of its kind, in a field full of coconut palms planted in memory of family ancestors who had been cremated on the southern side of the house. I wondered if it was telling us, 'I know I should not be here. But please take pity on me. Don't destroy me.'

I was walking one day with Muthassi – so I called my grandmother – picking up tiny dry miniature coconuts now and then and collecting them in the folds of my skirt. I asked her, 'What is the name of that lonely tree?'

Muthassi's eyesight had never been too good, not even in her youth. She blinked once or twice, straining to look in the direction that I pointed. She said, 'That one? It a nyaval tree.'

'Nyaval?'

'Yes, Ammu, nyaval. Haven't you seen nyaval fruit? Maybe you haven't. Deep purple in colour, about the size of a marble.'

'Can you eat nyaval fruit?'

'Of course you can. They have a slightly sweet and sour taste. I used to eat them a lot when I was a schoolgirl. And that reminds me of a girl, a certain Devu from Madathil House. She was famous for her black tongue. Once she remarked that my eyes reminded her of two dark nyaval fruit on a ceramic plate. I was really scared that I would go blind. I couldn't get a wink of sleep that night.'

Suddenly Muthassi bent down and picked up a gauze-like dry leaf lying under a coconut tree and said, 'I can use this as a strainer when I make oil out of scraped coconut kernel.'

I continued walking towards the nyaval tree and asked Muthassi, 'Where is that Devu you talked about now?'

'Oh, Devu,' Muthassi reflected with a wistful smile. 'She died a long time ago. Now I am the only one left. All my friends – they are all gone. Karthu, Vadakkemuri Chinnammu, Marath Kunju – all my companions, dead and gone.'

'Are they all dead?'

'Hmm.'

'So now you are alone, Muthassi, without any friends.'

I felt sad for my Muthassi, lonely in her old age, so I went up to her and hugged her close.

'Don't worry, Muthassi. Haven't you got me? I'll always be with you,' I consoled her.

'Yes, Ammu. That's more than enough for Muthassi.' She tightened her hold on my hand, and so we crossed the field and reached the courtyard in front of the house.

'Muthassi, just look at your hands, with all the veins standing out! I can't even see the veins on my hands. Why is that?'

'You are a small child, Ammu, whereas Muthassi is a worn-out old woman.' Muthassi threw the dry leaf into the front verandah, and we went on to the bathing enclosure next to the pond. A towel and a red soap dish with a piece of soap in it were lying on the steps leading to the pond.

Seeing the soap dish, Muthassi exclaimed, 'I forgot that I had left that soap here. I am lucky the crow didn't steal it.'

'Why, Muthassi, do crows eat soap?'

'No, but a crow might take it away, attracted by the colour.'

Dear Muthassi, I thought, how naive she is. That used piece of soap was not at all pretty. And yet she thought the crow would steal it. A piece of soap worn down by use, looking like a fragment of a tile! Was it likely the crow would be tempted enough to carry it off?

'So Muthassi, you think the crow knows what is pretty?'

'Of course. Is there any doubt? The crow has a keen eye for beauty. Otherwise why does it carry off the small oil bowls? Ammu, birds are very intelligent. They have more common sense and knowledge than human beings.'

'Why is that?'

'It is like that. That's all.' With that cryptic remark, Muthassi took my dress off, dipped it in water, soaped it and placed it on a stone.

'Muthassi . . .'

'Yes, Ammu.'

'When my school re-opens and I go off to Calcutta, who will come with you to the pond?'

'No one, Ammu. No one will come with me.'

'Won't you be afraid, Muthassi?'

She looked up from her washing, and said with a laugh, 'Why should Muthassi be afraid, Ammu? She is no longer a child. Do you know how old your Muthassi is?'

I shook my head.

'Sixty-eight. I will be sixty-nine this coming Chingam.'

'When will you die, Muthassi?'

'How am I to know the time of my death? It's all in the hands of God. When it's time for me to go, he will take me. No one from this Tarawad has lived up to this age. My mother died when she was forty; my uncle at forty-five. And grandmother, if I remember correctly didn't quite reach fifty. As for Kamalam . . . I am a sinner, that is why I stay alive. I often wonder what further sufferings are in store for me before I die.'

Muthassi wiped the tears that welled up in her eyes with one end of her mundu and noisily cleared her nose.

'But Muthassi, are you going to die soon?' I persisted.

She tried hard to laugh. I could see her small teeth, worn down and reddened. Her mouth had the fragrance of the betel leaves and nuts that she chewed. I put my arms around her neck, my face against her cheek and pleaded, 'Promise me that you won't die, Muthassi, promise me.'

Muthassi's eyes filled with tears once again. But she smiled and said, 'All right, Ammu. I promise I won't die. Is that enough?'

Some women came to visit Muthassi. Seeing me, they asked, 'Isn't this your daughter's child?'

Muthassi objected to this catechism. 'Who else could she be? Do you imagine I would keep other people's children in my house?'

The women laughed in a conciliatory fashion.

'Of course we recognised her, but we thought we should ask.'

That's all. Who brought her home? Has Velayudha Menon come as well?

'No. He brought her as far as Trichur. He wasn't able to get leave. Sankunni Nayar and I went up to Trichur and brought Ammu back.'

'Why did you have to travel all the way to Trichur, Ammu-kutty Amma? Sankunni Nayar could have gone by himself and brought her home.'

'Indeed! What an idea! Bharati, do you really think Velayudha Menon would have entrusted his child to a mere house steward? As long as I am alive such a thing is not likely. It is not a problem for me to go up to Trichur. I always tell the taxi driver to come and spend the previous night here so that Sankunni Nayar and I can set off before daybreak. We usually reach Trichur railway station at exactly the right moment to see the train arrive.'

'The child has grown since the last time we saw her,' the fat woman who wore a necklace studded with red stones said. She had a sleeping infant on her lap.

'She has grown a wee bit taller,' Muthassi conceded. 'But she hasn't put on any weight. She looks fatter because of the clothes she is wearing.'

At this stage, I put in, 'I am fat.'

The thin woman with protruding teeth covered her mouth with one hand and laughed. Then Muthassi lost her temper. She turned to me and said, 'You call yourself fat! You are just skin and bone. No, you haven't put on any weight, neither do you look pretty. Just look at your face – so dark and drawn.'

Muthassi made me sit next to her and began to smooth my unruly hair. 'Ah,' I protested, 'Ah!' All of a sudden the bald child lying on the fat woman's lap began to scream.

'Stop it,' the fat woman chided the child. 'He is a rascal! Screaming like that just when I am having a moment's rest.'

Muthassi said, 'He must be hungry. That's why he's crying. Why don't you feed him?'

'No, no, he's just had his feed. The rascal deserves a sound slap.' She tried to frighten the child by rolling her eyes in anger. 'I'll kill you,' she said. 'Just you wait. One of these days, I'll really kill you.'

I moved closer to Muthassi and asked her in a whisper, 'Will she really kill the child?' Meanwhile the child continued to scream at a higher pitch. I thought that his head looked like a huge rubber ball with a hole in it. Or perhaps it was more like a yellow balloon.

Muthassi couldn't hear what I said. She asked me, 'What are you saying? I can't hear you.'

'Will she kill that child?' I repeated.

'Who are you talking about?'

'That child's mother.'

Muthassi burst out laughing and said to the woman, 'Bharati, did you hear what Ammu is asking me? She wants to know whether you'll kill your child. She thinks you really mean to do what you say.'

The fat woman asked me in a horrified voice, 'Ammu, would mothers ever kill their own children? No one loves a child more than its own mother does.'

'Poor child! How can she know?' commented the dark woman with greying hair, who had been sitting silently chewing betel leaves until then. 'Just think of her fate. So very sad.'

The woman whom Muthassi called Bharati mused, 'Motherhood and moonlight are alike, so comforting, so essential to life. There can be no happiness without either.'

At this point, Muthassi suddenly stood up and straightened her mundu. She said, 'You must excuse me. It's nearly four o'clock. I must go to the kitchen and see if the coffee is ready. My servant Achutan is a slowcoach; he never does anything on his own. You come with me Ammu. Let's see what he is up to.'

Achutan was sitting on the kitchen floor, arranging parippu vadas on a plate. The mundu that he was wearing was as black as the kitchen walls. He got up as soon as he saw Muthassi and said, 'I couldn't get poovan bananas, so I got the Mysore variety.'

'Hmm,' said Muthassi, signifying assent. She lifted the lid of the coffee kettle with a kitchen prong to check whether the water was boiling. The fireplace was lit by a small hurricane lamp.

'Achutan,' Muthassi said in an exasperated voice, 'Can't you

clean this lamp at least once in a while? Do I always have to remind you of everything?'

'I did try to clean and polish that lamp,' Achutan replied. 'The soot won't shift though. I think it is time to change the glass.'

'I don't think the glass needs to be changed. You are just looking for an excuse to avoid work.'

Then Muthassi bent her head to examine the bananas that Achutan had arranged on a plate. Achutan looked at me with a sly and knowing grin on his face. I had often caught Achutan watching me with that knowing look. I turned my face away in distaste.

'Achutan, bring four plates of bananas and vadas to the Tekkini. Let the child have her snack here.'

I asked, 'Can't I have my snack at the Tekkini too?'

An emphatic 'No' was the answer.

'Why, Muthassi?'

No explanation from Muthassi. Just a curt, 'That's the way I want it done. That's all.'

As Muthassi stepped out of the kitchen, she instructed Achutan in a lowered voice, 'Before you pour the milk into our coffee make sure you have set some aside for Ammu to drink at night. You don't have any discrimination Achutan, and sometimes your excessive generosity to outsiders can be trying.'

Achutan looked at me once again with the same sly knowing grin. As soon as Muthassi left the kitchen he leaned one leg on the wall next to the fireplace, removed a bidi from behind his ear, and said to me in a philosophical tone, 'Do you know where Achutan draws his life energy from? It's from this bidi. Not from tea or cooked rice or rice gruel – Achutan cannot function without smoking at least two bundles of bidis every day. Do you know that child?'

I did not reply. Achutan lit a bidi and started to smoke. He then lifted the coffee kettle off the fire, using a folded piece of paper.

'I will give you your milk first. Only after that will I serve the others their coffee. Satisfied? Don't you know that Achutan cares for you more than for anyone else in this house?'

I sat on the steps leading to the kitchen verandah. Achutan

thought that I hadn't heard what he said. So, biting on his bidi, he repeated with a peculiar slur, 'Do you know it?'

I laughed scornfully.

At this, Achutan removed his bidi from his mouth and put it away by the fireplace. He continued earnestly, 'Not merely in this house. In the entire village, there isn't a single soul whom Achutan loves as much as he loves you. Are you aware of that child?'

I shook my head, meaning that I didn't know. Wanting to change the subject, I asked him, 'Where were you born, Achutan?'

'Achutan's birth place! It's nowhere nearby. It is a place called Perindri, you must have heard of it. Oh dear, I can't afford to stay here forever indulging in small talk with you. I mustn't forget those greedy women waiting in the Tekkini. I have to serve that set of gossips their coffee and snacks, or else your Muthassi will kill me.'

'Achutan, you don't like those women, do you?' I asked in a lowered voice.

'No, I can't stand the very sight of them. I don't like women who go and gossip from one house to another.'

He put four vadas on a plate and gave it to me. 'By the time you finish eating those vadas your milk will be ready.'

Even the vadas smelt of Achutan's bidis. But somehow I didn't have the heart to scold him.

At noon Muthassi sat on the verandah, reading excerpts from the Ramayana. She used a pair of broken spectacles, holding them to her nose with her left hand.

I was very sleepy, so I stretched myself out on the bare tiled floor. I could see the sky through the railings of the verandah: a glistening, silvery expanse.

'Muthassi,' I called out.

'Mm?' She stopped her reading and turned to me.

'Will you be unhappy when I leave?'

'Yes.'

'Terribly unhappy?'

'Why should I be terribly unhappy, Ammu? You'll come again next year, won't you?'

'But . . . if you die meanwhile . . .'

Muthassi brushed aside my fears with a laugh.

'I won't die so soon, Ammu. I will live long enough to see you married and have children. Isn't that enough?'

'Muthassi, please tell me. Who will I marry?'

'Who knows!' Muthassi turned her gaze to the sky. 'I don't know. Only God knows.'

It was very comforting to put my head on Muthassi's lap. Gradually my eyes closed. I could hear the humming of a bumble bee from some part of the verandah. Muthassi explained, 'The bumble bee is building its nest.'

Very much later, I woke up to find that Muthassi was not there. I was lying on a woven grass mat with a pillow under my head. Where had Muthassi disappeared? I had the strange sensation of having slept for years together, during which time Muthassi had died. I sat up, startled. The bumble bee was still humming.

'Muthassi,' I called out.

From somewhere below came Muthassi's answer to my call. I got up, went slowly down the stairs and reached the Tekkini. Nani Amma who earned her livelihood by pounding rice was there with her five-year-old daughter. As soon as the little girl saw me, she hid her face with one end of her mother's mundu.

Muthassi was sitting by the inner courtyard, making cotton wicks for the oil lamp. She had stretched her legs out on a bamboo mat and was putting away the cotton wicks, one by one, into a biscuit tin.

'Nani, do you think I can go on having avil made just to provide you with a job? The avil you pounded last time is not yet finished. I know you have a lot of money worries, but I have no way of helping you if you come to me every other day with your requests.'

Nani Amma bowed her head. She stroked her daughter's hair and smiled. I was fascinated by the iron ring she wore on her right hand, a ring with intricate work on it. She wore a shabby mundu and torn blouse. And yet, I thought, she was lucky to be wearing such an unusual ring.

I went near them to take a closer look at the child. She came up to my shoulders, and was dark skinned – so dark that it was

difficult to make out where the roots of her hair started. I would call that colour the very essence of black. The only clothing she had on was a skirt with red spots. There was a knotted black thread round her neck.

I asked her, 'What is your name?' She did not reply, but hid her face and most of her body behind Nani Amma's mundu.

Nani Amma answered, 'Amini – that's her name.'

Now Muthassi asked, 'How old is this girl, Nani?'

'She was born when that terrible storm struck our village,' Nani Amma said dramatically. 'Everyone was in a hurry to leave their houses with their beds and their cooking vessels. Only I remained, unable to get up from where I was lying. I told myself, if I am destined to die like this, then let me die.'

'But the fact is,' Muthassi interjected jokingly, 'that you didn't die. That means your time hadn't come, Nani.'

Putting away all the cotton wicks in the tin, Muthassi stood up. 'Come, Nani, come to the Vadakkini. Let me give the little girl something to eat, maybe the dosas left over from breakfast.'

The Vadakkini, as I remember it, was a dark room with a jackfruit in one corner, kept there for ripening, along with a basket of tamarind.

'Sit down,' Muthassi said to Nani Amma. Nani Amma whispered softly into the child's ears. She wiped the floor by brushing it with her bare feet, took the mundu from her shoulders, spread it on the floor and sat on it. The child stood behind her, only her shining eyes visible in the darkness. It seemed to me that there was no child, only those eyes suspended in the darkness.

I went to the kitchen in search of Muthassi. She was busy putting out pieces of dosa on a plantain leaf. The dosas were stale, having been left in the open, on the window-sill, since morning.

'Are you going to give those pieces of dosa to that child?' I asked Muthassi.

She nodded.

'Haven't they been left in the open for rather a long time? I saw flies hovering there. Don't you think the child might fall ill if she eats them?'

Muthassi hesitated for a moment. Then she said with a laugh,

'All right, Ammu. I won't give them to her. What about the snacks that were prepared this afternoon? Are you happy now?'

Half an hour later, I saw Nani Amma getting ready to go home, having had the food and tea. She was carrying a small basket containing the rice Muthassi had given her. She said to her child, 'Amini, just hold this basket for a moment. Let me tie my mundu properly.'

That child pretended not to hear her mother, and turned her head away in a different direction. This indifference infuriated her mother, who said, 'What are you doing, girl, star-gazing? Didn't you hear me asking you to hold the basket?'

With great reluctance the girl held out her hands to take the basket, but it slipped. The contents spilled out in all directions: first the rice, then the tamarind which had been concealed underneath.

'Useless girl!' Nani Amma rebuked her daughter and pulled her by the hair. She sat down, hastily gathered the rice and the tamarind into the basket and left the place in a hurry. Her daughter followed, weeping copiously.

I knew that Muthassi had only given the rice to Nani Amma. It became clear to me that she had stolen the tamarind. I was furious with her. I thought stealing was really low, dishonourable. I decided I should not let her get away with it.

I ran after her and called out her name. She turned her head, but on seeing me continued walking faster. Her child hadn't stopped weeping. Finally I caught up with her and questioned her. 'Nani Amma, why did you steal the tamarind? Is it right to take other people's property?'

'I didn't steal,' Nani Amma denied stoutly. She continued walking. The red sand kicked up by her retreating feet swirled around in the courtyard.

'I am going to tell Muthassi,' I said. 'You shouldn't steal things. Don't come to this house again. You are just a petty thief.'

That stopped Nani Amma. She held out the basket to me and said in a huff, 'Take it. Take back your precious rice and tamarind. I don't want anything from you.'

I was dumbstruck. I extended my hands to take the basket, like a lifeless wooden puppet. Nani Amma picked up her

daughter and made to walk off. Then came her parting shot. 'We are poor people, child.' Her voice shook as she said, 'And you – you are the rich.'

I left the basket on the ground and ran back. I felt like weeping. I felt – as I had never done before in my life – that I had somehow committed a grave sin. I was too shaken to mention the incident to Muthassi. What happened to that basket? Did anyone pick it up? Did Nani Amma herself come back for it? I wanted to know nothing more about it.

It was time for me to go back to Calcutta. When we reached Trichur railway station, Sankunni Nayar said pompously, 'The train is due to arrive in precisely half an hour and two minutes. Velayudha Menon would have boarded the train at Cochin. The first-class coach will come in at the other end of the platform and the third class coaches will be at this end.'

'Will you please stop bleating, Sankunni Nayar,' Muthassi said, cuttingly. 'I am quite familiar with all these details. This is not the first time I have come to Trichur railway station.'

Muthassi got out of the car, gave an eight-anna coin to the taxi driver and said, 'It is the child's gift to you.' The driver put the coin into his pocket with a smile and saluted me.

Muthassi wore a gold-bordered mundu and veshti and had a gold tulasi mala around her neck. She looked regal and the people at the railway station made way for her in a respectful manner.

The clerk at the platform ticket counter asked her, 'So the child is going back after her vacation?'

Muthassi did not deign to answer. She had an air of aloofness which she reserved for strangers. She held on to my hand, crossed the revolving door and entered the station platform.

I wanted to go to the other end of the platform where the books were sold, but Muthassi would not allow me. She led me to the Ladies Waiting Room and made me sit down. She then seated herself opposite me, in a large easy chair. I could see a Brahmin woman in a red sari trying to catch Muthassi's eye. Later, when Sankunni Nayar came, she said to him, 'Sankunni Nayar, she wants a book. Please choose her a good one.'

Sankunni Nayar put the rupee note Muthassi gave him into the pocket of his green shirt.

'Don't buy any of those vulgar books.'

'What are you saying? Am I crazy, that I would buy vulgar books for the child?'

After he had gone, still muttering, Muthassi leaned back in her chair and smiled. 'When you come home next year you will have grown bigger.'

'What about you, Muthassi? Will you have grown bigger too?'

Muthassi laughed. 'At this age? Will Muthassi grow bigger? Oh no! If at all, I will grow smaller and smaller, until I am all shrivelled up.'

I suddenly remembered that small, lonely nyaval tree.

'Muthassi.'

'Yes, dear.'

'That nyaval tree. How long has it been there? Who planted it?'

'Who planted it? Who indeed! I don't know. It's been there as far back as I remember.'

'Will it bear fruit?'

'Will it? I don't know. Even if it does, the fruit won't be large.'

'Why?'

'That's the way it is. That's all.'

'Muthassi.'

'What, Ammu?'

'Perhaps the tree will bear fruit by the time I come home next year. Then you and I will pluck the fruit and eat them, together.'

After depositing my small leather suitcase and the Malayalam book, which Sankunni Nayar had bought for me, safely in the compartment, my father went and stood at the door. Muthassi's face looked flushed. She asked my father, 'Have you taken an oath not to come to our place? She was my only child – my daughter, my son, my all. She died. But you are still a son to me.'

Muthassi wiped her nose and face with the edge of her veshti. Tears still streamed down her cheeks.

My father said, 'I shall come next year, definitely. I don't yet have the courage. Please don't take it amiss. Remember how

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we used to come, every year, the two of us, to that house. And now, how to come there, all by myself? Please don't misunderstand me, mother. I just cannot do it as yet.'

'I shall never misunderstand any of you. Especially my children. Never that.'

The train moved away from the station; my father pulled down the glass shutters of the window.

'Father?'

'Yes dear.'

'Will Muthassi die by this time next year?'

'No.'

'She won't, will she? Are you sure?'

'Yes. I am sure. Muthassi will never die.'

'Is that the truth?'

My father put me on his lap and kissed my forehead. He looked at me with tears in his eyes. I still remember the words he said. 'I promise. Your Muthassi will never die. She'll never die.'

'Will never die, will never die . . .' the wheels of the train seemed to chant.

*Translated from the Malayalam
by Vasanti Sankaranarayanan and Asha Bijlani*