



SHIBANI CHATTOPADHYAY

# The Man Who Tried to Kill Death with *Asoka* Leaves

CHATTOPADHYAY

She thought she had some strange illness when the Thirst had first started gnawing at the back of her throat. Like a conscience, it was always present, always nudging. It slashed into her sleep and forced her to wake up- resentful and groggy- in the middle of the night, and walk barefoot on the cool mud floor, and light with fumbling fingers a flare into the glass lantern- its light flickering on her swollen stomach.

It was the worst in the sixth month, when the Thirst settled comfortably inside the hollow of her neck, and kept prodding till appeased with yet another cup of water. Her throat was always parched, and so dry that even swallowing spittle was as painful as gulping down fistfuls of sand. She spent a lot of time drawing water out of the two wells in the village, then straining it through a clean white cloth into a bucket. She covered her face with her *chunni*, and even then the brown-skinned locals stared at this outsider of a woman with her pale white skin mottled

with sunburn. Their skins tanned so easily.

Then there was the small walk home. Then the addition of pinches of alum into the bucket and the waiting till the clear water settled out calmly on top of a cake of mud. Then the careful separation of the two. Once she had been so very Thirsty that she drank water straight out of the bucket, scooping it greedily into the boat of her palms. She tried to be careful, but it disturbed the mud, and the fine gravel sand-stormed upwards into the clear water, making her cringe when she drank the next boatful.

She learnt to be patient after that.

Her supply of alum was running out, for she had managed to hastily take only a few pouches of it when she had left the ship. She used to use it on her skin too, to keep the freckles off the whiteness. In the seventh month, she stopped doing that, and her face and arms bloomed with small brown specks just from the small walk to the wells every few hours. The days were always hot, and the nights surprisingly hotter. The air was so hungry with heat, that it sponged off sweat almost instantly.

Sometimes she dabbed a bit of perfume on the inside of her wrist from the only bottle that she had- a small, beautiful glass cylinder with a quaint silver top that she unscrewed slowly and deliberately, for the luxury of the

rich scent unfurling made it easier to bear the heat. This bottle was taken from the ship too, and now it looked lonely and homesick in the small mud hut. The label on it read 'Anais', and she decided to name her child that, the one that now nestled inside her. Maybe she wasn't as unlike her father as she thought she was. The revelation made her chuckle. He had always wanted a boy that he had planned on naming Malcolm, a boy who would take over his fleet of ships one day, and since she hadn't been one, she had been stuck with the name Malcolmia right after her birth. Her mother had been too dizzy with pain and insomnia to protest, and the birth certificate had been stamped and done with by the time she recovered.

She thought about it often. That she should name her child after a bottle of perfume that had come from far away. A bottle of perfume that was her only sibling in this strange land. That, and some alum. All stolen in secrecy from a ship in the middle of the night.

The ship belonged to her father. And it had swum a long way, in waters murky, frothy, teeming with strange shadows, and also eerily calm. All this for the strange powder that the locals extracted from flowers they grew by the sea-side. Thin, reed like plants, with messy purple petals that looked as if they had been pasted on by God in a hurry. Plants that surprisingly survived on sea water, and

wilted each year when the fresh rains came. They were boiled in water for hours, in large pans monitored overnight. The mixture was allowed to cool at its own pace, and after all the water evaporated over a few days, the residual powder was scraped off the sides of the pan, then wrapped in foils of beaten silver to preserve its essence.

On the other side of the Indian continent, this was a prized delicacy sold for an exorbitant price. One spoonful of the powder, when mixed in water and ingested, made a man forget all pain, and two made him so drunk with the joy of being alive that his face was frozen in a smile for hours. The Ones with White Skin needed even less, for their bodies imbibed the powder faster than the Indians' did. Malcolmia had been one of the white people, on a ship full of other white people, eager to take the powder back to their side of the country. Eager to trade spices, trinkets, cloth so fragile it looked like it would crumble, exotic dried fruits, chunks of gleaming graphite and rusty tins of viscous, sticky paint. Eager to show the locals some new things: a small bottle that maintained the temperature of the beverage kept in it for hours. Even in the blazing heat, the bottle passed the test and each bottle was triumphantly sold for three silver-wrapped pieces of the powder. Malcolmia's father brought a large box that was cool to the touch from the outside. The local chil-

dren milled around it, touching it warily, and stared open mouthed when he extracted a piece of ice from the inside of the box. They had never seen ice before, and when they touched it they were amazed by its blunt coldness, and by the film of water that coated their fingers soon after. The box could not possibly be kept in the village, for it ran on electricity, but he handed out twenty cubes of ice for a piece each of silver-wrapped-powder.

When Malcolmia first saw him, she was perched on the deck of the ship, and he was on land, far away, looking at an ice cube as it pooled into his palms, his brows furrowed. He looked at it with mistrust, as a child might at a strange insect, and she laughed at how naïve she thought he was. He looked up suddenly and met her eye, even though it was impossible that he should hear her in the commotion and the distance between them. She saw his eyes widen, and his lips move and mouth words, and Malcolmia knew what he had said even though she could not have possibly heard him, or even understood the language he spoke in. She felt a delicious giddiness overcome her, and thought absently that perhaps it was true: Voices sent out were never lost, they merely bounced off unreceptive eardrums until they were propelled into the right ones. She knew then, that the man studying the ice-cube meant more to her than her old life would.

She looked at the crowd of Indian women in their bright clothes and brown skins, and she noticed for the first time the symmetry with which the trees grew around a well in the distance. She was startled to notice just how clearly she could see the embroidery on the skirt of a woman walking in the distance. She saw two old men laughing and then amicably chocking on lit *beedis*- tobacco rolled in leaves and then dried, their eyes sinking into the wrinkles around them, and she thought that this sight was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. She felt a sense of belonging so fierce that she thought she might cry. She knew she would stay here. How could she not? He had *told* her to. She knew then that she would get off the ship, and never set foot on it again. He had told her: *someday, yes someday, I will Kill Death for you.*

Malcolmia had been a restless grey-eyed child and had grown up in a house with three imaginary friends that she did not bother naming, unlike most children her age. Identity had always been a highly malleable concept to her. She knew that there were three of them though, and it was always important to her that they stay separate and unique. Her father was never present, for he had discovered around that time the addictiveness of trading in the powder. Her mother had then been a variety of people, and changed her skins depending on what she drank

or the amount of powder that she consumed. She was a person who was lost, who had embraced motherhood as one might embrace a stranger. She was a person who wanted to compress time, just to get through life quickly, like it was a lesson that one must be taught to endure. Malcolmia wasn't surprised when the life drained out of her mother sooner than it ought to have, for her mother's concept of the passage of time had always been warped. She aged at double the speed that other people did, and by the time she was thirty five, her skin was flaky and her hands shook with palsy.

Malcolmia remembered sitting with her mother in the small garden outside their home in weak sunshine. She remembered how strange it was that the weather outside their house should mimic the fragility of her mother's body, and the wind whisper things that her mother claimed were restless voices that had been lost in time, waiting to come to rest: only waiting for the right people to detect and rein them in.

After the funeral, she decided to join her father on the ship, on an impulse she could not quite explain to herself. She did not feel like she was being uprooted, for she did not feel like she had known home. She spoke to no one, for she did not feel the need to. Three months later, the ship docked at a small port on the outside of an

Indian village, where her father distributed ice to a man who convinced Malcolmia to stay back, without actually speaking to her.

He could not even pronounce her name, and she thought it was endearing that he tried coaxing it out of his mouth in his native accent. They did not speak the same language, but the absurdity of the situation only made them more resilient to any permeation of rationality. She knew him through the language they wove together that did not *need* any words. Malcolmia thought for the first time how crude words were, and how rigid sentences were—how arrogant in their certainty of always getting their message across. Happiness and love, both are exotic, and unbelievably so to a mind that has never known them before. Malcolmia had never before felt as much like a vessel filled to the brim as she did now. All she had to do was spill over, and the more she of herself spilled, ironically the more complete she felt. Inside her the body of a child took root, a child who was born months later with one eye black, and the other tinted grey: the colour of a cloud full to bursting with rain.

Anais.

Malcolmia had stolen away from the ship in the middle of the night when everyone aboard was either asleep or drinking themselves into a deep sleep amidst heavy

jesting. She felt compelled to leave the ship, for it suddenly felt like foreign territory. The very air on it stifled her and she wondered to herself how she had never noticed it before, that the ship's atmosphere was like quicksand, pulling her into itself the more she tried to resist. All she took with her were a few pouches of alum, and a glass bottle of perfume, lest someone think that too much was missing and catch a whiff of the premeditation of the whole scenario. She took off her sandals and placed them neatly on the deck, the way a swimmer might before plunging, and they stood glinting in the moonlight. Then she ran barefoot to dry land, throwing her old life away as one might fling away a leech. He was waiting for her. They exchanged unspoken vows on their way to his hut, as if at an imaginary temple.

They all thought that she had drowned herself, unable to cope with the loss of her mother a few months ago. From what little they knew of her, they all agreed that she had been strange. The sandals left behind had been a suicide note of sorts, a tableau crisp with clichéd drama?

The Thirst had become so expansive that it made her body burn, and her tongue turn into a tortured, writhing animal. His mother tried to help her out by massaging thick, red oil onto her scalp that she said would draw the heat away. The oil stained her pillow though, and did not

do much else. She ate a pinch of powder, but surprisingly, it did not reduce the agony, and her skin blazed just as it did before. Her husband sponged her over with water perfumed with fragrant oil, but her skin soaked up the water like an expanse of parched soil might. She was made to sleep with a blue stone rippled with white below her pillow, so that it might trick her mind into believing that it was supported by the very essence of water. The Thirst did not leave her. Then only thing that cured it was the birth of her daughter. After the physical pain of birthing cleared, Malcolmia found that a tear making its way out from her eye meandered all the way down to her jaw, where it dripped onto her neck, instead of being absorbed by the skin on her cheek. The ache at the back of her throat left, and a wonderful feeling of satiety took bloom inside her.

Anais was a tiny infant, with one eye a deep black and the other a seemingly intimidated and watery grey, as if to symbolize the Element that had been at the core of her mother's life while she had been growing inside her.

This was also a bleak time when the heat from the sun came in excruciating waves, as if it had slipped a little too close to the planet. The goat-herds lost track of time and were puzzled that their goats seemed to nibble at their feet instead of the grass, as if in a daze and unsure of

what to do. The wells ran pitifully dry, as if they had been drinking their own water. The air was a thick, protean blob of mirages. People slept deeply, as if they had eaten too much powder and gone into a trance, and time itself had begun to clot.

Her husband spent his afternoons with other men, painstakingly breaking and sharpening blocks of graphite into thin shards to cut the flowers with minimal damage, the ones that gave them the powder. The flowers had a feisty life of their own, and wept precious sap at their stems when cut. Only graphite stemmed the flow. He spent his evenings carefully scraping the powder from the pans used to boil them in, for it required great dexterity, and had to be done carefully without breaking the crystals. He had always been able to see things that others could not, and he claimed he could see the powder spurt thinly into the air and feather away the moment it escaped its prison of a crystal.

He returned home one afternoon, to find Malcolmia sitting below a window, her head supported on the side of a wall, with Anais in her lap, the two of them asleep in a day blurry with heat. He *knew* right then that they weren't breathing. It did not matter to him to verify this, for a dreadful thought overtook him, one that said that even if they weren't dead now, *someday* they would be;

and it all amounted to the same thing in that one terrifying moment. He needed to do something about it. It amazed him, how no one had protested against Death so far. Most of all, he was amazed that *he* had never felt the need to do so until now. It appealed to him, the vision of a world where happiness was a little less fragile.

An *Asoka* tree growing outside the window caught his eye. Its leaves slumped downward, crinkled and dejected. They did not flutter, they did not fight against the heat that weighed down on them, and yet they struck him as particularly resilient and warrior-like; camouflaged with a coating of dust. It occurred to him that he had never noticed how they resembled knives- green with potent venom, for he had been too busy being happy. His version of reality, and what it ought to be, had now changed, and he grasped at the leaves from the lower branches, tearing off a fistful. His palms bled, for to him, they were knives.

He walked to the sea, away from the people in that village drugged with sleep, his hands bleeding, clutching a few knives, to where the froth curled calmly on wave after wave, and waded in till a stray splash of water slapped him on the chest and choked him. He smiled like a poet in the throes of a sweet revelation. He was getting closer to Death. The sea stung his bleeding palms, and he waded in deeper, inhaling in the salt that steamed off the first

few spatters on his face. He smashed his knives into the heart of some dark shape that raged at him, and he felt their blades meet resistance and then pushed harder, but it was only a wave, and not Death. He plunged his head underwater, and the silence overwhelmed him for a split second before the water rushed into his nostrils like an army hungry for blood.

Malcolmia had just awakened. She was carefully smearing a stripe of black candle soot into the precipice of her lower eyelid, when he walked in, crusted over with salt, his clothes damp.

Anais played with her own fingers.

He looked at his wife.

*I tried*, he said without speaking.

She looked up. *I know*.

They wept like little children then. All for the concept of happiness they simply did not understand.