A woman steps out of her carriage, brass bells on its hood chinking like a dancer’s anklets. She surveys the crowded bazaar through her veil, seeing the festival crowds, the scrubbed smiling faces, and feels her heart lift. A cloud of cardamom wafts across from a nearby halwai preparing delicacies that will be consumed at sundown, when the Eid fast breaks. She inhales in pleasure but knows she must not linger. First she must make for Bara Bazaar to buy a length of muslin and then take it to the embroiderers who sit gossiping under the silk-cotton tree. Her request will be simple—perhaps a tiny edging of flowers or a paisley shape to decorate a corner. After buying a few glass bangles from a hawker, she starts to walk up a narrow street, smiling at the thought that what she really wants is to peek at the newest designs the weavers will have conjured up for wives of the town’s wealthy merchants: gold zardozi roses on Kashmiri silk, gossamer silver threads entwined with rice pearls.

On her way she passes the jeweller’s store but his wares she can only admire from afar. She has never stepped through his door, but today, in the glass display case, there is a beautiful necklace that momentarily halts her steps. Breath catches in her throat as she sees a length of rubies, fit for a queen, each bead like a drop of blood glinting in the evening light. Who will buy it, she wonders. Perhaps an English memsahib who will have it fastened around her long white neck by an adoring husband. She imagines the memsahib dropping a kiss on her husband’s hand as it brushes past her face…

She sighs briefly, lifting the folds of her burkha to walk on. Then she spots him. On the far side of the street, his tall figure obscured off and on by the milling crowds. Her heart starts to race, blood pounds in her ears. She last saw him in a distant time, in another world. He
has changed little; eyes the colour of monsoon clouds, his hair crisp and golden like Bundelkhand’s summer sands. But it is like seeing a ghost, a visitation from another time, long gone. It was nearly ten years ago that he had returned to his country, sailing the black waters to reclaim his place and his people. What could have brought him back now? When the wounds of their land had subsided and all was finally peace. Why in heaven’s name had he returned?

She stands, poised uncertainly between past and future, and sees him take a step towards her. Yes, he has seen her too.
England, 1855

Robert Ellis stood at the prow of his steamer, watching Brunswick dock appear over oily black waters. All he could feel at this moment was disbelief at having completed the journey from India without turning back. As warehouses and cranes materialized out of the murk, his entire being filled with a churning rage, now more anger than sorrow. It was constricting his stomach, making his mouth turn bitter and his head throb so hard he had to tighten his grip on the metal rail of the deck.

Where would he even begin to count his losses? Everything was gone, everything he had known since boyhood: love, honour, career, identity, even the claim he should have had to both the lands he loved.

Evening was falling as a hired hansom drove him down crowded London streets to the Northumberland Hotel. The view offered by his carriage window could not have seemed more removed from the small sunlit town he had left behind. A freezing fog was beginning to settle over the taller buildings and spires, men wrapped in greatcoats were emerging from offices, clinging to their hats as they hurried to their homes or clubs. Some were boarding elegant phaetons that gleamed with ornate brass trimmings. He ought to feel proud of this great metropolis, grown even greater by its trade with India. He ought to take heart in the thought that he too had contributed to that endeavour. The city had certainly grown handsomer but, like him, it was somehow more knowing and less forgiving. It wore the air of the wealthy, fat and sleek and comfortable but strangely listless, and was shrouded this winter evening in a cloak of gloom.

After paying off the cab driver, he followed a porter up the carpeted steps to his room, knowing already that the hotel was too plush, too grand—not just for what he was accustomed to but also for what he was minded to enjoy any more. Someone was playing a faintly recognizable piece on a piano but it was a tune that no longer had the power to soothe as it may have done once in childhood. He
would have to get out before the comforts made him grow soft again. A boarding house in the vicinity of East India House should not be hard to find, a set of rooms austere and functional. That would give him something to do first thing in the morning.

He slipped a coin into the palm of the porter before pulling shut the door to his room, kicking off his boots and throwing himself on the bed. Wretched, that was how he felt. Wretched and wasted. He put his forearm over his eyes, trying to shut out the glow from the gas lamp on the street outside, and pressed it down as he felt, mortifyingly, the grief held so carefully at bay through the long journey now well up uncontrollably in his chest. Not once so far had he allowed himself the luxury of sorrow but tonight there may be no escape. Tonight there was no longer the slap of waves against the hull of a boat, reminding him that he could always disembark at the next port and turn back. No longer the serene warmth of a Jhansi night, the crickets in the long grass and the night call of the chakwa bird. Tonight his lullabies were to be the unfamiliar tooting of an omnibus and the endless drone of a mighty city trying to forget itself in slumber.

Hours later, and still wide awake, he rose. Perhaps it was hunger that prevented sleep. He had not even divested himself of the clothes worn on his voyage when he had fallen onto his bed and so he merely pulled on his boots and hat before abruptly leaving the room. He made his way through the hotel's now hushed lobby and emerged onto the cold street again. The wind whipped upwards, its icy fingers stabbing at his face, causing his eyes to smart and water. The clock on the spire of St. Martin-in-the-Fields showed ten minutes to the midnight hour as he walked under its looming shadow, negotiating a path through narrow roads to Covent Garden market. How strange that he should remember the way after all these years.

The market was all life and bright lights, despite the lateness of the hour. A costermonger was loading his barrow with boiled prunes and nearby a group of boys huddled around a smoking fire, thumbing a set of torn and dirty cards. One of them shouted an unintelligible word of abuse at a ragpicker for disturbing their game of cribbage. From the next street there were cries of children still at work, ‘Ni-ew mackerel, six-a-shilling! All large and alive-o!’ The shrill music of their calls did not seem that different from the cries of hawkers in Jhansi’s bazaar. There it was sour black chana in leaf plates or pretty glass bangles sold by the dozen…

He walked on, finding a small tavern serving pie and mash. Only the dregs were left but the serving girl, seeing the look on his face, silently scraped as much as she could get out of the bowl before clattering a plate down before him. He fished a few extra coins out of
his pocket and was rewarded with a wedge of bread and two pickled eggs. The meal was satisfying enough and, after he had finished, he looked around, absentmindedly crumbling the unfinished crust onto his plate. He drained his pint of stout, noticing that a woman was watching him. Crimson lips parted in a wide smile as she took in his silk cravat, his skin browned by the eastern sun. He got up abruptly to leave but she was quicker than him, pressing him against the door, whispering something about a few shillings and a room upstairs. Her hand was swift on his trouser front and, despite his numbness, he felt himself go hard under her searching fingers. But, much to the woman's annoyance, he pulled himself away and ducked out of the warm tavern, almost stumbling on its wet stone steps in his haste to leave.

A snow flurry had engulfed the street and the gas lamps were now smudged blurs of light. He pulled his collar up and wrapped his cape around his cold aching body. Should he walk on, seek out the river and hope that its black snaking length did not remind him of the silver one he had left behind? Or should he return to the hotel and try, once again, to get some sleep? How long, he wondered, how long before he would escape the torment of her memory?

A snowflake pricked on his face before melting near his ear. He had tried to describe snow to her once, recounting stray stories about his Shropshire boyhood that he had told no one else, desperate to cheer her in those dark days following the annexation. She had listened attentively, her eyes softening as her own memories began seeping out of her in a sad, low voice. They were sitting under the harsinghaar tree in the walled garden at Motibagh and she had told him of her riverside childhood, of the two boys she had grown up with and the father she had adored. Little Mani, with a destiny looming over her that no one knew about. What strange fates had conspired to bring them together; a girl who was to become queen and a young British officer destined to wrest her land from her. A land they had both grown to love and would both come to lose.

He remembered their sudden burst of laughter, echoing eerily in the walled garden, when they realized that their joys as children had been identical—riding horses and climbing trees. But he had heard the wistfulness in her laughter, seen the depths of unhappiness she could no longer hide. Though filled with his own regrets, he had felt a sudden surge of hope that perhaps they were not really completely divided. He wanted to take her hands and tell her that it was possible for worlds riven apart by everything else to be coupled, however tenuously, by shared memories of childhood. By trust and love. But she was by then lost in her memories and it was as if he had already lost her to them.
'Mani! Mani!' Angry voices rang through the dense silence of the mango orchard making the little girl curl her body tightly, cradling it in a gnarled arm of her tree. She would have to stay very still for any sharp movement would set the parrots flying out of the treetop in a sudden clapping explosion of green.

Through the lattice of branches, the summer sky looked like butter melting onto the parched earth below. Mani could not feel the heat, crouched as she was in the cool dark heart of her giant tree. She was safe nestled in these branches because nobody else was nimble enough to climb as high as she could. Her father was too old, Nana too fat and Tantia...well, Tantia would never go where Nana could not. From the day Mani's mother had suddenly gone, transformed from a warm smiling presence to a waxen-faced doll stretched out on a funeral bier, it was the womb of this tree, fragrant with ripening fruit, that had become her sanctuary.

She peered again through the darkness, adjusting her eyes to the brass-yellow heat haze beyond and this time saw two pairs of legs walking towards the tree. Both were clad in shorts and slippers, one set of knees scuffed and skinny like knobbly tamarind twigs and the other chubby with dimpled fat. The boys' heads were obscured by dusty leaves but Mani hastily pulled herself back when she heard Tantia’s high voice, closer than she had thought.

‘Nana, maybe she's gone back into Saturday House.’

Tantia's whining tone told her that he would not last long in this search. He hated these games when people hid from sight, their disappearance being filled with terrors that Mani could not completely understand.

Poor Tantia. So overawed by Nana who saw him merely as a shadow with no feelings of its own. Nana would never go indoors until the afternoon heat finally penetrated his bristly coconut head, reminding him of icy khus sherbets or the great chunks of watermelon being kept cool for them under wet gauze. Mani hoped it would not be a very long wait. Much as she loved her leaf-haven, there were only so many green mangoes she could nibble on to stave off her hunger and, with the sun so high in the sky, her meal was now surely congealing in the dining hall. How had Nana not succumbed yet to
the call of hunger? It was almost always Nana’s appetite that brought their games to a halt, Mani and Tantia clicking their tongues in shared frustration while Nana’s plump frame disappeared into the kitchens in search of spicy namkeen.

Mani froze as Nana’s voice emerged from right under the tree in an angry growl, ‘She’s here, I know she’s here. I saw her running this way…badmash girl, so infuriating!’

They had been speaking in Marathi but Nana now broke into English, as he always did when he wished to sound really outraged. ‘She had no cause to steal my diary,’ he said stridently, obviously hoping he was striking dread in her heart if she was up in the tree, ‘she knows it is my personal and private property.’

So fond of pompous English words. Always trying to show how much cleverer than both her and Tantia he was, especially in front of Mr Todd, their English tutor. Although Tantia was easily impressed, Mani had no qualms in reminding Nana that he knew more than them only because he was ten while they were six and seven. She knew she would soon catch up—already she was better at some things, especially horse riding. But Tantia always seemed a little unsure when she tartly threw that in Nana’s face, never taking her side against Nana either out of loyalty or fear, Mani never knew which.

It was Tantia’s querulous voice that rose up through the branches this time. ‘Maybe she has only borrowed your diary, Nana,’ he pleaded.

Though briefly touched by this unlikely defence, Mani knew that it had been offered only because Tantia was desperate to end their search for her so he could return indoors. Once in the kitchens he would stick very close to one of the maids until Mani showed up again. And, on finally seeing her, he would hide his relief under a huge sulking face.

‘Borrowed it?’ Nana screeched before repeating the offending word sarcastically, ‘Borrowed? I think both of you should remember that everything you have and eat and wear is borrowed from my father and me anyway. It is only because we have given you permission to live in our palace that you are here at all. Understand that, Tantia?’

Through the leaf screen, she saw Tantia nod his bullet head glumly before he set off after Nana again, dragging his feet noisily through the dry undergrowth. They were going in the direction of the water wells but Mani knew they would retrace their steps to the orchard if they did not find her there. It was safest to stay hidden a while longer.

Settling into the familiar crevices of the branch, Mani sighed deeply, wondering why Nana was such a bully and why Tantia was
always so eager to win his approval. She had even tried asking Tantia that once, after a particularly unpleasant altercation with Nana, sitting close by him and stretching her arm up to put it around his shoulders. But he had mutely shaken his head and pushed her hand away to wipe snot and tears on his sleeve.

Tossing a cluster of tiny new mangoes between her hands, she repeated the unfamiliar English word Nana had used, feeling the soft puff of it against her lips. English was such a funny language—words that were almost exactly the same sometimes had nothing to do with each other at all. Such as ‘purse’ and ‘person’. Now here was ‘personal’. She would have to ask her father what it meant or perhaps Mr Todd when he came on Wednesday for the English lesson. Already, she was Mr Todd’s favourite in the schoolroom. Unlike the other tutors, he was less inclined to be lenient with Nana just because Nana was the Peshwa’s son. Most people in the court relegated her and Tantia to lowly second-class citizens but Mr Todd was different. At first Mani had found the English tutor’s careful neutrality most charming but, lately, she had worked out that he was dismissive of Nana because it was the British who had taken away Peshwa-sahib’s powers after he had been defeated by them in battle.

Mani slid up the branch on which she had been reclining to smack her forehead angrily. She was constantly forgetting the awful possibility that Nana may well become the next Peshwa soon. Even though there was all that talk about the British never allowing anyone to hold the title of Peshwa ever again, Peshwa-sahib was doing everything in his power for Nana to inherit. And, after all, Peshwa-sahib would not be around forever. These days he too was always falling ill as Mani’s own mother had done before she died and, if he did die, and if Nana did indeed become Peshwa someday, then Mani would most likely be the first person to be banished from his kingdom.

She felt a sudden rush of remorse at having stolen Nana’s diary and read all those scribblings about how he would become a powerful ruler and train an army that would take on the British. And take on the Maharaja of Gwalior who, Nana had written, was just a ‘buddhoo chamcha’ of his British Resident. He had even paraphrased the English translation of that (‘idiot lackey’) and signed off using the official title he would inherit—‘Peshwa Nanasaib Dandonu Pant’, rather than just Nana. He behaved sometimes as though he were already the Peshwa, parroting his adoptive father’s views: complaining yesterday of how unfair it was that the British could rob the Maratha clans of their land and birthright merely by having bigger armies. Even though Nana had not been born when the war and the eviction took place, he talked
as though he remembered every detail, declaring sombrely that their life could never compare to what they once had in Pune.

Whatever the truth, however, Mani often felt something inside her chest grow tight and cold whenever she heard people in the court talk about the British in whispered and sometimes urgent voices. Worrying that those red-uniformed giants may order them to move out of Saturday House too, if anyone did anything to upset them. She could not even imagine living anywhere else but in this house that sprawled so lazily by the river, and hoped her father was right when he said that the British were generally even-handed and fair. He had told her that the whispering in court was only because it was always wise to control one’s tongue—especially when one lived in ‘an uncertain world’.

Feeling a renewed clutch of fear, Mani briefly contemplated shinning down the tree trunk to return Nana’s diary so that she could reclaim her two friends again. But her better instincts were instructing her to take a less honourable path. She cocked her head to one side, hearing nothing but the parrots scraping their beaks on the branches above and the squirrels rustling frantically amidst the dried leaves below. Quite sure that the boys would by now have wandered down to the river from the old well, she nimbly dropped down onto the soft earth under the tree. Tucking Nana’s diary into the waistband of her skirt and smoothing her small silk blouse over it, she carefully picked her way over the leaves underfoot, stopping each time her feet snapped a twig. Great-aunt Asharfi-bua too would no doubt be cross with her for having left the house without wearing her slippers.

Once at the edge of the orchard, Mani stopped to examine the soles of her feet, her heart sinking at the sight of the black mud caking them. That would take at least twenty minutes to scrub clean, by which time Nana and Tantia would have arrived in the schoolroom for their tuitions. It was not easy to decide whose wrath she wished to avoid more, Nana’s over the diary or her great-aunt’s over the state of her feet. Finally resolving that Asharfi-bua could be more easily won over with a profusion of smiles and promises, Mani ran into the back door of Saturday House, making her way through the warren of corridors around the kitchens and servants quarters before scuttling across the shadowed quadrangle to get to the part of the palace that was occupied by Nana and his family. Having arrived unseen at her destination, she peered around the door of the schoolroom. It was empty. She made her way hastily to Nana’s pile of books and slipped his diary amongst them before wiping her sticky palms on the back of her skirt. Careless as Nana was with his belongings, he would be
easily fooled into believing that it was he who had brought it out of
his room by mistake. Heart thumping now with the knowledge of
how narrowly her crime had escaped detection, Mani scurried swiftly
out of the room.

A clock chimed six times somewhere in the bowels of the palace.
Mani made a quick mental calculation, deciding that she still had a
few minutes to wash her feet before joining Asharfi-bua for her
prayers. Luckily it was Tuesday and not Wednesday, which meant it
was Karim-teacher’s history class and not Mr Todd’s weekly English
lesson. Karim-teacher, not as much of a stickler for punctuality as the
Englishman, would hopefully not scowl at her and make disapproving
English throat-clearing noises if she turned up for tuition just a few
minutes late. Pleased with herself at escaping just about everybody’s
anger, Mani hurried back down the corridor in the direction of her
father’s quarters, silk skirt billowing behind her like a pink sail. She
knew she ought to slow down, her father having asked her wearily
just this morning why she could not simply *walk* like everyone else.
She had been tumbling pell-mell down the stairs and he had looked
up from his papers to ask why she always behaved as though wild
animals were chasing her. Baba’s occasional rebukes, so mildly
delivered, could never really worry her though.

Mani called her father Baba, although the rest of the court knew
him as Moropant. As political advisor to the deposed Peshwa, he was
one of the most trusted courtiers but, according to his small daughter,
much too occupied with his work. It was an unfair accusation as,
whatever the events of the day, Moropant always found the time to
take Mani down to the river for their evening walk. Once within sight
of the rolling river Ganga, they would settle on a bench under the
amaltash tree, Mani sometimes perching on her Baba’s lap to be able
to grab his face between her hands and ensure he could not escape her
more urgent questions.

On one of those evenings, with one hand on her shoulder, he had
captured an amaltash flower as it spun down from the tree. They both
looked at the small yellow bloom lying on his palm but Mani knew
he was speaking to himself as he said softly, ‘The heat has come early
again and, see, it is these poor flowers that must pay the price.
Drifting helplessly towards uncertain fates, just like us.’ He looked up
at Mani before adding, ‘How like the flowers we are, beti, knowing
nothing of the fate we simply inherit from others.’

He had lifted her off his lap at this point to walk on but Mani,
trotting along beside him, wondered whether by ‘others’ he meant the
British or people in Peshwa-sahib’s court. She did not like to quiz her
father too much on days like this when he seemed to be talking more to himself than to her but this seemed important.

She tugged at his hand, ‘Is that why Peshwa-sahib gazes so sadly out of the windows sometimes, Baba? Is it his fate he is thinking of?’

Moropant smiled down at her, ‘Yes, I suppose it is, beti. It is his Pune homeland he remembers as he looks out at our Varanasi countryside. And the many Maratha clans he had been leader of not so long ago.’

Those were things her father had already told her about—of the war with the East India Company’s army and Peshwa-sahib’s subsequent exile to Varanasi.

‘But Saturday House is the best place on earth to be, Baba,’ she protested. ‘And you said once that the British are good jailers, did you not? I like this jail and so do Nana and Tantia.’

Moropant laughed. ‘Oh the British are charitable jailers alright. Better than the Mughals would have been. And they pay Peshwa-sahib a pension generous enough for his entire retinue to live comfortably here at Saturday House.’

‘Perhaps they give us money because they like us,’ Mani said confidently.

‘I think it would be fair to say that they do not dislike us, beti. All they want is that we promise them compliance and stay out of their way.’

‘Then that must be why they live far away from us too.’

‘The Europeans like to have their own little enclaves of Christian life and some of them distance themselves from local traditions. But there’s nothing wrong with that, is there, Mani? We all feel safer gathering amongst our own. No, the British respect us much more than those Muslim invaders of yore. We have much to be grateful for.’

Mani nodded. Apart from Mr Todd and the occasional visitor to the court, the only time she saw Europeans was on her occasional jaunts into town. She could not help staring at them from her carriage windows; tall men in buttoned uniforms hung with gold braid and women who looked like overblown roses in their huge silk gowns. They looked fabulous to her wondering gaze but it was clear that great gulfs separated her world from theirs. Her first knowledge that there may be things to fear from these strange, other-worldly beings was to come only two years later.
Eight-year-old Mani was settled on the floor at the back of the hall, stringing a heap of jasmines on a silk thread she had pulled off the edge of her skirt. Once the garland was ready, Asharfi-bua would help to wind it into her braid. It would perfume her hair for at least two days if she fooled Asharfi-bua into believing she had washed it by patting a little water on the top of her head. Busy with her task, she barely noticed Moropant walking in. He too had not seen her small figure curled amongst the damask curtains as he strolled to the bay windows, his back turned to the hall. The Ganga was visible from all the windows in this wing and Mani knew that the sight of the great river never failed to delight her father. ‘The timelessness of our Ganga-ma confers peace and calm on the troubled soul,’ he would say, his eyes sometimes clouding with sudden pensiveness.

Mani returned to her flowers when she saw that her father was today only observing some fishermen struggling to control their bamboo boats. A large Company steam sloop was blowing a loud horn to clear them from its path and the small fishing vessels rocked dangerously in the choppy brown waves left in its wake.

The guards at the entrance of the hall opened the big brass doors again, this time letting Peshwa-sahib and his younger brother through. Their day’s business in the court must have concluded early, Mani thought, as she watched the servants setting up the hookah pipes and spittoons. After a flurry of activity, the servants retired from the room, walking backwards, leaving only the three men behind.

From the sight of the sun being slowly swallowed up by the glittering river, Mani knew that the men lingered in the hall only to await their summons for the dusk prayers and meal. They settled themselves on capacious gaddas, tucking their silk dhotis under them while wall hangings swayed gracefully in the evening breeze. A whiff of incense drifted in from somewhere. Peshwa-sahib pulled a hookah towards himself and filled its bowl with a pinch of cinnamon from a silver box. He fixed his favourite jade mouthpiece onto the pipe before taking a long pull and, as he leaned back on his bolster, Mani saw that the expression on his face was troubled. She wondered why, as her Baba so often said exasperatedly, people just forgot to notice their blessings. As Peshwa-sahib opened the conversation, his despondent voice reverberated hollowly across the empty hall.

‘Like riverside melon vines, they are,’ Mani heard him say, ‘at first sending soft and sweet tendrils out so tentatively. Then, finding the richness of our soil, they grow and spread before our very eyes and, before we know it, those very tentacles are winding around our throats.’
His brother responded soothingly, ‘We have no choice but to accept that the Company is invincible, Bhai-sahib. The power of its army protects its trade and that trade pays for the army.’

Peshwa-sahib emitted a humourless laugh. ‘So beautifully simple. And now new territories come under their control without anyone putting up even the semblance of a fight.’

‘What is the point of a fight?’ Moropant offered. ‘We have tried that and failed. Even though my own Maratha pride rebels against this state of affairs, it seems we now have no choice but to remain on the Company’s right side. We must avail of the opportunities that lie in friendship with them, even if others accuse us of being false and self-seeking.’

‘Granted, Moropant, but should that cause us to turn on our fellow Maratha clans?’

‘Of course, it is in the Company’s interests to cause infighting amongst us Marathas. We can only hope that they will not be able to fragment such an ancient clan as ours so easily.’

‘Hope? Even as we play further and further into British hands?’ Peshwa-sahib snorted scornfully. ‘Can you not see how easily they divide us—a whisper here, a treaty there. Before you know it, brother will be pitted against brother. And the Honourable East India Company is the great puppeteer, pulling all our strings.’

‘What can one do, Bhai-sahib? Things have come to such a pass that it is now the British we must turn to, even to parley with our own Maratha brothers.’

Peshwa-sahib turned on his brother sharply, ‘Just because we cannot keep our own houses in order, why should we put our faith in firangis who neither like us nor understand us? Isn’t it naïve to hope they will help? Haven’t we already tried that and found our negotiator becoming the bigger enemy instead?’

Mani sank behind the curtains, trying to stay hidden from view. She hated it when either Peshwa-sahib or Baba got angry. Luckily, however, Peshwa-sahib’s younger brother was putting aside his hookah to mollify them. ‘We must admit that there are good men among the British, Bhai-sahib, men of honour willing to fight their own government’s injustices. And not all British reforms have worked against us. The practices of sati and child sacrifice followed by the Rajputs...age-old...only the British can curb them.’

Moropant voiced his support, ‘Quite. Bentinck was an able man who had a genuine interest in bettering things. Did it matter that he was British when there were benefits to be had for all of us from his administration?’
Peshwa-sahib remained silent as his brother replied, ‘If you ask me, these white firangis are much better than the dissolute Mughals and those Afghan devils who plagued us in the past. Those Mussalmans loathed us Marathas and made no effort to hide the fact. At least the British are, by and large, civil and respect our good traditions while advocating change where necessary. If they want to control the trade, let them, I say.’

But Peshwa-sahib’s mouth remained downcast as he vehemently spewed a jet of betel juice into a spittoon. ‘How can you be so blind, my brothers?’ he asked bitterly, irritatedly dismissing the servant who had been sent to summon them for the evening meal. The annoyed flick of Peshwa-sahib’s hand made the jewels in his rings flash angry red across the room. Mani watched the servant hastily back away.

‘Can you not see that when the British proscribe practices like sati, it is merely part of a concerted Christian attack on Hindu values?’ Peshwa-sahib continued. ‘You think William Bentinck really cared about some grieving widow throwing herself on her husband’s funeral pyre? After all how many such cases happen in reality? Tell me. Maybe just one or two a year? And only among the Rajput landowners. And are not our people already trying to bring about the same social reforms?’

Moropant nodded. ‘It is true there are Hindus in Bengal also fighting the practice of sati, but Peshwa-sahib—’

Peshwa-sahib cut him short. ‘There is no “but”, Moropant. Nobody—least of all the British administration—wants to acknowledge the good that our own people are doing. The point is that the East India Company must show everybody what a degenerate people we are, establish in the eyes of the world—their Board of Directors, their Parliament, their people, even themselves—how desperately we need them to come and enlighten us. To prove that Christianity is the only way to create a good and decent society.’

‘Are you saying that all their social reforms are just an elaborate screen for conversions to Christianity?’

‘Yes!’ Peshwa-sahib cried, ‘presented to us as gifts we must be grovellingly grateful for. Why, have they not got brigands and highwaymen in their own countries just like the Thugs here? But they make our thuggee out to be somehow connected with evil Kali worship—because it suits their purposes to have our religion seem cruel and insane. So that they can come and civilize us and, yes, convert us, Moropant. Do we not know that they use children to work in inhuman conditions in their own factories and workhouses? But do you ever hear them talk about their social evils over here?’
Moropant shook his head as Peshwa-sahib continued speaking, leaning forward and using his hookah pipe to jab agitatedly into the smoky air, ‘How can you even for one moment believe that it is the betterment of our people that they desire? When we have had flourishing civilizations in our lands for over four thousand years. Four thousand years, Moropant! No, what they covet are our land and our possessions and they will take those from under our noses even while we stand and admire the good we think they are doing us!’

Mani, frightened by the flashing anger in her beloved Peshwa-sahib’s eyes, heard his brother gently chide him. ‘Forgive me, Bhai-sahib, but how can one not believe that at least their desire to respect our ways is genuine. I was shown a Company handbook that has recently been produced for their officers serving in India that instructs them to accept Hindu and Muslim practices, even if they find them offensive.’

At this Peshwa-sahib thumped his fist on his arm bolster, his voice growing even shriller with frustration, ‘See, that is exactly what I mean! Even if they find it offensive! Is it not arrogance to be in someone else’s land and decide what is offensive and what is not? While we are expected to blindly accept their practices as being good and civilized? Did we not hear that their latest method of punishing insubordination within their ranks is to tie the offender onto the mouth of a cannon before blowing him to bits? Did they not do exactly that to four of their sipahis in Madras just last month? That is civilized behaviour but their outlawing of sati and thuggee is to be lauded!’

As Peshwa-sahib sat back, visibly exhausted by his rage, Mani clutched her flower chain to her thumping chest. Peshwa-sahib’s face was ashen and she knew how much the doctors worried about his health. He would die, just like her mother, if he flew into such rages. To her relief, her father spoke up, his voice calm and measured as always.

‘Forgive me, Peshwa-sahib. But we have already lost the battle and cannot turn the clock back. Now, for our children’s sake, it is peace we must strive for. I know I would be willing to sacrifice a little of my pride and a few of our customs if only for our children to enjoy a better world than ours.’

There was silence for a few minutes and Mani was sure that they could hear the drumbeats of her heart echo across the room. But Moropant sat up to rearrange the folds of his shawl, changing his tone to a more light-hearted one as he added, ‘In fact, I think it is the children I now hear, no doubt coming to fetch us for the meal.’

Mani knew this was a lie, as Nana and Tantia had gone to
Samarth for the day and she was crouched right here in this corner, but the cue was taken by Peshwa-sahib’s brother. ‘And, if we do not depart for the dining hall after this second summons, I fear we will be in very grave trouble with the ladies.’

At this Peshwa-sahib raised himself reluctantly from his bolsters, saying wryly, ‘And that, we all know, is just not worth the trouble, is it? Worse even than annoying the British.’

There was general laughter as the men got up but Mani could not still the beating of her heart as she followed them out of the hall at a safe distance. They were strolling down the darkening veranda and she saw to her relief that Peshwa-sahib had slung an arm around the shoulders of the two men accompanying him. She caught up as they entered the dining chamber and heard Peshwa-sahib now speak quietly, his voice filled more with sadness than anger, ‘What makes me fearful, my brothers, is that there is no limit to human greed. And that is just a universal truth that applies to all of us, not merely the British. At first they only wanted to trade and keep other Europeans away from their trading posts; then they turned their attentions to us indigenous rulers, enticing our soldiers away by offering better pay and pensions. After that it became too tempting to keep the lands that were bringing them such untold wealth and, along with that, they took our self-respect. Can you not see how much they need India ever since they lost America? You mark my words, Moropant, in the end they will get not just India’s territory and treasures but much, much more. Things that we cannot even dream of at present. And when they take what they want, it will be with great stealth, like a breeze that will blow into our houses, seeming to offer succour even while it poisons us in our sleep.’

Through the meal, Mani could barely swallow the food placed before her as dread continued to knock at the walls of her stomach. She pushed the bowl of shrikhand away and tried to shake off Asharfi-bua who was holding a damp palm against her forehead to ensure she was not ill. Peshwa-sahib’s anger with the British was so confusing. After all, one could not ask for more from this peaceful happy life they all enjoyed at Saturday House. Her father had always said that anyone who brought and kept peace in the land was welcome and that the British deserved praise for bringing order as the Mughal line waned and everyone started fighting for control. After all, they were all fortunate to live in lands so blessed with riches. Enough for them all, if it was distributed fairly.

After the meal, her father took her down to the western garden as usual. Still disturbed by the argument she had overheard earlier,
Mani noticed that her Baba too was unusually quiet, his eyes focussing somewhere in the far distance. The park all around them was covered in long gentle shadows and Saturday House, lying at the edge of it, was basking silently in the warm moonlight. But Moropant suddenly looked down at her with a strange expression on his face, shadows plunging his eyes into holes.

‘I know you and Nana and Tantia fight and make up all the time, beti,’ he said abruptly, his voice unusually thick, ‘but you must always remember that they are your friends, your brothers, Mani.’

Mani nodded obediently. She had heard this lecture many times before and knew exactly at which points to nod. But today her father would not be easily appeased, continuing to speak in a tone of frightening urgency, as though the whole world were just about to collapse around them. ‘You three children will always have to look after each other, even after you grow up, Mani. There must be no more of this childish quarrelling.’ He put his arm around her shoulder and sighed deeply. When he spoke again, his grip on her shoulder had relaxed and his voice was gentler, ‘Think about it, Mani. If you fight, then how will you protect each other when faced with a real enemy? You will not think it possible now but it is to each other you will turn when a bigger adversary comes along.’

Mani thought about who a real enemy to her might be, bigger than even Nana and Tantia put together, and could think of none. She knew she ought not to argue with her Baba when he was upset but she had to set him right on one matter. ‘Baba, even if I agreed not to fight with Nana and Tantia, you would never be able to get them to agree,’ she protested. ‘Even if I remained as calm and peaceful as I possibly could, they would just end up fighting with each other. Especially Nana with Tantia.’

Moropant shook his head ruefully and sighed again, ‘Poor Tantia. What would have happened to him, had Peshwa-sahib not taken him in to be Nana’s companion? I have never told you this, beti, but when Tantia’s parents died in the cholera epidemic, none of his relatives could be persuaded to take care of him. The poor fellow was sent from house to house, no one being willing to take responsibility for an orphan child left without any means. I sometimes worry what that sense of abandonment may have done to him...the wounds of childhood sometimes lie seared across the mind like great raw welts that refuse to heal.’

‘Maybe that is why Tantia is always so scared, Baba. And always so...so greedy for kind words.’

‘You are absolutely correct, my clever little one. Greedy for kind
words.’ Moropant looked down at Mani who could not resist puffing up slightly at her father’s approval. He was smiling at her now but his face faded again as he continued, ‘I’m glad you can see what makes little Tantia the way he is, Mani. And have sympathy for him. Nana too would do well not to worsen Tantia’s wounds with his teasing. The pain felt in childhood never fails to reach out through the years. It will take its revenge when it can.’