Tiger Hills

Sarita Mandanna

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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Weidenfeld & Nicolson
LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 2010 by Weidenfeld & Nicolson
An imprint of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 297 85981 9 (cased)
ISBN 978 0 297 85983 3 (trade paperback)

Typeset by Input Data Services Ltd, Bridgwater, Somerset

Printed in Great Britain by ????

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Chapter 1

1878

Muthavva knew her seventh child was special, had known from the very day of her birth, the day of the herons. It was a clear day in July. With almost two months to go before the baby was due, and the sowing season upon them, Muthavva had put off leaving for her mother's home. She made her laborious way to the fields instead, and was standing ankle deep in the flooded flats when she heard a rustling. She looked up, shading her eyes against the sun and rubbing the small of her back. A flock of herons wheeled overhead. In itself, this was not unusual. There were herons to be seen in every field in Coorg, the flash of their wings startling against bright green paddy. But in all her years, Muthavva had never seen as many as were now slowly descending upon the flats. A hundred birds, maybe more, flying wingtip to wingtip, casting the sun-drenched fields into shadow. The fluttering of their feathers drowned out the croaking of frogs, the cawing of crows, even the incessant racket of crickets.

Muthavva could no longer hear her brother-in-law's voice carried on the wind as he called out instructions to the labourers hired to help with the sowing, his words muffled by the steady beat of wings. The birds circled slowly, lower and lower, executing a final sharp turn to land by her feet. Muthavva stood surrounded, still absently massaging her back amongst a sea of silent white. And then, without warning, the herons took wing again. Up they soared on some secret cue, all around her,

showering her with the glittering droplets of water that rolled off their wings and the tips of their feet. At that instant, not one moment sooner or later, Muthavva felt a gush of warm liquid on her thighs. Her daughter was here.

The mountains. That is what the dead must notice first, Muthavva had always believed. That very first time, when they rose from the funeral pyres, slipping through ash, borne by the wind high into the clouds. And from there, that first, dizzying, glorious sight of Coorg.

It was a tiny principality, shaped not unlike the knitted bootie of an infant, and tucked into the highest reaches of the Sahaydri mountains that girded the country's coastline to the South. The far side of the mountains was bounded by the ocean, dropping abruptly into the glittering blue of the Arabian Sea. The way down the cliffs was so slippery, so fraught with loose rocks and sharp-edged shingle that only the most money-hungry traders were foolhardy enough to attempt it. They assembled twice a year at the edge of the bluffs, in time to meet the Arabian ships docked below, with baskets of captured monkeys whose feet they had painted red with betel juice and lime. They would release the monkeys over the cliffs, driving them down towards the sea with a great banging and bashing of drums; as the monkeys jumped terrified from rock to rock, they left behind a map of tiny red footprints for the traders to follow. Even so, each year there were those who fell, men screaming as they spun through the air, finally smashing onto the rocks far below.

Turning inland, the silver flash of the Kaveri river, ribboning the olivine mountains and parcelling Coorg neatly in two like the halves of a coconut. To the North, the undulating hills of bamboo country, softly rounded, dotted with towering arches of bamboo and slender knots of trees. Blackwood and ironwood, dindul and sandalwood, eucalyptus, benteak and rosewood, interspersed with breezy glades where grasses shimmered in the sun. The Scotland of India. That is what the many white folk in Coorg called it, this part of the land that reminded them so much of Europe. They had set about civilising the central town of Mercara, re-christening its streets Tenth Mile, Queens Way and Mincing Lane. They clustered their estates about the town – coffee

plantations sprung from Ceylonese beans that had rapidly taken root in this virgin soil. Their planter bungalows lay in a series of rough circles around the town. Low slung, red roofed and diamond paned, replete with verandahs, croquet lawns and racquet courts.

In stark contrast, the Shola forests of the South. Wild, untrammelled tracts of pipal, cinchona, ebony, toon and poon, crowding in on themselves, adorned with club moss and lush, unscented orchids. Tangles of thorned underbrush erupted between their trunks, vast, laboriously spun cobwebs bridging the exposed corrugation of their roots.

Here and there, scattered almost evenly between the North and the South, the local villages. A velvet patchwork of jungle soil, moist, fertile and dark as the night sky where the forest had been hacked away. Peridot swathes of paddy flats lining the wetlands by the streams. The sprawling, golden-thatched homes of the Coorgs, each with its designated wetlands and grazing pastures and the telltale wisps of smoke that rose from their hearths into the trees.

Finally the forest, at the base of the mountains. The thickly knitted toe of the bootie, forming a protective cover over the tip of Coorg that jutted out towards Mysore. This was dense jungle, simmering with a dangerous, compelling beauty, marked only by the faintest of trails. Only the Coorgs knew the jungle trails well, them and the charcoal skinned Poleya tribals who served them.

The trails had always been jealously guarded, especially in the old days when Coorg lay under siege. The sultans of Mysore had tried for generations to bring this stubbornly independent principality under their dominion. The internecine warfare, the abductions, the forced circumcisions and mass executions had only served to unite the Nayaks, patriarchs of the eight most prominent families in Coorg. They had banded together, bidding the clans under their jurisdiction to stand shoulder to shoulder against Mysore. The Coorgs resisted the sultans, digging in their heels and clinging to their land like the copper-coloured crabs that burrowed in their fields.

When the British and their John Company had finally overthrown Mysore, the Coorgs had rejoiced as one. In the peace treaty that followed, Coorg was ceded to the British. They had taken the measure of this little province, looked appraisingly at its mist-laden hills and

salubrious climes so well suited to the planting of coffee. They took note of the Coorgs; tall, fierce hotheads who thought nothing of looking them in the eye and speaking as one man to another. Wisely they had been patient, pushing their agenda with polite, manicured resolve. Eventually, fifty years after they had taken Mysore, the British were formally welcomed into Coorg.

Still, despite these days of peace and the syenite roads that the British had carved, skirting the edges of the forest to connect Coorg with the neighbouring provinces, collective memory ran deep. There was a band of armed and able-bodied Coorgs always stationed at the bend overlooking the entrance to the forest where the road from Mysore met the mouth of the trail. The Nayaks shared responsibility for manning this post, each staffing it with men from the clans under his dominion for five weeks at a stretch except for the three months of the monsoons when the trails were rendered impassable by mudslides and trees felled by lightning.

Today, the lookout post was quiet. Men lay snoring in the rough bamboo and burlap machan while Nachimanda Thimmaya kept watch. The afternoon wind picked up, gusting through the branches overhead and scattering dried leaves through the machan. Thimmaya shivered, drawing his tunic closer about him. If only he had picked the white cowrie shell this year, curse his luck. When Pallada Nayak, the village headman, had announced the date of the cowrie picking, Thimmaya had gone especially to the Iguthappa temple, offering its all powerful deity, Iguthappa Swami, a whole two rupees, money he could scarcely afford. He had sacrificed a fowl to the ancestors and yet another to the veera, the ghosts of the valiant. Leaving nothing to chance, Thimmaya had even propitiated the wood spirits with a hefty bundle of pork and rice left in the forest. The day of the picking, when the priest had extended his closed fists towards him, Thimmaya had sent up yet another fervent prayer to Iguthappa Swami. But no, he had pointed at a fist and the priest had opened his palm only to reveal a black cowrie; Thimmaya had been selected once more, three years running, to man the post.

This year was especially hard. It was sowing season and every available pair of hands would be needed in the fields. Muthavva should be in

her mother's home, not bending over the paddy, not when her belly swelled round and full with another child. It had been a difficult pregnancy, the dribbles of blood in the early weeks, the pain in her back as her stomach grew. His brother Bopu had offered to take his place at the lookout post, but Thimmaya had refused. Bopu had his own family to feed, and besides Pallada Nayak would not have approved. He sighed. If the price for cardamom fell again this year in Malabar, the family would have to tighten their belts.

He was sitting there, lost in his thoughts when he started. Someone was running through the jungle calling for him. 'Ayy. Who is it?' he shouted, grabbing his matchlock and peering through the branches.

The runner came into view and Thimmaya recognised him with a pang of alarm. It was one of Pallada Nayak's cattle hands. 'What happened?' he asked tersely, jumping down from the machan.

'The child . . .' gasped the Poleya, wiping the sweat from his face. 'The child is coming.'

Thimmaya's face tightened. The baby was not due for many weeks, wasn't that what Muthavva had said? Why had the pains started so early?

The men crowded round him as he laced his sandals and tucked his dagger into his cummerbund, slapping his shoulder and telling him not to worry. He barely heard them, all his energy focused on reaching his wife as soon as he could. He loped off along the trail towards the Pallada village, the Poleya struggling to match his pace. 'Please Iguthappa Swami,' he prayed, over and over. 'Please.'

He reached the village just before nightfall, and went first to the Pallada house to pay his respects. The evening lanterns were being lit, casting the Nayak in silhouette as he strode up and down the verandah. 'Ah, Thimmaya, have you come?' he said, pleased, as Thimmaya bent to touch his feet. 'It is good, it is good,' he said, 'now go to your wife.' Thimmaya nodded, unable to speak. 'There is no cause for worry,' the Nayak reassured him. 'All is well.'

Thimmaya nodded again, his chest still tight with foreboding. He touched the Nayak's feet, then hurried towards his own home, yet a good six furlongs away. It was dark by the time he got there, the lamps had been lit, the dogs fed and let loose for the night. They rushed

barking towards him as he stopped at the aimada, the ancestor temple in the courtyard. 'Ancestors of the Nachimanda clan,' he prayed, passing his palms back and forth over the flickering lamps. 'I will sacrifice a fowl to you, please let my woman be well.'

And then his nephews and his son were running out to meet him, and his mother, laughing, her arms extended. 'Uyyi! You have come monae.'

'Muthavva?'

'She is fine, they are both fine monae. Come in and see your pearl of a daughter.'

They brought hot water from the fireplace for him to wash his hands and feet and then he headed for the bedroom where Muthavva lay flushed and spent upon their cot. His mother put the baby in his arms. He gazed down at his wriggling daughter and the knot in his chest came finally undone, dissolving into an emotion so strong he had to blink to stop the tears.

Muthavva never told him about the herons that had heralded the baby's birth. The labour had started so quickly, the pains been so insistent that her brother-in-law had hoisted her onto his back and run all the way home from the fields. The baby in such a hurry to be born, that the midwife had barely been summoned before she thrust her way into the world. As the women bustled about, looking for the brass gong to announce the birth of a girl child and the servants were sent to distribute puffed rice and bananas in the village, Muthavva made up her mind. She had birthed six babies before this child. Six healthy, squalling boys, of which only the oldest, Chengappa, had survived infancy. She touched her finger to the tip of the baby's pert, perfectly formed nose. This daughter, she knew in her heart, was special. Why cloud her birth with talk of omens or portents? No, she decided, she would tell nobody about the birds.

She did, however, once. After the ritual forty days of cleansing were over, when Muthavva untied the cloths bound tight about her abdomen, arose from the birthing bed, and was deemed able to perform her household duties once more, the family took the baby to the village temple to

have her horoscope drawn. The old priest reached for his manuscript of tattered pipal leaves, wrapped in orange silk and passed down through generations from father to son. The child would have marriage, he predicted, and progeny. Money was in her fate too. But . . . and here he fell silent. Muthavva and Thimmaya looked anxiously at one another. 'What is it, ayya? What do you see?' Thimmaya's mother asked, anxiously clutching the baby closer until she squirmed in protest.

'Nothing . . . it is nothing . . . and yet . . .' The priest fell silent once again and consulted his leaves. He looked up at the worried faces around him, as if debating what to say. 'It is nothing,' he said finally, even as he fished about in a dilapidated wooden box. 'Here.' He pulled out an amulet. 'This will protect her.' The amulet had a powerful mantra inscribed upon it, he advised, it would protect her from the evil eye. Better she wear it at all times. Shushing their concerns, he smeared vermilion on their foreheads and tied the amulet around the baby's arm with black thread.

They touched the feet of the priest and prostrated in front of the idol. They had made their way outside, blinking in the sudden sunlight when, exclaiming that her earring was missing and that it must have fallen off during the reading, Muthavva hurried back inside.

'Ayya?' she called softly, her eyes taking a minute to adjust to the cool darkness of the sanctum sanctorum. The priest was clearing away the debris from their pooja, and he looked up, mildly irritated.

'Yes child, what is it now?'

She told him about the birds she had seen that day, the unnerving precision of their manoeuvres, as if they had come to herald the baby's birth. What did it mean? What had he seen in the leaves? Was there something he had not told them, some awful fate that awaited her daughter?

The old man sighed. Who could say what they meant, the birds? It was said that when a king cobra happened upon a sleeping man and instead of sinking its fangs into his flesh, fanned its hood instead, to shelter him from the sun, then that man would someday be king. The herons . . . maybe they foretold something, maybe they did not. Who could read the mind of God?

When Thimmaya went to see Pallada Nayak the next day on his

way back to the outpost, the Nayak generously excused him from the remainder of his lookout duty. It was only fair to Muthavva, he said, and besides, it was sowing season, and Thimmaya had another mouth to feed. The Nayak would send his youngest son in Thimmaya's place.

The paddy that year was so bountiful that Thimmaya was able to buy two milch cows with the gold it fetched him; the cardamom prices were the highest they had been in six years. The family sacrificed a cockerel to the ancestors for blessing them with a daughter who brought with her such good fortune. They named her Devamma, after Thimmaya's great-grandmother, but called her Devi, their very own Goddess.

Muthavva never entirely forgot the herons. She kept the amulet firmly tied around her daughter's arm, surreptitiously scanning the skies each time she took the baby outdoors. As the months passed however, and nothing untoward happened, she relaxed her vigil. The birds had been a figment of her imagination she told herself, the phantasms of a pregnant woman. She was entirely too preoccupied to notice them the night of Gauramma's wedding.

The village had been abuzz for weeks. It was an excellent match; Pallada Nayak's granddaughter was marrying the third son of Kambeymada Nayak, from the village that lay two hundred furlongs to the south. The latter was one of the wealthiest men in Coorg, with fifteen hundred acres of wetlands, several hundred more of cardamom country and multiple coffee estates. Even his tobacco spittoon, it was rumoured, was made of solid gold. Nobody had actually seen the spittoon you understand, but then which Coorg in his right mind would openly display such treasures for the Poleya servants to covet? Besides hadn't the old man commissioned a fabulous walking stick just this past month in Mercara, carved from the finest rosewood and inlaid with ivory? Ah, the village concurred, it was a lucky girl who entered the Kambeymada family and who better than their own gentle Gauru?

Pallada Nayak spared no expense for the wedding. The moon rose high over the village green as liquor flowed freely and cauldrons of wild boar, chicken, mutton, vegetable and egg curries were hauled from the open air kitchens. The two shifts of musicians played without a break,

Thimmaya and the other men dipping and swaying to the wail of their trumpets. The groom had arrived and he and his family were being feted and fed. Women bustled about in shimmering silks, their faces rendered even more alluring by moonlight. Jewels glowed against their satiny skins. Wide adigé collars of uncut rubies banded their necks, and ropes of golden-beaded jomalé, and coral pathaks with hooded cobra pendants, their ruby eyes flashing fire. Half-moon kokkéthathis of seed pearls and gold swung at their breasts. Bangles, elephant headed, gemstone studded, plain and filigreed were slung about their wrists, diamonds sparkling in seven starred clusters from their ears.

Muthavva sat with the other nursing and pregnant women, exempt from hostessing duties. Children were running about, her own boy no doubt getting up to mischief somewhere in the melee. Thimmaya's mother would keep an eye on him and see that he was fed. She was content to sit here and listen to the chatter, the relaxed weight of her sleeping daughter in her arms.

What a pretty bride Gauru made, the women sighed, a trifle large, it was true, but who could deny the sweetness of her face? He was a lucky man, her husband, and . . . 'Uyyi!' they exclaimed as a pack of laughing boys came hurtling through the crowd and collided with Muthavva.

'Is this any way to behave?' the women scolded, as the boys sheepishly untangled themselves. 'Do you have pebbles for eyes, can you not see where you are going? See now, you have woken the baby and made her cry.'

'Sorry, we are sorry,' they apologised, backing away.

One of them though, barely ten or eleven years old, stood his ground, gazing at the bawling Devi. 'By all the Gods, she is loud!' he observed, his golden-brown eyes dancing with amusement. 'It is a wonder my ears can still hear.' Before Muthavva could object, he reached with a grubby finger to touch Devi's cheek and flashing an engaging, dimpled grin, disappeared into the crowd..

Shushing Devi back to sleep, irritated that she hadn't scolded the boy more thoroughly, Muthavva never saw the flock of herons that rose silently from the trees, silhouetted against the moon as they passed over the green.