

## **Bitter Harvest**

By Anjali Purohit (India)

Right next to the ancient well, the tamarind tree stood centre field forming perfect perpendiculars to the dry black furrows of the soil.

Daji walked towards the tree with the long coiled rope in his hands. His dark skin was furrowed just like his land and you could hardly have told them apart but for his knuckles that were white from holding that rope so tight. Also white were the dilated pupils of his eyes. Also white was his bush shirt, incongruously new against the dusty Gandhi cap on his prematurely grey head. He'd stitched that shirt for his son's wedding.

But now it was not to be.

"Daji, with folded hands I beg forgiveness. I cannot give Shalu into your debt ridden house. What would you do if she were your child?"

Daji couldn't meet Shamrao's eyes, "No, dada. I'd do the same."

From that day, Daji took the circuitous route home and avoided the marketplace where everyone knew him.

His face softened only when little Arun came running, plummeted into his lap and chattered away. Arun, born fifteen years after his eldest, whom Daji pampered silly.

The trunk of the old tamarind rose tall without dividing and disappeared into a riot of delicate sap green punctuated with tamarinds hanging in tempting curls. Hidden quite close under the canopy was the first branch. Father had shown him that niche in the trunk.

"The trick is to put your foot here, then push yourself up and get a grip on this branch. The rest will be easy."

He taught him where to tie the swing so as to give it the highest sweep, "Stand here, reach out," demonstrated appa, "loop it around. Yes, perfect ! Now throw it down."

Both clambered groundwards, folded the old blanket fivefold across the waiting rope and little Daji had the strongest, most marvellous swing in the world.

Today, Daji didn't need to carry the blanket. He just had the rope coiled around his rough dark hands.

He strode, subconsciously avoiding the few surviving saplings that tried to stand erect, valiantly ignoring their own grey leaves curling inwards as premonitions of their impending fatality.

Last year, there was a bumper harvest. Daji piled a mound of cotton so high under this tree that its peak touched the branches. The next day he went to Nasik to shop for the marriage basta. Then the price of cotton plunged and the cotton rotted away unsold. Daji pledged his land that year and this year, his house and cattle. The recovery agents pasted the amortization notice on his door.

Daji stood in the spotlight of shade under the tamarind. He looked up. Tiny emerald leaves brushed against his cheek. The noonday sun blinded his eyes. He knew where he must reach to tie the rope. He strung the coil on his shoulder and raised his arms.

Suddenly, something four feet tall crashed into him, knocking him to the ground. Arun was in his lap.

“Baba, you forgot the blanket ! I've brought it now. You said you'd teach me to tie the swing high up when I'm older. Look, now I've grown so big, I can do everything just like you...”

Daji clutched Arun to his chest. He then rose and took the boy's hand.

“See this niche here? You must keep one foot here and quickly swing yourself to reach this branch. Then...”

The merciless sun went behind a cloud. Father and son could see clearly where they must hold, pull and climb so as to reach high up into the loving tamarind tree.