

The Eleventh Letter

Chapter One

Leela

As a child, I imagined I was the receiver of Nature's secrets. I would sit for hours beside dirt-covered roots, bearing witness to the emotions rampaging through my green kingdom: the *oorppam*'s love talk with the sun-struck splendor of the *kumbi* tree growing nearby; the winter cherry's envy of the sinuous hibiscus as it grew taller and more resplendent; the sadness of wilting jasmine leaves; the terror of a young cardamom tree as it felt the gnawing of caterpillars on its delicate leafy veins; a slender vine chortling its way up another tree; the determined vigor of a periwinkle; and leaves bidding goodbye as they fell crackling to the earth's floor.

My father, a math teacher at St. Thomas Higher Secondary School, was visibly elated at my absorption and even encouraged it. I would notice him observing me as I dug up sickly looking shrubs with my stubby nails, inspected mud-encrusted roots for damage before re-planting, picked up drooping stalks to tie them to stronger limbed branches, or watered and moved the wet mud to aerate the soil. He waited patiently, indulgently, when I stopped to admire a new bud that burst through its tight shell at night. He never let on that he thought me foolish to burst into tears at the sight of a purple Bauhinia orchid plant crushed by the weight of a careless foot. I overheard him remark to my mother that he noticed plants reacting to me, shifting subtly, very slightly, in recognition as I walked by.

When I turned eight, my father planted three Ashoka saplings. These three, he told me, were reminders of my three siblings who had died during childbirth. He charged me with the responsibility of taking care of the trees.

I fell to the task eagerly. Measuring their height, width, and the number of leaves that appeared in close synchronous symmetry on the plants as they grew, I observed the orderly arrangement of leaves, the nodes from which pairs of leaves appeared, the even distribution of nodules along a branch, the slow thickening of stems, and the texture of the soil from which the plants extruded. When blossoms appeared like tubes that opened into four oval lobes with sticklike stamens, half white, half crimson, they looked like petals, but my raw instinct, even as a child, told me they weren't.

And later, when the first cluster of flowers appeared, I was spellbound. I gathered then why the Ashoka tree was called the Sorrowless Tree. There was no room for anything other than joy around its beauty and majesty. Those first flowers were a tender yellow initially, and then changed to orange, and finally to the color of a vibrant flame, illuminating the soul of the tree. The flowers emitted a sweet-smelling fragrance at night, and I often slipped from my bed and bent to the flowers under the glittering gaze of the stars. If I stood close enough, the vibrating wings of bees sent an electric charge through the petals that tingled right in the marrow of my bones.

Stories told about the Ashoka tree were fascinating. It was this tree under which Buddha was born. It was beneath the Ashoka tree that Sita, the wife of Rama, was kept prisoner. It was upon the branch of this tree that Hanuman landed. It was the Ashoka tree that Kama, the god of love, imbued with special meaning. It was a branch of the Ashoka tree that Draupadi placed upon Arjuna's shoulders when she accepted him for husband. It was the tree that housed a thousand birds, that provided shade for weary travelers, and drove away evil spirits. It was the tree that never died.

Every time my mother raised objections about my unkempt appearance, my father would

tell her to be patient, for I would certainly outgrow this obsession.

When I turned twelve, my father presented me with a copy of Nehemiah Grew's *Anatomy of Plants*. He had once mentioned my fascination to the principal of his school, a London-educated man. As my father was heading home one afternoon, the principal thrust the book into his hands. He told my father that the book was lying unread and unused. "That's a lonely life for a book," the principal had said, and retold in my father's deep voice, the phrase had stuck with me ever since.

The book put words and meaning to my passion. With my limited exposure to the English language, I struggled through the descriptions as I pored over each of the eighty-two illustrated plates. Some evenings the principal would drop by, and we would read sections and chapters aloud to each other. I became more and more fluent in reading and speaking English.

On my thirteenth birthday, my father bought me *The Florist's Manual, or Hints for the Construction of a Gay Flower Garden*, by Maria Elizabeth Jackson, with directions for preventing the depredations of insects. On my fourteenth birthday, he gave me *Gray's Manual of Botany*; on my fifteenth birthday, *Indian Botany* by Daniel Oliver, and when I turned sixteen, a collection of papers and treatises written by Janaki Ammal, a Tellicherry woman who had become a well-known botanist.

I cleared a small patch at the back of the house and planted beans, jackfruit, papaya, and tomatoes. I added rice paddy and wheat, following up with coconut, rubber, tapioca, and then finally pretty flowers and shrubs. I watched, observed, and referred to the books as I investigated births, deaths, and biological differences between the species of weeds, shrubs, roots, vegetables, flowers, and seeds in my garden.

Then, a few weeks after my sixteenth birthday, just as I had begun to fathom the

mysterious beauty of fragile roots and the massive trees that they supported, my mother informed me gravely that I had become a woman. I wasn't sure what that meant. But I was soon to find out.

Returning from school a few days later, I was confronted by a scene of total carnage. All three of my Ashokas had been destroyed, hacked to bits, reduced to stumps. The branches and trunks lay scattered, waiting to be gathered and discarded, like common debris. My mother had hired a field worker to cut them down.

It felt like a hurricane had ripped through my life, slinging its debris at me. A thousand needles stabbed at my throat as I stared at the slaughter that day. A tortured whimper had left my throat, snaking through and closing the airway to my lungs. I opened and closed my mouth, gasping for air. I recall that feeling of panic as though it had happened yesterday.

My mother, seeing my distress, came over and ran her hand consolingly over my hair. "Your obsession was unseemly, Leela," she said in explanation. "I blame your father for encouraging you. Women like us don't have the luxury for such indulgences. No man will want a woman obsessed with mud and leaves. You must ready yourself to become a wife. Don't look so heartbroken, my child. I know it's a disappointment, but we all must endure disappointments in life, don't we, *molé?* That is what growing up means. They were mere trees, after all."

At that moment, pity for my mother swamped me. I wanted to explain that the Ashokas had been more than mere trees; they'd been my soulmates. I met my mother's eyes and tried to say the words aloud, but not a sound emerged.

From that day on, words lived in my throat but never found their way out. My tongue became dry, and sentences remained trapped within the maze of nerves, flesh, blood, and tissue.

My frantic parents consulted doctors in Kochi, Trivandrum, and even took the express

train to Madras. The physicians and experts were puzzled by my muteness. There was no physical evidence for this strange loss of speech.

My mother was convinced that I was punishing her for cutting down the Ashoka trees and often beseeched me to speak, but I found myself unable to move my jaw to utter a single word, even in consolation. I watched the worry lines deepen on my father's face. I observed how anguish and remorse caused a tremble to my mother's hands. And even when I felt the words hovering at the edge of my throat, waiting for the signal to be given, I was unable to oblige. The impulse to try gradually faded.

Eventually, the house and its people settled around my silence.