

Green

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Sample Chapter

## Memory

The first thing I can remember in this life is my father driving his white ox, Endurance, to the sky burial platforms. His back was before me as we walked along a dusty road. All things were dusty in the country of my birth, unless they were flooded. A ditch yawned at each side to beckon me toward play. The fields beyond were drained of water and filled with stubble, though I could not now say which of the harvest seasons it was.

Though I would come to change the fate of cities and of gods, then I was merely a small, grubby child in a small, grubby corner of the world. I did not have many words. Even so, I knew that my grandmother was lashed astride the back of Papa's patient beast. She was so very still and silent that day, except for her bells.

Every woman of our village is given a silk at birth, or at least the finest cloth a family can afford. The length of the bolt is said to foretell the length of her life, though I've never known that a money-lender's sister wrapped in twelve yards of silk lived longer than a decently fed farmwife with a short measure hanging on her sewing frame. The first skill a girl-child learns is to sew a small bell to her silk each day so that when she marries, she will dance with the music of four thousand bells. Every day she sews so that when she dies, her soul will be carried out of this life on the music of twenty-five-thousand bells. The poorest use seed pods or shells, but still these stand as a marker of the moments in our lives.

My silk is long lost now, as are my several attempts since to replace it. Be patient: I will explain how this came to be. Before that, I wish to explain how I came to be. If you do not understand this day, earliest in my memory like the first

bird that ever grew feathers and threw itself from the limb of a tree, then you will understand nothing of me and all that has graced and cursed my life in the years since.

The ox Endurance bore a burden of sound that day. His wooden bell clopped in time to his steps. The thousands of bells on my grandmother's silk rang like the first rainfall upon the roof of our hut after the long seasons of the sun. Later in my youth, before I returned to Selistan to see the truth of my beginnings for myself, I would revisit this memory and think that perhaps what I heard was her soul rising up from the scorching stones of this world to embrace the cool shadows of the next.

That day, the bells I heard seemed to be tears shed by the tulpas in celebration of her passage.

In my memory, the land rocked as we proceeded, in a way that meant I did not walk. I had eyes only for Endurance and my grandmother. My father drove the ox, so my mother must have carried me. She was alive then. Of her I can recall only the feel of arms as a pressure across the backs of my legs, and the sense of being held too close to the warmth of her skin as I wriggled away from her to look ahead. I hold no other recollection of my mother, none at all.

Her face is forever hidden from me. I have lost so much in this life by racing ahead without ever pausing to turn back and take stock of courses already run.

Still, my unremembered mother did as a parent should do for a child. She walked with a measured tread that followed the slow beat of Endurance's wooden bell. She held me high enough that I could look into my grandmother's white-

painted eyes.

Her I recall well in that moment. Whatever came before in my young life is lost now to my recollection, but my grandmother must have been important to my smallest self. I drank in the sight of her with a loving eagerness that foretold the starveling years to come.

The lines upon her face were a map of the ages of woman. Her skin seemed webbed, as if her glittering eyes were spiders waiting to entrap whatever little kisses and pudgy hands might stray too close. I do not suppose she had any teeth left, for her betel-stained lips were collapsed in a pucker that seems to me in memory to have been as familiar as the taste of water. Her nose was long, not so much in the fashion of most of Selistan's people, and had retained a certain majestic force even in her age. She had no hair left but for some errant wisps, though as most of her scalp was covered by the arch of her belled silk, I suppose this knowledge is itself a memory of a memory.

There must have been a washing, a laying out, a painting of the white and the red. These things I know now from my experience of later years, learned upon the corpses of those I helped prepare for the next life, as well as the corpses of those I have slain with my own hands.

Did my father run his fingers across his mother's cooling body to do these things?

Did my mother perform that ultimate rite for him?

Did my mother and grandmother live well together in the presence of my father, or did they fight like harridans?

So much has been taken from me. What has been given in return seems hollow next to the brilliance of that moment—the sharpness of the colors painted on my grandmother’s face; the rich, slow echo of Endurance’s bell and the silvery ringing from my grandmother’s silk; the faded tassels on the ox’s great curving horns; the heat that wrapped me like a bright and stifling blanket; the dusty, rotten smell of that day as my father sang his mother’s death song in a toneless, reedy voice that sounded bereft even to my young ears.

That brilliance is reinforced by a skein of later experience, but it also stands alone like the first rock of a reef above the receding tide. I wish that the past were so much more open to me, as it is to the blue-robed men who sit atop the shattered heads of ancient idols in the Dockmarket at Copper Downs. For a few brass tael, they will enter their houses of memory to recount the order and color of festival parades and marching banners in decades long lost to dust.

Distant memory is an art that absorbs its followers, immerses them in the mazes of the mind. I am overtaken by recall of more recent times, of blood and passion and sweaty skin and the most pointed kind of politics. For all that was taken from me in the earliest days of my stolen childhood, those distant memories would still be safe and sane compared with what has passed since, if their return were ever granted to me.

It would bring me the sound of my mother’s voice, which I have lost. It would bring me the look of my father’s face, which I have lost. It would bring me the name they called me, which I have lost.

My image of my grandmother is as bright and powerful as sunrise on the

ocean. She stands at the beginning of my life. Her funeral marks the emergence of my consciousness of the world around me.

For all that bright and shining focus on my grandmother, she was gone at the beginning of all things. Whoever she might have been to me in the rhythms of ordinary living is buried deep within the impenetrable fog of my infancy. I like to think she held me during the days when my mother must have worked the fields alongside my father. I like to believe she crooned to me songs about the world.

These things are even less than guesses.

My grandmother's last moments aside, what I hold most in my memory from those first days of my life is Endurance. The ox seemed tall as the sky to me then. He smelled of damp hide and the gentle sweetgrass scent of his dung. He was a hut that followed my father but always cast shade upon me. I would play beneath his shadow, moving as the sun did if he stood for too long, sometimes looking up at the fringe dividing his belly where the fur of each of his sides met and a fold of skin hung downward. The white of his back shaded to gray there, like the line of a storm off the hills, but always spattered with dust and mud.

The ox continually rumbled. Voices within prophesied in some low-toned language of grass and gas and digestion that endlessly fascinated me. Endurance would grunt before he pissed, warning me to scramble away from his great hooves and hunt frogs among the flooded fields until he found a dry place to stand once more. His great brown eyes watched me unblinking as I ran in the rice paddies, climbed the swaying palms and ramified bougainvilleas, hunted snakes in the stinking ditches.

Endurance had the patience of old stone. He always waited for me to return, sometimes snorting and tossing his head if he thought I'd moved too far in my play. The clop of his wooden bell would call me back to him. The ox never lost sight of me unless my father had taken him away for some errand amid the fields or along the village road.

At night I would sit beside the fire in front of our hut and stitch another bell to my silk under the watchful eye of my father. My mother was already gone by then, though I cannot recall the occasion of her death. Endurance's breath whuffed from the dark of his pen. If I stared into the shadows of the doorway, I could see the fire's fetch dance in the depths of his brown eyes. They were beacons to call me back at need from the countries of my dreams.

There came a certain day in my third summer of life that, like most days there, was hot as only Selistan can be. You northerners do not understand how it is that we can live beneath our greater sun. In the burning lands of the south, the daystar is not just light, but also fire. Its heat falls like rain through air that one could slice with a table knife. That warmth was always on me, a hand pressing down upon my head to wrack my hair with sweat and darken my skin.

I played amid a stand of plantains. Their flowers cascaded in a maroon promise of the sweet, sticky goodness to come. The fat stalks were friends sprung from some green jungle race, come to tell me the secrets of the weather. I had made up my mind to be queen of water, for it was water that ruled over everything in our village. Warm mud was caked upon my feet from my sojourns in the ditches planning the coming of my magical queendom.

Endurance's bell echoed across the paddy. The clatter had an urgency that I heard without at first understanding. I looked up to see the ox's ears flattened out. His tail twitched as if he were bedeviled by blackflies. My father stood beside his ox with one hand on the loop of rope that served as a bridle. He was talking to someone dressed as I had never seen before—wrapped entirely in dark cloths with no honest skin exposed to the furnace of our sun except the dead-pale oval of his face. I wore no clothes at all six days out of seven, and my father little more than a rag about his waist. It had never occurred to me that anyone would have so much to hide.

My father called my name. A thousand times I have strained in memory to hear his voice, but it will not come to me. I know it was my name, I know he called it, but the sound and shape of the word are lost to me along with his speaking of it.

Can you imagine what it means to lose your name? Not to set it aside for a profession or temple mystery, but simply to lose it. Many have told me this is not possible, that no one forgets the name she was called at her mother's breast. Soon enough I will explain to you how this came to be, but for now believe that the loss is as great to me as it seems incredible to you.

Papa turned toward me and cupped his hands to call out. I know my name hung in the air. I know I ran toward my father with my hair trailing behind me to be tugged by the sun and wind. It was the end of my life I ran toward, and the beginning.

Laughing I went, covered in the dust and mud of our land, a child of sun-scorched Selistan. My father continued to hold Endurance's lead as the ox tossed



his head and snorted with anger.

Close by, I could see the stranger was a man. I had never seen a stranger before, and so I thought that perhaps all strangers were men. He was taller than Papa. His face was pale as the maggots that squirmed in our midden pile. His hair peeking out from behind his swaddling was the color of rotting straw, his eyes the inside of a lime.

The stranger knelt to take my jaw in a strong grip and bend my chin upward. I struggled, and must have said something, for I was never a reticent child. He ignored my outburst in favor of tilting my face back and forth. He then grasped me by the shoulder and turned me around to trace my spine with a rough knuckle.

When I was released, I spun back hot with indignant pride. The maggot man ignored me, talking to my father in low tones with a muddled voice, as if our words did not quite fit his mouth. There was some small argument; then the maggot man slid a silk bag into my father's hand, closing his fingers over the burden.

Papa knelt in turn to kiss my forehead. He placed my hand in the maggot man's grasp, where the silk had so lately slid free. He turned and walked quickly away, leading Endurance. The ox, ever a mild-mannered beast, bucked twice and shook his head, snorting to call me back.

"My bells," I cried as I was tugged away by the maggot man's strong hand. So the belled silk was lost to me, along with everything else to which I had been born.

That is the last of what I remember of that time in my life, before all changed: a white ox, a wooden bell, and my father forever turned away from me.