

For Readers Only

MEIRA
CHAND

LAST QUADRANT

Marshall Cavendish
Editions



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*Then the moment exploded. Glass was breaking and flying.
Kyo was swept into the foaming water and mangled there.
The split second unrolled like a slow motion film, stamped forever
in Akiko's mind. She saw the loose slump of Kyo's body slung
backwards by the roll of foam, slices and fragments
of glass fly about and the great dark underside of the boat,
thrust in through the window, riding up upon the piano
as Kyo was thrown into the water.*

Twenty years ago English doctor Eva Kraig adopted Akiko, the illegitimate daughter of Kyo, who had abandoned the baby and then turned to prostitution. Now Eva may lose her beloved Akiko, for Kyo – ravaged by time and drink – has come back to Kobe to claim her grown daughter.

In the havoc of a great typhoon, Akiko finds herself stranded with her adoptive mother, the natural mother she has never known and a troubled young man who has fallen in love with her. In the brief calm of the typhoon's eye, the group arrives at the comparative safety of their wealthy neighbour's concrete house. There they must wait out the violence of the last quadrant, the wildest part of the storm. As they draw together in a fight for survival and are forced to reckon with their deepest selves, the terrible night becomes a turning point for each of them.

First published in 1981, this is Meira Chand's haunting, dramatic second novel, now in an updated edition for a new generation of readers.

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FICTION

ISBN 978-981-4828-22-2



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Part One

KYO

1. Thursday

'May I come in then?' Kyo asked. She had not waited at the outer gate, but let herself in and approached the front steps, as if such familiarity was in order. It was twenty years since Eva last saw her.

In the fierce light of the doorstep Kyo's small figure was bright and hard as a chip of stone. Eva blocked the passage with an arm before the open door. From behind came the odour of stewing bones from the soup she was preparing, a bald and fetid smell. Escaping the kitchen it seeped out about her into the sun of the garden and borders of marigolds. Their colours were deep and velvet against the parched dry beds of soil. Eva stared over the half moons of her glasses, and shock flushed in a cold dry burn.

Dropping her arm from the doorway, Eva moved a few inches back. Kyo's cheap perfume sharpened her nostrils, before the cooking bones engulfed it. The cloying film of make-up was thicker than before, the lips pulped and soft from that secret life Eva knew little of. But suddenly she remembered the fine texture of Kyo's skin, stretched over the wide flat planes of her face, scrubbed and shiny, free of make-up, on that first day Eva

brought her to the orphanage, more than twenty-five years before. Now she thought, how changed she is, how old she has become; she must be forty-five.

Kyo followed Eva into the room but stopped at its carpeted threshold. 'Not a thing has changed.' She looked round in a deprecating way, and then stepped boldly forward.

Eva stood silently, one thought above all filling her head. Why has she come after all these years, when I thought of her as dead? Before her Kyo walked about, touching, appraising the small cramped room. Its frail oriental scale was unsuited to the Western adaption of carpets, chairs and tables. The reflective glass doors of the china cabinet mirrored Kyo's presence to her. Yes, Eva thought, the room was the same as when Kyo last saw it, except for the twenty years it contained.

Through those years Eva had continued to live on the hill, in charge of St Christopher's orphanage, and surrounded by the same neighbours. Some way further up the road resided the Englishman, Arthur John Wilcox. Far below, the fortress of the Coopers' house possessed the narrow sea road along the beach at Suma. From these predestined points upon the hill they consumed a com-mon view, of the Inland Sea of Japan and the town of Kobe on Osaka bay. They dissolved within the same sunset and watched the same unfolding day brim upon the sea. In a small house beside the orphanage Eva Kraig had lived all this time with her daughter, Akiko, adopted from the woman, Kyo Matsumoto. The years had passed between them smooth as glass, until this moment of Kyo's return.

And the thought of Akiko pressed dark and thick then in Eva's head. For she feared she knew why Kyo had come, all that

she would say. She was thankful Akiko had gone that morning, earlier than usual, across to the orphanage. Whatever the reason Kyo had come, Eva wished to absorb it alone.

‘Sit down,’ she suggested.

Kyo sat with one leg crossing the other. A backless shoe gaped from her foot, a blue vein traced her heel. Beneath the make-up her flesh had the bloodlessness of plants shut away from sun. For she spent her life within a nocturnal warren of bars. Eva knew. She slept through the day, a drained whisky glass beside a stale bed. That was the life she had chosen, of the bars and a night-time world.

Head on one side Kyo lit a cigarette, inhaling with narrowed eyes. She looked deeply at Eva a moment, as if choosing an instant to strike. And Eva waited, cold and fixed, stiff with the twenty years behind that held at their core fear of this moment she knew was about to come. Sometimes she had dreamed of it, and woken. But the child was always there beside her, sleeping, peaceful, safe. Kyo exhaled smoke in a soft whistled breath. It meandered up in gossamer strands through a ray of light. Heat overwhelmed the room already warmed by the bald odour of the cooking soup bones. Eva wished for strength to open the window. But she sat, apprehensive and tense on a high-backed chair, her eyes on the golden sphere of carpet that ended the ray of light. Within it a threadbare warp pushed through a flowered border. Eva kept her eyes there and did not look up. She waited for the words.

‘I want Akiko back.’

It was easier once she had heard them. She raised her head calmly, everything in her stilled. ‘She’s not yours to have back. You relinquished that claim. Easily, gratefully. Have you

forgotten? Is it convenient again to become her mother? You know I adopted her legally.'

She knew then that the words had been buried within her through all the years behind, waiting, guarding against this moment. She held her breath and the words reverberated on, filling the room and her head. From the window the shaft of light, like a pale laser beam, divided the space between them. Behind the dusty shifting ray Kyo appeared untouchable.

Eva stood up. She pulled wide the curtains in a rush and clatter of hooks and threw up the window. At once the sinister beam dissolved in sun and the dry smell of hot soil rose from the garden. Beyond the window Eva glimpsed the glassy surface of the sea and the dark shape of Awaji island. That morning the heat was still and oppressive, as if the sky pressed it flat upon the earth. Summer still spread a net over Autumn, refusing to relinquish it.

Eva turned to face Kyo, her back to the window, and saw the woman defenceless. Kyo shaded her eyes against the light, hardness peeled from her face like the skin of a grape on the soft naked flesh beneath. And Eva saw again Kyo's face on a night she remembered so well, smashed and mobile then with terror. On the night Eva found her, battered, abandoned, flung into a dirty frozen gutter. Then she had taken the girl in her arms, wiped the bruising and blood. Remembering, pictures surged up, one after another, tumbling into her mind. She pushed them down, to concentrate on Akiko.

Akiko. Her daughter. She could not think of her as less. She could not think of her as Kyo's child. Already she was twenty-two, years had melted quickly. Often, since the time the child first came to her, they had walked together on the gritty strip

of nearby beach, and Eva had seen their shadows mingled there in wet sand, holding hands. At her side the child's breath was almost her own, in frail shells they had listened for the sea. And at night the child's body, limp with sleep, hollowed her out with love. Akiko. Eva stiffened and looked coldly at Kyo's upturned face. Kyo was like bad flesh you cut away, or the rot of fallen fruit.

'I was ill ... I am ill ... it's bad. They told me they can't say anything. Maybe they'll cure me. I don't know. I can't think any more about it.' Kyo put a hand to her cheek. Eva saw fear and weariness, she saw the loneliness Kyo would never admit.

'I haven't lived in Japan for twenty years. I've come back because I'm ill.' The tone was defiant.

'Where were you all this time? Where did you work?' Eva asked defensively; she did not want to hear.

'Bangkok, Hong Kong, Taiwan. Bars, massage parlours, cabarets. Need you ask? Japanese girls are always in demand. I made good money.' Kyo shrugged. There were fine lines about the corners of her eyes.

'And you never came back to Japan?' Eva questioned, feeling suddenly tired, suddenly old. There was a weight behind her lids.

'Sometimes, for visits.' Kyo shrugged again.

'But you didn't think then of Akiko?' Eva controlled the anger replacing the first harsh shock.

'She was all right. I knew you would look after her.' Kyo brazened.

'What makes the difference now?' Eva kept her voice low. She remembered how Kyo's well-being had obsessed her long before, and felt a double anger. What a fool I am, she thought.

Why did I let her in? She must not be allowed to destroy us.

'I've told you, I'm ill. I can't work. I've no money. I'm still Akiko's mother, you can't change that.' Kyo uncrossed her legs and sat forward in her chair.

'There is no one else to help me. I've no other relatives left as you well know, no one else I can go to. What is to become of me?' She puffed hard at the cigarette, the butt now a limp grey worm on her lip. Eva stared at the stagnant smoke above the woman's head.

'What happened to all your money?' Her heart beat in her head, the words sat stale and furred in her mouth. She wondered if the whole charade was not some figment of a nightmare. She blinked and touched the plait of hair about her head, but Kyo was still before her.

'I spent it. There is nothing left. Somebody has to help me. You were always so kind ... I thought ... I have never forgotten ...' Eva tried not to hear the desperation.

'Where else can I turn to but Akiko and you? Akiko is old enough to earn a living. She must help me. There is no one else. No one.' Kyo lowered her voice suddenly and said the words persuasively, playfully almost, except for their careful rounding. Slyness passed in her face like a shadow, her gaze nakedly prospecting in the dead hot air of the room.

Eva held her eyes and saw in them only darkness and arithmetic. The room became tight about her. The odour of perfume and hot dust thickened. She spoke quickly.

'I'll get you some coffee.' The words sounded light and ridiculous.