

Daddyji

1972

I N WINTER, THE SKY IS BLUE AND HOSPITABLE, THE nights are frosty and starlit, the fields are left furrowed by the plow, and the air is filled with the call of partridges, the honking of wild geese overhead, and the languid creaking of Persian wheels as the bullocks turn them round and round to draw water from the wells. At the close of winter, Basant-Panchami—a festival honoring the god of work—arrives, and everyone celebrates it by wearing yellow clothes, flying yellow kites, and eating yellow sweetmeats; the fields become bright, first with the yellow of mustard flowers outlined by the feathery green of sugarcane, and later with maturing stands of wheat, barley, and tobacco. When the trees are loud with the buzz of bumblebees, it is time for the festival of Holi, celebrating the destruction of evil—when everyone's clothes are merrily splashed with red-tinted water. In summer, the earth is seared by hot, dry winds, the trees are stripped of their leaves and almost immediately clothed in blossoms, and the landscape is made rich with the crimson of cotton, the red of coral-tree flowers, and the scarlet of flame-of-the-forest. Then, while the mango groves echo with the crying of barbets and of Indian cuckoos, the heat of the sun, direct and relentless, bakes the plain, blanching everything except cactus and camel thorn. The rivers dry up, and dust storms swirl and sweep across the plain, turning it into a desert. Through the heat comes the cry of the brain-fever bird—"brain fever . . . brain fever"—and the

still, moonlit nights are streaked with dark formations of geese fleeing to the cool of the mountains. In the monsoon at the end of summer, the pied-crested cuckoo appears, riding the monsoon wind from East Africa. Black clouds boil up from the southwest. Explosions of lightning and rumbles of thunder rend the clouds, and rain pounds the land. The rivers overflow, fields become mires, and snakes crawl and wriggle in the mud. The earth smells sodden, and mosquitoes whine everywhere. Finally, the pale sun breaks through the clouds ("the marriage of the lion and the jackal," the children call this union of sun and cloud), the air becomes heavy with the sweet, rich fragrance of mangoes, and leaves and grass sprout anew. In the autumn, the rains subside, the mud recedes, the cotton is picked, and rice, millet, maize, and lentils are sown. Then it is winter once more.

It was in this fertile, brutal land, in the Punjab, up and down the rivers and along their canals, that the family tree of the Mehtas sent down its roots and spread.