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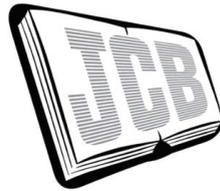
ASOCA

A Sutra



Asoca

by Irwin Allan Sealy



THE JCB PRIZE *FOR*
LITERATURE
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An exclusive extract from the
JCB Prize for Literature

CELEBRATING DISTINGUISHED FICTION BY INDIAN WRITERS



ONE

Gooseberries

‘A-*so*-ca! Put down that meat hook and get off of that stove!’

Mother talked funny but she was easily the beautifulest of the queens, so I hung the hook back up. But I didn’t swing back down till I had Alexander and his flunkeys running for their lives.

‘He’s shoving!’ Susima whined. ‘*And* he emptied the ash bucket over Ghasita!’

Old news, but I did it to show that he was my dog and if I wished to change his colour I had every right to.

‘Be a Maurya, baba,’ Susima’s mother said, ruffling his hair, and went on pricking gooseberries. She had good knees and I was a bit in love with her.

The kitchen courtyard swarmed with gardeners dumping gooseberries. ‘Oy!’ they’d shout and flirt as they collided with the sorting maids. Jam-making came after the midwinter bonfires and was taken seriously at the palace. Rows of cream-and-ochre preserving jars stood in readiness, glazed like soldiers on parade. I loved that uniform, and later I put my Camelteer guard in it, cream tunic and ochre stole. Baskets of gooseberries covered the yard, and more were being brought in every minute from the orchard by grinning gardeners. Gooseberries spilled from the baskets and went rolling across the clay floor. Susima overcame

his sulk enough to kick one back to me, but I was already taking the lids off the jars to make sure there were no centipedes trapped inside. When I saw he was trampling something I ran to join him and squashed one or two under my heel. Gooseberries squeak as they split, then die gaping. The floor was a mash of pale green fruit tagged with stalks and tiny leaves.

Mother was stirring a vat of brown cane syrup with a ladle seized from the cook whose job it was. Today the queens invaded the kitchen and stayed all day till the last jar was capped. Other royals were shucking cardamoms and pounding cinnamon. A black haze of peppercorns, roasted and crushed, hung in the air and made me cough. The cooks, brahmans to a man, curled their lips and retired to the Yard of Crows where they sunned themselves and yarned.

I ran to the pantry where last year's jam was stored, a route every prince knew blindfold. The last jar of the old season stood on the top shelf, out of reach. It was twice as big as me, a giant crock chockful of jam. I dragged a spice chest over, sprang onto it, and reached up. In my rush I overdid the pull. The great jar fell to the floor with an explosion that shattered the morning. I felt cold spikes enter my cheek and nose and smelt a sickly fermenting smell as I fell back. Centuries passed before I came to.

'His eyes were spared, thank every god!' Mother was saying as I woke up.

A bearded man with a phial of some yellow stuff was anointing my cheeks as he prepared to remove the spikes. The medicine stung and I roared freely. When I saw the pincers, I bellowed louder. Susima, watching, seemed about to join in.

'It's nothing, my little parrot,' Mother said. 'We'll be playing Eyelash in no time. Bags I first game!'

The bearded man fluttered a hand at the corner of my eye and must have removed a splinter with the other because it suddenly hurt. I began to wail.

'We'll have a bath together,' Mother whispered in my ear, 'and you can use my sandalwood soap.'

The doctor had never attended me before. I was a healthy child. He caught my eye and frowned and flapped his hand: 'Watch the butterfly!' Slowly he dipped it into his medical bag and produced—*TAN-TRI-YAN!*—a little clay chariot. I gave a pre-emptive sob. War toys I liked, but now I knew his game. Also, I realized I had an audience. A ring of royals, half-sisters and cousins and concubines' daughters had formed around us to watch the famous medicine man. My favourite was up front, her big hands folded, her probing eyes fixed on me. The servants stood back and marvelled from a distance. I didn't know it but I had single-handedly halted the annual gooseberry jamboree.

The doctor signalled for one of the glazed jars to be brought over. '*SHAKE IT!*' his black beard thundered.

The servant, shaking herself, obeyed. Something rattled in there. The company murmured. Ceremoniously the great man removed the ochre lid and had the woman turn the jar upside down. Out fell a rain of clay triangles, the very shards he had removed from my face. The watchers gasped. My girl picked up the sharpest and stared at me as at some kind of suffering saint.

'*SPIT!*' Blackbeard commanded.

I spat on them with venom. He replaced the lid and with both hands hurled the jar high in the air. It hung above the extracted bits, then fell with an ordinary crash, not the explosion of the great pantry jar.

Father marched in, his jaw working, always grinding away. The concern on his face was repeated with flourishes on the faces of his ministers. With them was Uncle K, his crow-black head tilting this way and that.

'What happened? We heard the bang all the way from the armoury.'

'It's as you see,' Mother bowed. She swallowed the betel juice she was holding. 'Your son is safe, and sorry.' She caught my eye. 'He's had a narrow escape.'

'Honestly—thunderclaps, monkeys scooting, women screeching! Talk about misrule! Have you any idea what's happening beyond the

gates? People are keeling over, dropping like flies. It's quieter than midwinter curfew—and you start up a war!

'But you know,' Uncle K intervenes, 'that—how would you say, *detonation?*—gives me an idea.' His eyes glittered with menace and he smiled an inward smile.

For once Father ignored him. He was overwrought—over me! Mother retold the story. I could see she was beginning to enjoy the telling. Susima's mother twisted her mouth and looked sideways. My girl gave me a long adoring look that said we were the only two in the room. She had slant eyes and a wide forehead that sweated like cool butter. She was already taller than Mother.

'Come along, Luscious,' her little follower said, dragging her off now the spectacle was over.

Father came up close. His arm sought out Susima as he listened to Mother's account. He was watching me fixedly in the way he had of looking just over my shoulder, and his gaze must have settled on the pillow because it grew hot there. He drew his firstborn to him and rubbed his back as if he were the injured one.

'You're all right,' he said at last, boxing Susima's chin. 'That's the main thing.'

Susima glowed. I hated him right then, though I saw he was not out to steal the show, or Father's heart. And looking back, at this great remove in time, I feel sure of his sympathy. He was, truth be told, the noblest of us all. He didn't lie or cheat or push and shove and scramble. But then, he didn't have to. He carried himself as if the crown were a settled thing.

You shouldn't, really.

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Irwin Allan Sealy's *Asoca* is one of ten books on the 2021 JCB Prize for Literature longlist.

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