

Day of Miracles

'Pray!' I had to shout it six times before Shem heard me. 'Why don't you pray? Maybe God will make it better!'

Kiss it better. Kiss it better. The words jeered inside my head. How could anything so terrible ever be put right? When Shem turned his face towards me, it was a rictus of hatred—and not just for me, not just for his wife, but for the God who had repaid his lifelong devotion with a dead daughter. I realized—with the icy, sinking terror of a drowning sinner—that zealous, righteous, smug, god-fearing Shem was finally adrift in a godless world.

'Pray!' I said again. 'God will make everything all right!'

Since I was lying on the hatch, I heard the ladder rattle underneath me. Someone had climbed up to find out what the noise was all about. Even when the heel of a hand thumped against the hatch, I did not roll clear.

Shem stared at me blankly. His face was the same bleak mask Kittim's had been when I first set eyes on him.

'Pray, brother! You're the Hand of God, aren't you? You can do anything!' I shouted.

My silly, eager face—teeth bared in a stupid grin—clearly angered Shem too much for him to look at me another moment. He broke away from the sight of Bashemath and me, turned . . . and walked directly into the low crossbeam. I heard his teeth clack together and the grunt of breath as he knocked himself out. In the same

second, I lifted the hatch by a fraction and pushed my mouth close to the crack.

'Fetch the baby!' I told whoever was standing on the ladder below me. 'Do it! Do it! Do it now!' The ladder creaked and there was a sound of feet thudding away through dirty straw; of animals flinching away from the runner. The commotion had made the animals uneasy, too. They were disturbed or excited by the scents and sounds of misery, the savour of death in the air. Somewhere in the dark, the skulking, slinking mink was sulking, for want of the meat it had killed. All this I sensed in the few moments before I dropped the hatch—forgetting to pull my fingers out of the crack.

Ham and Sarai saw Shem fall face-down on the floor. They let go of the curtain and moved towards the unmoving heap on the floor.

'He's praying!' I shouted at them. 'Shem says we've all got to pray! You too! Fall down! Close your eyes! Ask God for a miracle!'

Ham seemed half inclined to do it. But of course Sarai only gave me a sidelong look and wrinkled her nose. In a moment father and mother would push their way through the heavy folds of curtain and appear demanding an explanation. Why had I ever thought it could be done? Miracles are not made by trickery, are they?

Then a noise caught our ears that was different from any since the Flood began. Ham lifted his nose like a hunter scenting the air. Sarai turned around on the spot. Beyond the curtain, father cried out in tongues of ecstasy. Then the partitioning curtain bellied out ahead of a draught, and ashes from the fire scudded in among our bare feet. Father and mother had uncovered the door and gone out on to the open deck. I could hear the undersides of their callused feet brushing the boards like soft brooms. How could I hear such a tiny sound? How? Why had

even the animals stopped trampling to listen in alarm to this new sound?

Because it was the sound of silence.

The rain had stopped. No hiss or dull, fingertip-drumming of raindrops broke the unearthly quiet. Ham and Sarai fought their way past the curtain and followed mother and father out, wonderingly, into the pinkish light of a rainless dawn.

Still Shem lay pole-axed on the deck, the orange glimmer of firelight skittering over him like little triumphant demons robbing a fallen enemy. Bashemath watched him, no trace of emotion on her face. I told her, 'The rain has stopped, Bashemath!' But her eyes only drifted vaguely over me without a change of expression. She was impervious to good news.

Then the ladder rattled again, as someone climbed it—awkwardly, no hands free to climb quietly. I prised open the hatch again and there was Kittim. He was carrying his baby sister. Habit had made him obedient to every command, even mine.

Without question, he passed her up to me, but his hands would not detach themselves from her wrappers, and as I lifted the baby, I lifted the boy, too. His head and upper body rose into the living quarters. Bashemath's vacant eyes rested on him without registering the smallest surprise. Perhaps she thought he was part of a bad dream from which she might wake at any moment.

'She'll live now,' I whispered to Kittim. 'Be safe now.'

Then I tugged his baby sister out of his arms and gave her away to Bashemath. As for the dead one—what I did with her or how I did it, I don't recall.

When Shem came round, he found that God had poured Divine Powers into his head, paining and distorting his

skull, making his forehead bulge in a grazed swelling above his eyebrows. That is what God had done, yes. Entrusted Shem with the Power of Healing. He must have. Because, while lost in a trance of fiery ecstasy and unaware of his surroundings, Shem had miraculously restored to life his baby daughter.

He did not remember doing it, of course, but I was able to tell him the way of it. Hand-on-heart, I promised it was true. 'Don't you remember, Shem? You prayed and Adalya came back to life!'

And Bashemath did not tell him I was lying.

Bigger, stronger, and better nourished than the silent, jaundiced Adalya, *this* Adalya looked three months older. She fed at the breast with eager ferocity, fixing Bashemath with angry eyes. Bashemath said nothing at all—about the change in Adalya, about her painful, strenuous sucking, about the miracle that had 'restored her dead baby to life'. Bashemath simply returned the baby's gaze, rocking forward and back, forward and back, missing something soothing from her world, without realizing it was the gentle drum and hiss of falling rain.