



Desire of the Moth: a novel

Champa Bilwakesh

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Desire of the Moth: a novel Champa Bilwakesh

A fifteen-year-old widow runs across a bridge to catch a train bound for Trichi. Sowmya is running away to make sense of the events that had seized her body and her mind, and had ripped apart her world. She is determined to flee her destiny of numbing isolation within her community, the Brahmins of the Thanjavur district in South India. Her plans pivot when she meets a devadasi--an aging dancer--in her compartment. When the woman Mallika opens her drawstring bag and buys Sowmya her dinner, Sowmya recognizes what she needs to overcome her own condition, that of a young woman in possession of a thin cotton sari, a head shorn clean, and little else. She asks Mallika how she too can achieve that kind of power--the power to open a bag and pull out money. Thus begins Sowmya's transformation in the city by the sea, Madras, which is in the grip of its own political and social changes while India is struggling to seize its independence from the imperial British raj. Here she learns the beauty of dance from Mallika, and the sweetness and agony of falling in love with a married man. The cinema brings unimagined opportunities and all the power and riches that she could desire, but it also consumes her relentlessly. When a letter arrives, Sowmya begins her quest to regain everything that had been lost when she once lived in that small village tucked into a little bend of the Kaveri River.

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