

# **The Jungle Stories**

## NightDuty

331, Gulmohar Drive. The Shankars' house is in semi darkness, the surreal light from a lamp in the living room draws out elongated shadows against the curtains behind which a table and chair stand in solemn duty, waiting for somebody to sit down and write a few words. I find it difficult to be that person, the one who will write, pen down memories that are hard to recall, harder still to digest. And yet, as I watch the shadows lengthening on the curtains, I shudder to possess the mind that does not forget.

Gulmohar Drive owes its name to the trees that line the road leading to this peaceful colony of bungalows and luxury apartments. Cars are tucked away behind garage doors camouflaged by shrubs and flowering plants, gates shut against invaders, *raddiwalas*, vegetable vendors, old women shouting out names of fishes for the day, and ubiquitous salesmen who appear uninvited. Watchmen on the prowl create an island of security for residents, and car horns sound muted behind the heavy drapes that forbid any peek into elegant drawing rooms.

The Shankars' drawing room opens out on to a huge terrace on faux bamboo stilts, shrouded with creepers and fragrant blossoms. The door doesn't open now, not even to let in the breeze that hovers hesitantly on the plants and ornate flower stands. Mrs. Shankar cannot stand the breeze and stuffs her ears against it to retire into her room before evening prayers. Mr. Shankar sits in his room, the armchair back eroded with the weight of his body against it, a book in hand, feet up on a foot stool, eyes on the trees outside lace curtains fluttering on the window.

I wander along the winding lanes of the colony, sucking in gulps of air, trying to clear cobwebs from my brain, erasing memories that don't listen to persuasion, and waiting to return home, opposite The Shankars'. From my room I can see Mrs. Shankar's barricaded windows and Mr. Shankar's effervescent white curtains made heavy with too much breeze. But I cannot see Dayita. Her windows shut, balcony door shut, world shut against prying eyes and ears, darkened to prevent the stray light from slanting down on to her bed, locked up to keep out meddlesome hands that won't leave things as they are. I can't see Dayita's shadows in that room moving about from wardrobe to bed, bathroom

to dressing table, picking up and putting back exquisite things that made her pretty lips pout brown, her long hair shine with gloss, her dusky skin radiant with health and care. Her shadows don't leave me free.

Late in the evening I curl my fingers over and around the brass knocker on The Shankars' door, breathing slowly, afraid to disturb the very air in which I stand suspended, motionless, fingers still aching to knock but only caressing the brass, cold to my warm touch. Are those sounds I hear from deep within the house those of breathing, living human beings? It is night, but not late enough for them to retire. What do I do? The brass rings hollow in my ears, the wood on the door is thick and may muffle the sound but the door opens almost instantaneously, taking me unawares. What do I say? It is only Kanak, their maid, standing still, expecting me to speak. I can't; the words cleave in my throat, on my parched tongue, I only want to return and end up asking for a glass of water. Kanak stares quizzically and goes inside, the door wide open, welcoming me into the house, the house I cannot step into; perhaps the strong wind outside will push me in through flimsy curtains barring my view, across a polished stretch of floor with its chessboard like tiles and I will find myself in Dayita's room. Kanak appears with a crystal glass on a silver tray and I gulp down the water.

“Konok, ke okhane?”

Who's there? What would Kanak say? But the question doesn't wait for an answer. Mr. Shankar appears, book in hand, grey silk kurta crumpled at the lap, eyes grim behind thin spectacles, hair ruffled by a hand that constantly brushes through it, pushing back invisible stray hair from the high temple. He sees me and stops. Or do I stop on my way into his house? What am I doing there, gaping at the door? The silence stretches out between us, holding us in thrall, taut as a line between me and Mr. Shankar, a line neither he nor I pull at or cross. I leave with the sound of the door being shut behind me.

In the confines of my room at midnight I wait, on duty, for a horn to sound, a knock, a telephone call, something that will give me a reason to return to that house I left earlier in the night. I dose off in my chair, waiting, and see her in my dreams, fresh from her bath, in the balcony of her room, smiling, holding out her cup of frothing coffee in a gesture that made my blood run warm into my thoughts. I remember going out with her

to the coffee house in the next lane, poring over coffee and books, arguing over the paintings hanging from the pastel walls, buying only that which I liked most. I see her at my door, beguiling smile in place, hair caught in a loose bun that threatens to come loose any moment, perhaps only waiting for my touch to bring it down all over my face and neck and I reach out to touch it, grasping air instead. That wakes me up and takes me outside the house again, along dark and deserted lanes.

I get a phone call in the morning but not the one I am waiting for. Mr. Shankar calls me over and I go, into the sanctum sanctorum. Dayita's room. Her father sits there, book in hand, and I glance at the cover, Friedman's *The World is Flat*. I want to ask whether he has read it already and whether I could borrow it but again, the cleaving and parching. I look for a place to sit and stand by a barred window wondering where Mrs. Shankar is sitting.

“What time did you leave that evening?”

His question takes me unawares, drawing me out from ages of silence and I take time to speak.

“Er, ... I ... I must have left at 11.00.”

“Must have?”

“No, I mean, I left at 11.00.”

I find words and they do not stick to my palate. I sit down calmly on the window sill, brushing aside the yellow and maroon curtain that curled up in a heap on it.

“And she?”

“Sorry?”

“I asked what time she left.”

“It was around 6.30.”

“Why didn't you leave then?”

Why indeed! Would he understand? His life's energy was spent on managing his business, not answerable to anybody, his time his own. Would he understand why I did not leave office with her?

“Sir, I had work.”

“When don't you?”

“I beg your pardon!”

He gets up in reply to my indignation and walks away. Kanak slips into the room, a glass of juice on the silver tray and finds me touching the bed, the mirror, the chest of drawers on which a pile of books gathers dust.

“Please! No!”

I spin around in the semi darkness to see the bewilderment on her face.

“What happened?”

“Please sir, don't touch, sir.”

“Why?” Why was I pushing this? Didn't I guess?

She shakes her head, to the right, to the left, almost magnetic in its appeal. “Not allowed sir.”

I walk out of the room, anger welling up inside and sit down on the steps, willing the tears to come but choking on them all the while. The watchman, walking up the steps, halts, “All okay sir?”

“Ye....s, ye....s..s.”

I walk away, breathing hard in the open air outside. The Shankars' is a ghost house mourning a ghost that doesn't exist. It is Sunday and I have a terrible urge to go to office, relive everything that happened, talk to people, but I walk away once again from what I want to do. Walk into an empty house and sleep through the morning. In the late afternoon's insistent light my head feels heavy, a hundred bees buzz in it, and my stomach churns. All it has had for the last 24 hours is a cup of coffee and some biscuits. It forces me to get active, drive away the inertia of the past hours and plunge headlong into

the kitchen, rummaging for food and provisions. A tin of toffees on the counter, the last Maxim's tin we bought together, before the egg shaped cask drove us crazy. We wanted one each and she settled for the house shaped container at last while I got the egg, the last piece in the departmental store and I want to return there but my feet are too heavy.

Monday morning. The office swarms and I try to crawl in unseen but nobody will let me. What happened? The boss is very upset. He's sent people to find out. The police were here too. My head jerks up at that.

Police? Why?

Come on, who else do you expect?

I expect Dayita.

My table's a mess and I look around for an explanation. Across the aisle, Preeti locks eyes with me and shrugs, attempting to smile but turning away instead. Everybody's confused, the hush is loud and I collapse on my chair, ringing the buzzer for a cup of coffee but when it comes it sings my throat and I want to throw up all of a sudden. I leave to go and the boss calls for me.

Where were you? Who did she go with? The official driver? So where is she?

The driver's here.

Great! Call him please. He alone knows what happened.

I see the morning's paper open on his sprawling table and my eyes scan the bold print, **Mob on the Rampage in Protest**. I wonder what they were protesting and want to take up the paper, read it without a worry in the world. Sitting in the boss's cabin, I look around but know that he's watching me. Humbug. Reminds me of the advertisement where the smart guy spells out his boss' name, savouring each syllable and its derogatory equivalent.

“So, you guys don't want people like us in your state?”

What the heck is he talking about? At this time? She is not from this state, so what is he insinuating? I sit up straight. “What did you say, sir?”

“There was a riot like situation yesterday. Pro and anti outsiders. Didn’t you read the papers?”

I run out of the office; breathless, I reach the police chowki at the end of the street. Her name’s not there. What was I looking for? Walking back to the office, I know I’ll be fired but the boss calls me back in and apologises, “I didn’t mean you, but in general.”

“Sir, where’s the driver? Who was it?”

Ravi walks in with fear swimming in his eyes, “Sir, not I. I couldn’t go, Adarsh went.”

“Where’s he?”

“Don’t know. The cab’s not back.”

“Daft. Call the police. Trace the cab. Talk to the agency.”

Could Ravi do all that?

“Why didn’t you go?”

He turns to me. “Sir, my wife was sick. Went home.”

The receptionist calls the cab agency. The weekend was a dead loss but everybody knows Dayita is missing from our life.

Why didn’t they call the guys earlier?

Were they waiting for me to bring them news?

When aren’t they too busy for such things?

Whirling, twisting thoughts crowd my beleaguered mind; the agency calls back. The cab is missing but the search party is out. In this sprawling city, I wonder where they will look for it. Dayita went alone that evening, the usual co-passengers having left for the weekend trip back home. And I let her go alone, too busy to accompany her through the unexpected intricacies of this throbbing city. My thoughts seem to follow an unsuspected trajectory and I catch myself at it. Why am I thinking all this? Where was she?

The street outside the colony is quiet, too quiet. None of the usual cabs with their uniformed drivers waiting for the call centre guys, none of the hawkers trying to get through the manned gates, only a couple of stray dogs yelp at me as I get out of the office car and head home. The Shankars' is in near-darkness again. I run up the stairs to my house and slump in the couch behind the door. The phone rings into my thoughts; Mrs. Shankar. I jump at the voice, soft, gentle, unexpected, unheard since that day. What does she want with me?

“Am I disturbing you?”

“No.”

“Can you come over?”

“Now?”

“If possible.”

I run down the stairs, the lift suffocates me. She stands by the window that overlooks my house; how often has she stood there and watched me smile at Dayita?

“Have you eaten yet?”

“I'm not hungry.”

She looks at Kanak who stands by the bed and Kanak leaves the room. I know the meaning of the look they exchange but I refuse to eat whatever she brings. Where is Mr. Shankar? Dayita once told me the name Shankar wasn't theirs but bestowed on her ancestors by a king. I was curious about the story but never found out the details. Should I ask about it now? Kanak enters the room and places a plate of *parathas* and potato curry before me. In a small silver bowl, I see two rasgullas swimming in syrup, in the glass on the tray, I can see the water limpid and clear. But around me, in this room, this house, all I see is gloom.

“Why did you call me?”

“Where is she?”

Where is she? Am I supposed to have all the answers? On the verge of walking out again, I sit down and take up the glass of water. The water runs down my throat but I am still thirsty.

“I don’t know.”

“Your office?”

“No clue.”

“Did she work for this?”

I don’t know what she’s talking about and reach for the jug of water.

“Did you read the papers today?”

“No.”

Her look was murder.

“They found a dead body near the old saw mill. Raped.”

I sink into the down on the four poster bed, sink to no particular depth and can’t find the strength to rise again.

“So?”

“No. I was just thinking.”

“And you think it could be Dayita?”

Can she hear the anger in my voice? Is she a mother thinking in this manner?

“Can you check it out?”

I sink again but this time hold on to one of the braided wooden supports that hold up the four corners of the bed.

“I won’t.”

“Why?”

“I don’t think it is she.”

Does anybody smile like this?

“What you think doesn’t matter anymore. We have to try everything. Go check it out, her father won’t.”

“There were riots in the city on Friday.”

Did I actually say this?

I could hear the silence whirring around in the room, hanging on to the cream fan blades, swishing through the air conditioner vents, clinging to the drapes, settling down around us.

“We live in a jungle, Dev. Did she know that day she would never return?”

“Why are you thinking in this negative manner?”

“In my small town, girls could roam about free of fear. Here, there are too many things to harm them. Rape, arson, robbery, kidnapping, and now the riots. Who knows what they did to her? The jungle has got to her, you understand Dev?”

I don’t understand. I don’t want to understand her negative talk. I don’t want to understand anything she says this night. Dayita left office that evening and did not return. She is eccentric enough to go away without informing anybody. Don’t her parents understand her? Isn’t that why I took to her that evening when she jumped into the sea and came back drenched and shivering, but laughing and hugging her wet body, her clothes clinging to her, her long hair wrapped around her middle and hips. I loved her grit in the face of the storm gathering over the coastline, I who was afraid to swim.

“Dev?”

She points to the food lying untouched on the table but I don’t want to eat, I have things to do, her talk has made me restless and the night beckons me. I am on duty again tonight, waiting for a call. Outside their house, the air is crisp, street lights glow through Gulmohar trees and cast their weird shadows on the road below, on me as I walk under them. Where do I begin my search?

Office. 8.00 a.m. Nobody around. I walk over to Dayita’s table and sift through her belongings. Surprised that the police didn’t touch these. With the dead increasing in number every day, will they look for an ordinary girl like her? Jayesh and Richa. The

photograph is in sepia tones but capture the recent past, just before they got married. I turn it over, *Hi Dayita. Will meet you on the 18<sup>th</sup> at Jojo's. Flying to Canada on the 19<sup>th</sup>.* My heart leaps. Jojo's? How come she didn't tell me about this? But Jojo's is in the heart of .... Oh, my God! Images of the breakage and mayhem flash across my mind. Jojo's. An instant target for killjoys. There are no autos outside in this nippy morning air, few buses and no hawkers. Jojo's is far and my mind races with unthought-of miseries.

The place is a wreck, a huge red circle shuts out curious feet and I hover on its edges. When blood flows recklessly, its stains are difficult to wipe. I can't identify Dayita's blood in the coagulation there. Richa's phone does not ring. Mine does. Office. My voice freezes on the phone and I sit in the car, buckling the seat belt automatically, my hands zombies in their own right. Ronny was literally shouting into the phone and my ears were deaf to his pleas. How could I reach so soon?

The office is a mess of people but I see only Mrs. Shankar there, sitting alone at a table, her velvet pouch hanging limp from one wrist, her hair in a bun at her nape coiled in strand after tense strand reinforced by a net. I see her staring out of the window, in this room there is no breeze, only the hum of the air conditioner, and an inactive ceiling fan installed long ago when the city was cooler. I move towards her but dash against Ronny, his hair a honeycomb as always, his proximity reminding me of incense burnt in temples, his voice pulling me out of my reverie.

"They found a charred cab."

"So?"

"So? They think it could be Dayita's. Her mom's here."

"Has she identified anything?"

"Nothing."

"Forget it. What are you guys up to Ron? You think she's lying in some charred cab waiting to be found?"

"Dev? You okay?"

Bloody guy. Inane questions. So typical of this office.

Mrs. Shankar turns towards me, “Dev?” Her whispered entreaty catches at my jugular and I swallow hard, pulling her up and away from that room where they have imprisoned her thoughts. She tugs at my sleeve, when I look down at her I see the unshed tears glistening in her eyes and a strange thought catches my fancy in that grim moment, why isn’t she called Meenakshi? The question shudders through my mind when I think of the same name for Dayita. Her limpid large eyes always brought the name to my mind. We walk out to my car outside ignoring my shouting colleagues behind me, shouting for they know not what but for a brief moment my legs tremble, halting me in my determined stride. She holds my hand, her grip firm, warm, gentle, and I don’t look forward to meeting her husband in that forsaken house he hides in.

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First the riots and then bomb blasts. The city heaves in violence, wave upon wave crashes in on unsuspecting crowds in shops, markets, malls, and theatres. The first news was only a signal, what follows is hell on earth and we wallow in this hell. I move into the Shankars’, still waiting at night, on duty, waiting for a phone call, mail, SMS, or even a knock. I know that as soon as I shut my eyes in the sleep-benumbed hours of the night, Mrs. Shankar is on call, waiting. I see her once at the door of the guest room where I sleep, staring at me, and I watch her through half closed eyes, waiting for the presence to go. She lingers, half touching the clothes that I wore to office, the heavy wooden door, leans against the lintel, then disappears into the dark interiors of her house to wait. Do those clothes bring her whiffs of the office her daughter disappeared from?

A month and a half, no call, no news, no SMS, no mail. Life drags on and I return to my own house, away from the stifling presence of a mourning mother and ghostly father. I apply for a new job in the meanwhile, holding on in the wait-out period till I shift to a new workplace sans the memories and callousness that haunts me here. A new recruit occupies Dayita’s chair.

“Sir, why not wait for some more time? In case she returns from wherever she is?”

“Dev, that’s the humanitarian way of doing things. In this office, we need to get moving for now.”

“Still.”

“Keep emotion and reason apart when you enter the workplace, young man. Even if she returns, we don’t know whether she will be in a position to work immediately or at all.”

I keep my reason with me and emotion in his cabin and call my job consultant for that offer he still has for me. The pay is a notch lower but I want my reason to win this time.

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## The Washing

The two pinpricks of light saw Sona before she saw them. When she finally did, they moved away, knowing a human passed. She saw them before entering the forest, took a different route, and kept walking, away from those two points, her bundle swaying at her hip, glad to have left her anklets at home. The silver anklets in the afternoon *haat* still sparkled in her mind as she continued to walk, her black, thick plait a lash on her back and around her hips. Before entering the forest she had tied it up into a bun, afraid the men loitering at the gate would use it to their advantage; she left them behind near the gate, by the broken down canter that took visitors into the forest. It was late, the darkness gathered around her in folds and the light points disappeared. Hari would be angry with her for staying out late. Beyond the red soil path she walked on, she had to cross the trickle that would be a raging river in the rains. The eyes she saw glowing through the trees made her feel at home, away from the lewd looks of those men standing with their hands thrust obscenely into their pockets, their hair oiled slick, their moustache dripping lust. She left the hum of the Sunday *haat* far behind as she sprinted across the last few yards, anxious to be with the children, silently cursing herself for staying out late.

The village lay at the other end of the forest, away from prying eyes. On dark nights, villagers could hear the sound of trees crashing. They did not venture out to check, trees would fall when their time was over, who were they to stop the process? Sona’s mud house with its clean floors and vermilion-and-mustard drawings on the walls was right in the centre of the village Peepliya, deriving its name from the only Peepul that

spread its branches near the village pond. When she reached her house and pushed open the rickety bamboo gate, she saw her husband standing against the lamplight that shone from inside the hut. She could see his sinewy arms held akimbo, *lungi* billowing in the breeze, *beedi* glowing in the dark. Running the last few steps, she almost fell against him, noticing how he seemed to wake from a reverie, and stumbled into the house. The children were playing on the floor, dirty and disheveled; she half dragged them to the pot of water outside and washed their faces and hands before laying out their surprise spread—savouries of various colours, rattles for her five year old son, and a new pink and green frock for her eight year old daughter. She fed them quickly, guilt adding to her speed, talking incessantly so that they would forget she had been away so long. Hari still stood outside, smoking his beedi. The wind brought in the long, lazy, low growl into their hut, and then, quietness. The silence of the forest crept into their house slowly; sleep came early in this part of the world in the confines of trees and bushes with the river’s lulling trickle nearby. When the children slept, she went outside and stood beside her husband, trying to sense his silence; was it anger with her or an unknown thought that made her feel scared and uncertain?

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Mornings in the village were fresh and innocent. Sona finished her morning chores and kitchen work before the children woke up, before Hari returned with wood, and the women collected at the huge pond to wash and clean, gossip and joke. When Hari brought the wood, she went back to the pond to meet Bishni, a morning ritual since the time she came to the village and Bishni taught her to recognize snakes, animal and bird sounds, flowers and trees. She laughed at Sona’s fear of snakes, but that morning she didn’t laugh when Sona stepped back at the sight of the green snake gliding into the hole under the peepul tree. Her grimness reminded Sona of Hari’s silence and she clutched at Bishni’s saree, looking deep into her eyes, scanning their depths to find some sign of anger or anxiety. Bishni looked away and dipped her urn into the pond’s clear water. The gurgling sound irritated Sona and she turned away to wash her face and feet in the cool water.

“You don’t know anything?”

“What? Last night he wouldn’t talk, now you’re quiet.”

“You were away yesterday, prancing around in the *haat*.”

“I go every Sunday. What’s wrong this time?”

“The forest *babus* came. We have to go away.”

Sona stared blankly at her friend, unable to comprehend.

“Go where? Why?”

“They said we are destroying the forest and its animals.”

“Animals? How?”

“I don’t know.”

“Go to another forest?”

Bishni was almost harsh, “We can’t stay in any forest.”

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Hari left home early to water the fields. He had good bullocks and when the river ran full, water was not a problem. He loved his life in the forest but fear clawed itself into his mind. He saw the forest department people leave Lakhi’s house two evenings ago and asked Lakhi about it. Their weekly gift of chickens and herbs had failed and they could no longer live on their land in the forest. They met the village headman.

What would they do without the land they tilled for so many years?

Didn’t they have the right to stay on their own land?

The headman was old and the lines on his forehead screamed helplessness.

Weren’t they cutting down trees and putting animals at risk?

Hari and Lakhi were angry. Didn’t they take care of the trees; didn’t they save the leopard last summer from the trap he fell into; didn’t they use plants and herbs to make medicines and oil?

The headman had only one answer—they had to leave. The *goment* was taking up the forest. “My grandfather had to leave his land, Hariya; that was when the *gora log*

were here. Took our land and made us work for them. Grandfather ran away and came here.”

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Sona sat on the steps leading to the pond, feet dangling in water, when Hari called out to her. Standing under the Peepul that gave its name to this village, Peepliya, he looked angry and upset. She ran up the steps and stood before him, chest heaving, hands on her waist, eyes flashing. “What?” Hari could not remember seeing her thus, he pulled her away towards their hut, sat her down on the cow dung cleaned stoop and repeated the news Bishni gave her.

“Have to listen to them?”

“Else we’ll be thrown out.”

“How can they? This is our land, our house. How can they throw us out?”

“Be calm and listen to me. We have to go. We can go to the land on Tori *pahad* or to the city. We’ll go to the city.”

“Why?”

“Tori has no water, it’s rocky. What’ll we do there?”

“What’ll we do in the city?”

“I’ll find work.”

Sona walked among the trees in the afternoon, touching them, waiting for the occasional deer to pass, cocking her ears for the distant growl, or the quick rustle of a snake. Hari’s father lived in the jungle and nobody asked them to leave. She thought of their crops, land, and their basket weaving and wanted to scream but couldn’t. Neither could she sit back.

On Sunday, she sold the last few baskets at the *haat* and went straight to Kishen Singh’s office. Kishen Singh was a big man, trucks brought wood to his office, people from the towns bought the wood, police men and forest guards had tea with him. He was always gentle and kind and kept his big box of money in a locker with a gun by his side. His smooth face had weathered many storms; he knew about everything that happened in

these areas and so when Sona entered his office, Kishen Singh's heart melted. "I know re Sonaaa. I am talking to everybody, asking them not to leave, to fight. But your men are afraid re, afraid for the children and women."

"Afraid? But I am not afraid Kishen ji."

"So what? The others are. Go ask Bishni, she has agreed to leave, go to Tori."

"Why are they afraid?"

'Are re Sonaaa, don't you know? In Karimpur village they burnt down the huts when the villagers refused to leave. Tore up the crops. What will you do when they come?'

Sona watched the wisps of hair in Kishen Singh's moustache flutter under the ceiling fan, the only ceiling fan in the locality. She walked away from Kishen Singh's office in the *haat*, confused, and saw other villagers huddled together, whispering, cowed down; the *haat* was no longer a throbbing lifeline to happiness, it seemed to be heavy with doubt and fear. When she returned to the village, there was an eerie calm she couldn't understand. An unknown fear gripped her as she hurried towards her house; all along the way she saw huts destroyed, gardens trampled and plants uprooted, and to her horror, Bishni's cows slaughtered in front of her house. Forgetting her own fears, she ran into Bishni's house and found her sitting lifeless on a cot. The forest people had sent their men to tell them to leave. Bishni stood up to them.

Walking back to her house, Sona decided to fight. Hari would not.

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Most of the villagers left for Tori *pahad*, determined to stay close to the forest. Hari would not listen to Sona's pleas to follow them. No water or fertile soil, what would they do there, break stones? Till when? His anger clamped down on Sona's mind and she packed quietly, sullenly. He decided to leave early to look for a job and place; Bishni's husband Dilip would escort her to the city when he called for them.

Sona disappeared from home the morning Hari had to leave. He searched everywhere but couldn't find her. In the stifling heat of the afternoon, he went to the mangrove where their temple stood. She stooped before a mound, scattering petals and

leaves on it, oblivious to her surroundings or perhaps immersed in it. Hari rushed to her side and stopped short when she turned towards him.

“What is this?”

The teardrops at the edges of her large eyes trickled down her dark cheeks. Gathering herself at his chest, she whispered, “I made a mound for the dead.”

He held his wife away from his chest and scanned her face, wiping the tears collected at her chin, “Which dead?”

“Our house and life.”

He reeled from the shock but held his ground. She stuffed a bundle of dried leaves tied with a twine into his hands, “Keep these for fever.” Drawing her close to him, he walked back to their house. Later, she went with him to the edge of the jungle, where the gate opened out to the world outside, where the canters waited with their visitors, and muttered, “We’ll get our land back.”

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The last water droplet swung out of the green tablecloth, the wrinkles along its edges sprang back to life, and Sona watched the cloth slowly get back into shape. She scratched her head with a weary finger, a trail of water ran down her hardened wrist, down to her elbow held angularly away from her body, and toppled on to the floor. She wondered if her daughter had returned from school and her eyes melted into the distant hills, a hazy undulation against the sky. Leaning momentarily against the railing, she shut her eyes and inhaled deeply, these few moments before the rest of the work caught up with her hummed with the memories of her past and a deep nostalgia swept over her very being; it jangled in her mind simultaneously with the ringing of the doorbell.

The man’s eyes bulged and the cylinder by his side loomed as she peeped through the eye hole. Inserting the safety latch in place as instructed by the memsahib, she opened the door; the man replaced the empty cylinder by the door outside with a new one and entered the lift. “Don’t open the door till he has left.” Sona remembered the injunction and waited till she saw the man disappear into the lift, heard its hum as it descended, then opened the door to lug the heavy red thing inside. She often thought of the life she had

left behind and the one she had been forced to lead, cleaning other people's dirty clothes, vessels, bathrooms, and houses. The sounds of beasts were replaced by vehicles and their constant clamour, the trees with dusty streets and crowds, the wide spaces with shacks where even talking to her husband had to be in hushed tones.

Sona finished her work in the evening and headed home, over a dirty drain that separated the street from the hutments. She had paved the ground in her front of her hut with cow dung and was delighted to see the fresh design on it made with coloured rice powder. Her daughter, Rupa, had grown up in the past two years and tried to replace her mother in her many chores, but Sona wouldn't let her work as a maid, so she went to school. When she pushed open the plastic sheet that hung at the door to her hut, she saw Hari playing with Vishnu, but Rupa was nowhere in sight.

“She's left for her class.”

“Without food?”

“I gave her tea and a bun.”

Sona smiled at him, its beauty filled his heart with happiness. There was something in this man who shunned drinks unlike others in the slum, there was something in the way he would pinch money and get tiny delights for the children and her, like the sweet bun today. She sat on her haunches in front of him and said, “You're home early today. Let's go somewhere.”

“Where?”

“Somewhere, away from this place.” She wrinkled her nose in distaste. She still remembered the first day she saw her new home, the horror and pain she felt at the thought of the trees and rivers, ponds and animals and the dirty, worn out place where huts were made of tin and plastic, drains full of dirty, murky filth, where children ran about naked and unkempt, where women stood at the community tap and fought with one another, and men returned from work drunk, dragged to their huts by their women and children.

Hari hitched up his trousers and said, “Chalo. Let's go to the mela.”

“Hari! Oh, Hariya!”

Sona jumped at the sound that echoed with the whisper of trees and gurgle of rivers; she ran out of the hut, smiling even before she saw the voice. Dilip, Bishni and their kids. The next two days were a flurry of joy, a blur of tears and holiday from work; of course the memsahib nagged and complained but Sona's time was hers, sometime at least. When Dilip and Bishni left, the house seemed unbearable. The slumlord would return the next day for rent and Sona knew it would be difficult to carry on. They had to buy wood, vegetables, oil, ..... The little money Hari got from the forest department was long over. Memsahib's husband said the *goment* had cheated them but she wouldn't tell Hari about it for the husband reminded her of Kishen Singh, and after all, Hari had found a job, while many others died on that hill, breaking stones, stung by scorpions, bitten by snakes, taken away by the beasts when the men wandered into unknown areas in the forest. She heard all that from Bishni, but Bishni wouldn't budge from the hill; the villagers were planning to meet the *forest minister* who was to visit the forest with family, to stay in the beautiful house above the river where it left the forest and jumped down the cliff. She also knew the villagers would be stopped at the gates.

Sona went back to her work. The memsahib was irritated, having had to wash and clean in her absence. Now she threatened to replace her if she took leave again, but threatening wasn't enough to douse her irritation. "Didn't you see this stain on sahib's shirt? Clean up the whole house properly after I leave. There is dust everywhere, don't know why I pay you." She threw down the dirty clothes into the bucket and stomped out of the house. The woman in the next flat was kind, she sent clothes and books for the children and Sona didn't mind working for her, but this woman could bring the roof down with her voice.

After she left, Sona went into the bedroom to clean it up. As she bent low over the clothes piled on the bed, something nudged her from behind. Not expecting anybody in the house, she thought it was a ghost and froze for a moment. But the touch came again, at her exposed back, just below the blouse. This time she whirled around and caught his hand. Memsahib's husband. He was surprised at her strength and slowly let go, but the threat loomed in his eyes and Sona thought of the sickle she used to carry in the fields. He saw the look in her eyes and stepped back; he knew better than to pursue his prey, but desire surged through his veins.

Her day was spoilt; her pride hurt once again at the reprimand, the sound of the memsahib's shoes as she stomped out of the house, above all, by her failure to wash well. The village brook and its hard rocks were good for washing and her children never wore dirty clothes. She thought of the way the women laughed at their washing, exchanging jokes they wouldn't share before their men but made at their expense. She started laughing at a joke and remembered how laughter had made Bishni's face wrinkle up and her eyes twinkle with unshed tears. Sona laughed, alone in the house again, her washing piled up, and as the tap spewed water into the bucket, she sat back on the wet floor and cried.

Hari was home early again and Sona looked at him quizzically before going out with the utensils to wash. She hated the washing here with its forever leaking tap and slimy floor. The children did all their washing and cleaning there and on windy days she feared for her life, the rocks that held the roofs down could be blown off the plastic sheets right on to her head. With one eye on those jagged pieces, she would hitch up her sari and quickly finish washing. But today she forgot to look at the roofs wondering why Hari came home early every evening. She couldn't ask him because it would irritate him, he was always irritated these days and she had little energy to argue with him.

And so, the days carried on, blurring into one another.

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“Shona, Shona ...aa.., there you are.” .... Pushpa slumped before her, huffing, eyes dilated, brow sweat-splattered, hair hastily coiled up. She reached out and clutched Sona's wrist, panting, unable to speak. Pushpa the vegetable seller was always full of news.

“Pushpa! What happened?”

“Didn't you hear?”

“What?”

“Have to go.”

“Where do you have to go, Pushpa?”

“*Mooncipal* will break our houses.”

With the wind stuck in her throat, Sona wiped her hand on her sari, picking up the pots and pans in a hurry, barely listening to Pushpa’s chatter. Hari’s quietness was a pain in her chest as she ran to him, pushing at his shoulder in a frenzy she couldn’t control. Her body was shaking.

“Have to leave this place?”

Hari stood up, turned away from her and lit his beedi; she snatched it away and screamed, “Tell me first. Why?”

“Can’t stay here, not allowed.”

“Not allowed? Again?”

Hari’s job as a watchman was for an employer who kept a gun across his table. The gun scared Hari; he had seen such things in the hands of men prowling the roads at night, peeping through the colony gates, laughing raucously, men like the ones who entered the forest, prowling, waiting for the kill. A friendly forest guard once told him how such men killed the forest animals. When his employer spoke out in his booming voice, he listened carefully, an eye on the gun. Now he told his wife what the big man said. The road was too narrow and had to be widened, a new building was coming up at the end of the road and there would be more people and vehicles. Space was needed. With the blood boiling in her ears, Sona entered the shack and started flinging their things into a sack, quietly, furiously, maniacally.

“We don’t have to leave today. Sona? Sona!”

His shout fell on deaf ears. She wanted an explanation. She wouldn’t move again. But she wouldn’t speak, fear gnawed at her, wrapping its hard fingers around her windpipe, choking the anger; she wouldn’t speak to this man who forced her to leave their jungle and enter this place, a jungle of houses, filth, people and humiliation, where nobody knew one another, where women would fight and hurl abuse, where memsahibs would fling dirty clothes for washing, where every day was a series of buckets filled with soapy water and basins full of stinking dishes that made the bile rise in her throat and her hands hard and red. She would not live there to be shunted away again. Hari let her finish

packing, then held her in his arms, rocking her, the smell of his sweat a reassurance in her senses, but she wouldn't trust him. Pushing at his chest, she turned around, "You were afraid to be thrown out of the jungle, what now?"

"We'll find another place."

Her screamed response rang in his ears as he walked out parting the plastic sheet at the door. She was behaving erratically. Why should leaving this ugly place make her so angry? His employer said something more that Hari wouldn't share with Sona. The people in the colonies didn't want the *jhopdi walas* who created filth and taught their children bad words. Sona would kill Rupa and Vishnu if they used dirty words, but the little boy of house number 8 gave a *gaali* in English to his friend and the families fought endlessly afterwards. He was in no mood for Sona's screams and sat outside under a huge peepul tree that reminded him of home, smoked his beedi and stretched out, mindless of the mosquitoes buzzing around him.

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Days were a haze of work and endless washing, nights a blur of fear. She thought relentlessly of the trees in that distant jungle and felt a hardening of her thoughts as though they felt neither day nor night, neither washing nor cleaning, neither humiliation nor slavishness, only an ever-tightening grip of certainty that made her restless, sleepless, mindless. She lived surreally out of the abyss into which her life seemed to be sinking. She watched Hari in the muted light of the street lamps. He was different. Not the husband who spent nights sitting in their moon-dappled courtyard talking with her, listening to her incessant chatter, cocking an ear and clamping a hand across her mouth, listening to a distant growl, a wakeful howl or drawing her back swiftly as the snake glided over the dry leaves. All around, the moon would play tricks on her senses and she would wait for the sounds that gave her a sense of belonging. Hari was fast asleep on the mattress beside her and she drew to him, wishing for a snake to hiss so that he would again pull her to him, safe against his firm chest.

Rumours were rife in the slum.

*The bulldozers were on their way.*

*Police would accompany them.*

*The slum dwellers would fight to the finish.*

*Landlords and road contractors were bribing the dwellers.*

*The mooncipal would create a park for children on the land.*

Sona had sent a message to Bishni asking them to visit, but amidst the rumours she didn't know where to put them up when they arrived. Restlessness was a drum in her head and she dreaded all heavy sounds that might herald bulldozers.

At the community tap some mornings later, she watched the trickle into her steel urn when a commotion broke out behind her, freezing her blood. She turned slowly and saw a huge machine with teeth. The word bulldozer hummed across the yard where the children played, men shouted and women screamed at the men with the teathed machine. Sona dashed into her one room shack and started picking up the bundles she had carefully wrapped for such a day, but Bishni was yet to come, what if she arrived and couldn't find Sona or Hari? All around her, the teeth crawled, slow like a pregnant woman, she saw roofs come crashing down, clothes tumble on to the ground, and children fall over one another in fear. The women didn't listen when she told them to pack; they wouldn't believe her when she described how they fled from the jungle with all they owned. For a moment, she saw the fields of corn swaying before her eyes, thought of the sickle she carried in the fields and how it could make a clean cut through the neck of the man driving the teeth. When evening came, Sona still stood by the road, Vishnu and Rupa by her side. "Come with us Sona." Parveen the flower seller's urgent call was a distant echo in her head. Hari was on duty at the time and came rushing back, sweat streaming down his face, his wild mop of hair in disarray; his family stood by the road, Sona's face set hard, the children clinging to her, their belongings collected in a heap, remnants of lives scattered on the ground.

"Sona, eh Sona?"

When she turned towards him, her eyes were ember, "Let's go back."

"What? Where?"

“Where? You like this? We are beggars? You ran away to this place, now where?”

“There’s no home there now Sona.”

“The trees are still there, the animals, our land.”

“No land, no land. All forest now. Forest and teak.”

“And our ponds?”

“There are others now, ponds made by the *goment*, big ones, where animals come to drink.”

“I’m going back with the children. I want our land back.”

“How?”

“Till the land again. Burn down the teak.”

“What? Are you mad? They are *goment*’s. Come with me.”

Sona did not move from her place. Bishni would come and they would return to the jungle together. Dilip had told them about the villagers gathering at the Collector’s office, demanding their land in the forest; Bishni and he would be there too, she waited for news. Land back, land back, land back. The refrain beat a pattern in her thoughts as she waited by the road that had to be widened. Bishni and Dilip reached next morning, bringing more news of the protest. The *goment* promised to let villagers take care of the forests but the *timber people* were in their deserted houses.

Sona drew Bishni away from the others. “What’s happening, Bishni?”

“The villagers have come back. Protesting at the forest department office.”

“Why?”

“New rules. We can live in the forest and help to take care of it. But we need proof.”

“What proof?”

“That the land belongs to us. Do you have the papers at home? You have to give it to the *van sabha*.”

“But they know we lived there?”

“Even then. *Goment* wants proof.”

Sona looked around the road and the deserted slum. A look of disdain, quickly followed by despondency flickered over her face and she sat down on a rock jutting out of the ground. Papers. Proof. How would they gather all that? Wasn't it enough for the village elders to know that they lived there for generations?

“Sona, come back with us. We'll fight for our land. What about Hari?”

“I'll come, Bishni. Won't live like this ..... moving from place to place. I won't.”

Bishni placed her hand on her friend's shoulder, the shoulder that heaved with unshed tears, tears of anger and of shame. She and Sona would prove their rights, fight together for what was theirs.

The light drizzle of the previous night soaked their bones. The children shivered as Bishni and Sona dried their bodies and changed their soiled clothes. Hari watched Sona, noticed the hurried way in which she worked, and a sudden dread filled his being. The drizzle turned to rain and the rain to harsh sunlight. In the afternoon's blazing heat, Sona picked up her bundles and started walking with Bishni and Dilip. The children ran with her, trying to match their pace.

“Sona, where are you going?”

She stopped to look at Hari and spoke in a voice her husband had never heard from her, “To fight for our land.”

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## Cityscape

When Parth shuts his eyes, he sees the green hills and their lush woods. When he opens them, he sees the fibre and glass of buildings. Caught between these two, he feels confused and stops thinking. But thoughts have a way of their own and they creep into his mind in those moments when he sits out on the balcony with his morning cup of tea or tries to snuggle on to his wife's pillow, gingerly, to catch her warmth, yet let her sleep

undisturbed. In those moments, his eyes are shut. He often thinks of capturing those hills and woods on canvas but fails to find the right colours and rushes off to a meeting or conference, laptop swinging by his side, collar starched stiff, tie in place, anxious to deliver.

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In winter, the city is not cold but its hilly spaces lie cloaked in fog, its wooded slopes a mystery to the lone trekker, its fortified heights hidden in the clouds. When the trekker climbs the steep slopes, the black walls of the fort loom up suddenly in front, taking the unwary by surprise. In warmer months, the walk is less romantic, the trees on the slopes less mystifying, the cuppa tea less invigorating. Monsoon is the best season for those hills and woods. Parth was a regular on these slopes. From the crumbling fort walls, he could see the city spread out before him, an amoeba, white and green, the green, a little more than the white of the buildings. On the heights, the peacocks' cries from the woods sounded more eerie in the clouds and pouring rain. He often felt the urge to explore the woods and look for those famous peacocks of the hill fort, a painful desire to see them in their full splendour clashing with his sensitivity to keep away. He would sit on the ramparts for hours, soaking up the rain, looking at his beloved city, counting the number of green spaces. He felt thrilled to count more green than white, it became a favourite past time and he drew Ananya into the game, setting up a competition of who could count the most number of green. She would soon tire of the match and walk away to buy a plate of crisp *pakor*s and steaming cups of tea. Carrying the hot feast to her husband, she would observe how engrossed he was in the surroundings, how he stared out at the greenery with a hunger that wouldn't be satiated. It was so every Saturday. She was getting used to it as her husband became less new and the fixation less intriguing. She would often smile to herself and try to distract him, making him pose for photographs, do his daredevil stunts to tell her parents what a stud she had married. But he would go back to his hunched position on the wall and stare at the endless space, the dense woods, the terraced fields, and the urban spaces spread out till the horizon. One day, finding him looking at the same landscape morosely, she asked, "What happened, Parth?"

“The green is fading.”

Ananya heard the melancholy note but didn't know how to respond. Of course the green would fade; he should be more practical she thought. She would keep quiet till spoken to, grudging his deep involvement in something other than her. In the privacy of her bedroom, away from those hills and trees, peacock cries and sheets of rain, she would feel more in control, more in love, more in awe of the man who could love her with passion on Friday nights and nature on Saturday mornings.

When Ananya switched off the lights that night, Parth shut his eyes and counted in his mind, felt an ominous shiver creep up his body and snuggled into his blanket, pulling it up and around his head, face, right up to his nostrils. He would be out of the country for six months; when he returned, he would make sure, but Rishi, not Ananya, would be with him; Rishi, with his binoculars and patience.

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The grass was tall where the peacock pranced, the blue and green of its neck and feathers magnetic to the peahen that watched in thrall. She forgot the baby snake on the tree trunk, a different hunger raged in her entrails and the peacock's shrill cry rose high into the wet air. All around, the greenery was magnificent, the waterfalls from the unexpected rains plunged from the hill in sparkling, shimmering lines that broke the emerald monotone. The clouds were a trifle too low and threatened to splurge as Parth and Rishi trekked up to the summit. The cascades stunned the two friends, and as the woolpacks came surging around them, they walked in the clouds. The weather's sudden bounty had taken humans and peafowl by surprise.

The peacock stopped its dance, human sound was anathema to him, and all around a dense stillness descended as Parth perched himself on the broken rampart wall and adjusted the binocular range. The horizon was missing; he sat up to look better; this was where he sat every Saturday, but the view seemed different. He tried to look through the clouds that were floating at his feet but they obscured both human habitation and the woods. Not anticipating rains this month, the usual trekkers stayed indoors, some college goers and fresh-at-romance adventurers appeared in stray corners of the fort. Parth screwed up his eyes as the clouds dissipated, the horizon had uneven edges; he jumped

down from the wall and called out to Rishi at the other end of the wall, near the mango trees, trying to catch a glimpse of the peacocks he heard on the way up the hill.

“Rishi, let’s climb higher.”

“Hey, what’s the matter? Why higher?”

“Come along, need to see something.”

Shaking his head at his friend’s idiosyncrasies, Rishi clambered up the slope to the fort’s highest point. Parth was already there.

“Rishi, look! See through the binoculars!”

His eyes strained in the direction of Parth’s pointing finger, a few white vertical heights, nothing else. “What’s it dude?”

Parth sat down on the black outcrop and kept the binocular aside. “What did you see Rishi?”

“White and orange buildings, nothing else.”

“Those buildings were once small woods and a lake where we kids would fish for long hours. Now only concrete.”

Rishi couldn’t understand his mania about the city’s greenery. “Dude, what’s it about this fading greenery that gets to you? Is there a story there?”

Rishi would know the story, but much later. In the meanwhile, Parth spent another year of his life trying to break glass ceilings in his office.

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The hill had a row of houses, things the peacock hadn’t seen in these parts. The houses stood behind a huge gate and garden. The human habitation had cut into the hill’s eastern slope where the peafowl assembled and squawked together during the rains. When the peacock flew down on to the hill where he mated every season, he couldn’t find his bearings. The trees looked few and far between, the grass sparse, and the green expanses cleaved. He looked around, strutting down among the trees, eager for his courtship dance. This was the place where the peahens vied for his harem each year,

choosing him for the brilliance of his plumage, and yet, now there were no females to admire and adore the wing he had lovingly nurtured the year long. Pecking along the ground, he went down the hill where the houses stood, but once he reached there he stopped, not knowing what to do. He screeched once, he screeched twice, and then began to turn away when a familiar movement caught his eye. Somewhere behind the fan shaped plants beyond the massive iron gates, there was a blur of brown. The peacock stopped, stared at the hazy movement once again and in a sudden outburst, let out long and raucous *keows* in quick succession. He flew a short distance away, and waited. The brown blur had a white belly and the belly was now sitting on the iron gates. The peacock turned back to look at the peahen and moved away again, sure she would follow.

She came down from her perch and followed him into the trees. He was aware of her presence, yet turned his back on her. Slowly, he unfurled his tail and shook it vigorously, the eyes danced on their brilliant spread, the feathers rattled, and the lordly bird moved forwards and backwards, almost hypnotizing her in case she lost interest. She evaded him, teased him, but finally gave in and crouched in submission. He turned around and spread his dazzling fan on her.

One conquest over, the peacock moved away; he wanted other mates. Flying low toward the trees, he looked around for the other peahens, screeched, sat on high branches and kept a lookout. A short distance from where he sat, there was a fence and beyond that, shrubbery. He flew on to the fence, looked in the shrubs, visited all the places where he courted previously ..... finding nobody to woo, he moved away, flying from one tree to another, covering long distances that left him tired, and finally left, in search of newer grounds, preparing for the fights to come.

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Parth ambled down the lane beside the high rises. He had learnt to pedal his bicycle there, his father running beside him till he was left behind as he, Parth, rode off into the sunset on certain evenings. From where he stood, the horizon used to be a hand-stretch away; that was how his father described it. A dry drain ran along the wall of the huge complex, its cover rusted with age and disuse. Parth bent down to peep into the hollow and remembering the present, quickly got up and looked around. That was where

he had looked for his new cricket ball, afraid to return home without it; even then the drain's interiors had been out of reach for him. He looked into the distance and saw the concrete megaliths, the driveways and garages, badminton courts and gyms that had replaced the ponds and trees of his childhood. He looked up at the towers beside him and felt dwarfed in his desires.

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The peahen had a busy time ahead of her. Heavy with life, she scratched the ground, creating her own little home, away from prying eyes, next to a bush, and laid her first egg in it. She sat on the nest, on the prickly dry grass and leaves, to wait out the next four weeks before her chicks would appear.

But her life was to change soon and she didn't know it.

Foraging a short distance away from her nest, she heard a distant sound, quickly turned around and saw humans approaching.

Five of them; the peahen watched; she didn't know their destination but they were walking dangerously close to the nest. Squawking loudly, she made a dash for the nest, just in time. Her presence was warning enough and the humans walked away, keeping a safe distance.

She carried the egg to an isolated spot next to a row of trees. The next day, she laid another egg and watched over the two.

In the morning, other humans came, stopped to photograph her but she flew away to the tree, fearful for her eggs; they waited for the peacock they thought should appear beside her, and tramped away. She had seen these humans in the buildings she wandered into lost and disoriented, and she was afraid.

The peahen moved her eggs further and further away. Finally, she flew on to the roof of a house and made her nest on the red tiles, warm with the afternoon sun, and laid her eggs lovingly in it, next to a pile of twigs, away from the tree branch that leaned over the roof.

The tiles on the roof slanted down; once, when the peahen returned from foraging, she found the eggs on the ground, broken.

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Parth woke up to the phone ringing in the bedroom. Sunlight, arrested behind the heavy curtains, cast its warm glow in the room, on the books and cassettes that lay all around him, drawing him out of his stupor. He cursed himself for keeping the phone in the bedroom and dragged his feet to answer its insistent call. Ananya.

“Hi! I knew you would be sleeping now.”

Parth smiled into the phone, her voice a fresh awakening in him. “What are you doing?”

“Waiting for D-Day, what else? Waiting for you to come over.”

“And I am waiting for my daughter.”

“Selfish creep, that’s what you are. Here I am waiting for you, and all you can think of is the baby. Anyway, come soon.”

Parth cradled the receiver in the crook of his arm as he chatted with her and combed his hair; he could visualize her, smiling as she bandied words with him and wanted to be with her desperately, but leave was hard to come by in the office. The baby would be with her before him. After the scare of the first trimester, he felt safe in the knowledge that she was well cared for. Soon they would be parents, the thought was strange and he smiled at his own reflection in the mirror.

Parth’s house overlooked the wide open spaces of the golf link. On a fine day, he could even see the golfers at their play. He shifted there from the previous colony where cars honked throughout the day while mornings brought the sound of trucks revving their engines and hawkers shouting out their wares. He used to long for the chirping of birds instead and after careful search, bought the Golf Link flat for an astounding sum but the area was high priced and the flat had doubled in value over the past years. Ananya loved the good life of the place and he found it easy to reach office on time after enjoying his morning cup of tea and reading the newspapers in his wide terrace, among the flower pots and bird baths Ananya had arranged.

His life was about to change.

The city had opened up, business flourished, millionaires and multi-millionaires grew in number, foreign tourists brought in good revenue, standard of living improved dramatically, and the public clamoured for better lifestyle and amenities. Golf was one of them. So the golf club moved to the outskirts where commercial construction was prohibited and those who wanted to enjoy the game could do so away from the city's noise and pollution.

“What happens to the golf link here?”

Parth's astounded question was followed by momentary silence, the society meeting came to a halt till the secretary spoke up, “Hi-tech city, guys.”

Everybody was shocked. Hi-tech city meant their glamorous surroundings and view would be replaced by tall buildings, crowded markets, and a higher cost of living.

Parth thought over it for long. Could he continue to live once the greens vanished? He shuddered at the thought and began his search, again, for a place close to nature. On a Saturday trip to the hilltop, he saw bulldozers and excavators near the base of the hill; a huge hoarding had been put up almost overnight. A new residential project! Parth's antennae were on alert; walking into the site office, he felt happy, suddenly.

He called Ananya the same night. After they talked, Ananya touched her baby as it lay in the confines of her womb, “Your father is chasing an illusion sweetheart.”

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Hill Side. That was the name of the complex Parth and Ananya moved in to with the six month old Isha. The buildings cut into the hill, their foundation went deep into the hard soil. Parth was excited. From his balcony on the fourth floor, he could see monsoon waterfalls and hear the shrieking peacocks. The complex had its own pool and landscaped gardens, the palm trees lining the walls looked exotic and Parth dreamt of seeing equally exotic birds come there to nest. Ananya was worried, “Parth, how long will you have to travel to work from here?” “That's no hassle Anu. Small price for such largesse.” He continued to trek up the hill every Saturday.

Ananya's mother called on her cell phone two weeks after they shifted, but the hill blocked communication.

“No range, mamma.” Ananya whined over the phone in the STD booth at the market two kilometers away from their new home.

“So how will we talk, Anu? How long will it take to install the landline?”

“That’ll take a month at least. Anyway, the tower’s coming up on the hill so using the cell shouldn’t be a problem after that. It’s only a matter of a few months at the most.”

“Hope so beta. But do call when you can.”

Ananya replaced the receiver in its cradle and adjusted Isha’s carrier strap. She was beginning to feel uncomfortable strapped to her mother’s back; her tiny fingers always knotted themselves in Ananya’s hair and mother and daughter would engage in mock screaming bouts for a few minutes every time Isha wanted her fingers out of the tangle. But Ananya was in mood for Isha’s antics at the moment and headed for the market for the week’s vegetables, silently cursing Parth for the many pieces of discomfort she had to deal with daily. She kept her peace because Parth was happy. House and hill communicated effortlessly and he couldn’t ask for more. A whole summer crept by and Parth continued to immerse himself in nature, treks, daughter, and office.

Ananya moved away, just a little, and Parth didn’t notice.

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Rishi visited them for lunch one weekend. He loved the way Ananya cooked fish, and after a hearty meal, Parth went downtown for some work. Ananya was with Isha; alone in the drawing room with the terrace door wide open, Rishi could touch the silence that enveloped him. He fiddled with some books and when Ananya reentered the room, blurted out, “Anu, how can you guys live in this sleepy place? I mean, just imagine, no sound from anywhere!”

“Your friend’s mighty happy here, Rishi.”

“And you?”

The silence descended all around them. Ananya stood by the ornamental railing in the terrace, fidgeting with her fingers around it, “The silence gets to me at times, Rishi.

When I hear the peacocks screeching I want to tear my hair out. Why couldn't we live in the city like others?"

"What about others in this colony? Haven't you made friends?"

"Most of them work in the suburbs and unlike Parth, they don't travel twenty kilometers one way to work. They have much more family time Rishi, and I don't like butting into that."

"Have you talked to him about this?"

"He loves it here, I told you."

When Parth returned in the evening, they went for a walk. The lake at the base of the hill was dry, the grass grew tall and golden, and beside the colony's walls, the fields were ripe. Rishi looked around the familiar territory he had traversed so often and a niggling doubt replayed itself in his head. As they climbed the hill with the baby strapped on to Parth's back, a peahen flew overhead and dropped away from sight; Rishi turned around to look at it and saw the broken skyline in the distance where the city stretched out, languid and peaceful. A few trees jutted out and the green of manicured lawns sprung pleasant surprises. Parth was climbing, steadfast. Another peahen flew down and away, disappearing into the shrubs below the crag on which Rishi stood. He found it strange and wanted to ask Parth if he had noticed this behaviour. He hadn't seen peahens at such striking distance earlier. The hill was famous for its peafowl but there were rumours of their migrating to other places. From where he stood, Rish could see the the remnants of uprooted trees and broken sides of the hill where the new complex had dug its foundation; he wondered whether he was watching the exodus of the peahens that evening. Parth was up and away, already playing with Isha, Ananya stood staring into the distance but when Rishi reached her, she pointed a finger in the distance, towards a white speck and said, "That was where we lived earlier."

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The field was golden when the peacock swooped down on it. He pecked at the crops, their dry heads, and strutted away to another patch. He could hear the peahens squawking and turned his head in their direction but could not see them. Beyond the

field, small and golden, he saw the white building where his peahen had made her nest. He moved down the narrow path between the crops, his tail catching at them, and took off towards the tree at the edge of the field. There on a high branch he perched, looked around, and saw the humans standing on the hill. He flew to a higher branch, bugling loudly as he reached his roosting place but couldn't see the peahens. Among the trees that remained on the hill, one had a special place in his heart, the huge banyan tree in whose crotch he loved to sleep, but the humans were too close to it.

By the time they started their descent, it was dark. Isha was uncomfortable and her cry rent the quiet darkness around making them feel guilty of the encroachment. On Parth's request, Rishi stayed overnight.

Rishi woke up in the early hours of the morning, to the sound of a screech; he looked around, and too lazy and bleary eyed to wake up just when he had begun to sleep, dozed off again, only to be woken by a tiny squawk. It came from outside the window. Unable to sleep again, Rishi got out of bed, stretched himself and walked to the large window. From where he stood, he could see the ledge jutting out with a flower pot kept close to the window panel; the sound came from that spot, again. Gingerly, careful to avoid breaking the flower pot, Rishi opened the window and looked down. A blur of brown and grey met his eyes and he leaned forward further, too scared to even confirm what he had just guessed. He looked around. The palm trees had grown tall. From the fourth floor window, Rishi could smell the morning mist all around. He looked down again, thinking the time gap between the first look and the second would dispel the illusion. They were still there. He had seen countless photographs, seeing them before his eyes was almost *déjà vu*. The mother was missing. They looked a couple of days old and Rishi was afraid they would topple off the ledge or be gobbled up by an adventurous cat. Not knowing what to do, he shut the window carefully lest the chicks got frightened, but waited next to the curtains, away from view, for the mother to return. She did. Flying back to her chicks, the peahen cried out just once and settled down on the ledge, covering them with her wings. At breakfast, Rishi told Parth and Ananya about the peahen and her chicks. Ananya was shocked; Parth quiet; Rishi tried to interpret the quietness but worried about the peahen and her chicks.

“Why don’t you stay back tonight? We’ll leave for office together in the morning.”

Rishi wanted to talk to Parth and agreed to his suggestion for another night out. After breakfast, the two friends went out; walking down the road that led to the city, Parth was unusually quiet, and Rishi debated with himself how to broach the topic. Parth preempted him with a sudden deluge.

*You know, Rishi, Dad longed to live amidst greenery. The irony was that nature withdrew from wherever he settled down. The nomadic life took him all over his city, then the state, and finally his work brought him to this city that was new to him. Ma was fed up of the travel and the mania that had gripped him, but he wouldn’t stay in a concrete jungle. Finally, he moved to Ashoka Road, a locality famous for its Ashoka trees .... nothing to do with the emperor. They rented a house there to bring up their kids, Parul and me. We were happy there, but then people wanted to extend their houses, so the trees slowly started disappearing. Dad got upset and decided to build his own house near some municipal park or defence land where the trees wouldn’t be cut. He built a grand house on a plot of land close to a defence establishment and we shifted again. The roads were wide, hills close by, and birds were spoilt for their choice of trees to roost in. My parents were happy at last, and old. They still drove to the city for all their work. After building a house with big rooms, wide terraces and a well kept spot of garden, they couldn’t afford to hire a driver despite Dad’s failing eyesight. And then something happened that broke them. Dad lost his legs in a car accident, Ma her strength, and slowly the house fell into disrepair. We were still too young to maintain it. So we sold it and moved closer to the city, to a smaller house but with amenities at hand. That day, when we moved from the house Dad had so lovingly made, I promised myself I would fulfill his dream and live close to nature.*

Parth sat down on a milestone, exhausted with retelling memory. They sat close together, quietly, and then, almost in a whisper, Parth said, “*But I failed to understand other things.*”

Rishi thought the words had been dragged out of his friend's heart against his will. They kept walking, silent, with the evening calls of birds and the silence of the fields-at-sunset around them.

“Now what, Parth?”

Parth perhaps expected Rishi's question but not what came after it. “Ananya's not happy here. She feels lonely and frustrated.”

His wife's confession to his friend irked him but without warning, his mother's face swam into his mind's eye. *Next time you want to shift closer to nature, go alone but take care not to drive nature away.* Her words rang in his ears and he turned to look at his colony with its back to the hill; he could see some of the windows and their ledges but not the peahen's nest. He couldn't fathom what he had got for himself and what he had taken away from those nesting creatures. He looked back at the hill with its sparse green cover. “Chasing nature, I pushed her away.”

Rishi didn't know whether he referred to nature, Ananya or the peahen.

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## Eyes

From the boat, I could only see the eyes, gleaming. Were they eyes or did I imagine all those stories heard from grandma in the stillness of the night? The jungle seemed to crowd in on my mind and bring to fruition the long forgotten imaginings inspired by grandma's monotonous narrations as she dozed off, sometimes under the glittering night sky, at others in the sweltering heat of a mosquito net hanging in loose folds around our limp and sweaty bodies. The incessant whine of a mosquito was a wake up call, but my eyes stayed focused, on the pinpoints of gleam. A slow thrill crept up my body. Rajat slept soundly. Could those eyes see me too? Was it a hungry beast or satiated in the dead of night? I hugged myself tight, unable to move away from the mesmerism of the eyes. I'd heard about that too. I was trying to hold the focused, intent gaze. And then it moved away. The darkness seemed impenetrable.

The river lay quiet; Shabir, the boatman and Rajat were asleep. I sat alone, the boat rocking gently. Why was I here this forlorn night, with the jungle, the river, the moon, and those eyes for company, away from my books and the classrooms where I practiced what I had learnt? Hadn't Rajat and I decided on Singapore? I dissuaded him, for the thrill of the tiger. I thought of grandma more than anybody else this moment. Her tales and magical stories swirled in my mindscape like coffee whorls, trapping me in a sense of adventure and thrill. I turned to look at the jungle again. What pleasure did it give me to sit thus, awake, waiting, for what I still didn't know. Rajat may be right. Did we make a mistake coming here, where no habitation seemed to exist, only river and jungle, the green and blue merging and parting to merge again in their reflection on one another. I wanted to dip my hand into the moon-sprayed ripples but was afraid—afraid to wake the others, afraid lest the boat tipped, lest something else appeared out of the darkness. Again that familiar adrenaline rush. What was I waiting for? Stray lines from Blake hammered in my head, somewhere, distantly, but sure and steadfast. "In the forest of the night,/ .... Burnt the fire of thine eyes? ..."

I was here for the thrill of the jungle. How could man-made Singapore rival these ancient water-paths and the lure of those captivating stripes? How often had I seen them, heard their growls in grandma's tales? What else besides? Rajat slept on, serene, sure in his sleep as in his waking moments, his expensive clothes looking incompatible with the boat. But he looked as comfortable on this boat as in his air conditioned office. Would I ever find the same serenity within myself, that sure-ness that he carried with him? I touched him softly on the cheeks and he stirred, turning towards me as if magically, knowing I was there, needing him. But he slept. Tired and confused, I lay myself down beside him; Shabir was close by. I turned away from him and snuggled up as close to Rajat as decently possible.

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The tiger was looking at her again, out of eyes of fire. She was enchanted and couldn't move, standing shocked, rooted at the water's edge as the beast stared, willing her to move, make that one small motion that would provoke it. Would she? She couldn't move; she felt tense in her nerves, her body. She wanted to turn around and look for

Rajat, but she saw her grandmother instead. What was the dead woman doing there, behind the tiger? Her eyes dilated and she screamed.

Rajat sat up and shook the supine body next to him. She was screaming. “Teesta! Teesta! What is it? Get up! Get up Teesta!” She woke with a start, the sweat trickling down her body, soaking up the thin white garment that covered her. She looked around, terrified, and her eyes came to rest on Rajat’s face. She stared at him, as if in a trance. He was shaking her violently, trying to talk, but she couldn’t hear him, just the lips moving incoherently. And then slowly, reality intruded, slowly, slowly, the lips began to make sense, the warm air began to dry up the sweat, slowly, slowly, she stopped shaking, feeling terrified, and slumped into Rajat’s arms. He hugged her close, trying to calm her mind. Shabir looked at the two of them, shook his head a couple of times and went back to sleep.

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The morning sun was soft on the river water. Rajat woke up early, disturbed by Teesta’s screams at night, trying to attach a meaning to it. He looked out at the forest in the distance, but couldn’t see beyond the green opacity. Beyond that, he knew existed an entirely alien way of life, where survival was a daily necessity, where the river was not a tourist attraction but a life source, where food and work was eked out by the dint of courage and tenacity. He wondered whether he would ever be able to survive like those people out there, whether he would ever want to. He looked at his cell phone, no signal. He turned around and squinted into the morning sky, feeling refreshed by the remnants of the night’s cool breeze. A flock of birds he couldn’t recognize flew past, screeching, and disappeared even as he followed their trajectory across the sky. He felt a presence near him and turned to face Shabir. The boatman was already in a fresh lungi and vest, a beedi at his mouth, unlit. Rajat knew Shabir wanted to say something but was hesitant.

“You’re up early, Shabir.”

“Yes saheb. We wake up early. Some village folks were here some time back.”

“I see. What did they want?”

Again the hesitation. “What is it Shabir?”

“Saheb, bibi ji was screaming last night.”

“Ya, she had a bad dream.”

The boatman looked down at his bare feet, shuffling them, provoking Rajat. “What’s the matter Shabir? Did they say something about that?”

“Yes, saheb.”

“What! We were here. How could they have heard her?”

“There is a temple beyond those trees there.” There were trees everywhere. Rajat followed Shabir’s eyes and gazed towards the west. A cluster of trees formed what looked like an arc in the distance. He looked back at Shabir, his eyes doing the questioning now. “Saheb, many of the villagers were in that temple last night, waiting for the tiger that had entered their village two nights back. They heard the bibi ji scream and thought the tiger must have attacked us here.”

Rajat almost choked on his saliva. “Here?”

“Yes saheb. They can come here. I told you not to make any noise.” His tone was sullen now. Rajat remembered the way Shabir had looked at the two of them at night. He felt like a worm, entering this territory and not respecting its laws. “Sorry, Shabir. But she didn’t do it deliberately.”

Shabir turned away. Rajat sat down on the box of provisions they were carrying. He looked at Teesta, asleep, a frown creasing her forehead in the sun’s dappled light under the awning. Shabir was inside, cleaning the spare oars and tinkering about in his makeshift kitchen. Rajat could see his white vest flickering in and out of the ray of light that slanted into the shed. He lit a cigarette, reminded of the need by Shabir’s unlit beedi and looked again at Teesta. What was she doing here, in this boat, near the jungle, with almost no aim? He wanted to take a cruise liner and enjoy the sights. She wanted the adventure. And here they were, ending their first night on a scream.

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Shabir sat in his makeshift kitchen smoking his beedi, deep in thought. He didn’t know whether to keep the city people with him or send them to a different boat. He

wondered why they chose a boat over those big ones people from cities came in. Those had many comforts, but cost a lot too. He peered into the flames from the stove and wondered whether the saheb and bibi ji would stay for long. What did they want to do? They paid him a lot of money and said they wanted the boat for some days. Last night's screams had got him scared. What if it had come out of the forest? The villagers were angry with him for getting them to this spot. The scream had awakened their god too, in that temple in the forest. What could Shabir do? But he had kept quiet, not wanting to make them angrier. Now he didn't know what to do with the saheb and his bibi ji. They couldn't go into the forest, so what would they do the whole day on this boat? He counted the money in the bundle at his waist. The crisp notes felt good. He had promised Dhara not to drink again, but the craving was strong. Thinking of his wife made him want to return home, to play with Aisha, their two year old daughter. He thought of how Dhara looked before their marriage, thin and delicate, as if the river breeze would carry her away from him, back to the orphanage she came from. This bibi ji did not look anything like Dhara. She did not wear the poor sarees that his wife did, but rich clothes. Yesterday she wore a loose pant that became a balloon at her feet when the wind blew. Her hair was short, not long like Dhara's, but beautiful and curly. She smiled beautifully also, her teeth white and straight, not stained with paan.

The water from the rice kettle started hissing into the flames and Shabir got up with a start to remove the lid. Why was he thinking of the two women together? His Dhara was different from this bibi ji and he hadn't seen her for so long, he ached for her. The image of this bibi ji's ballooning pants and curly hair disturbed him now. He thought of the way she screamed and was angry for getting them here. He wanted to warn the saheb against any such foolishness but did not want to lose the money. He would get some more after the trip. He doused the flames from the stove and returned to the fresh air outside. The saheb was smoking, sitting on the black box. What did the cigarette taste like? People said the beedi could never taste as good. Shabir turned away and started cleaning his oars. Soon, they would have to start rowing further downstream.

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When she woke up, they were further down the river. Here, near the water, the mangroves were replaced by tall trees, growing close together. Teesta looked at her watch, it was late. Did she sleep this long? She felt strange after last night's dream. What were Rajat and Shabir discussing? Rajat's clothes looked crumpled and dirty. Would he have looked this way on a liner? She couldn't help smiling at the thought and Rajat turned towards her at that very moment. As he came towards her, she got up and tied her hair into a small bun. The breeze on her neck felt cool and soothing and she put out her hand to Rajat, "Rajat, let's go into the forest today?"

"Forest? Why?"

"What why? What do you want to do the whole day on this boat?"

"Haven't really thought of it." He was looking irritated.

"Let's explore the heart of darkness."

"Bad allusion."

She turned away to take a wash from the bucket of water Shabir pointed out to them last evening. She wanted to explore the forest, perhaps get to see the tiger in its habitat. She knew Shabir was against it. Something sacred about these, he said. What rubbish! Jungles and forests should be explored, enjoyed, not avoided as sacred. She was feeling claustrophobic in the boat. When she returned to Rajat, he was again talking to Shabir. Hungry, she started rummaging in the box of provisions when Rajat knelt beside her. "Teesta, it's not possible. The villagers don't like intruders in these areas." She knew Shabir had hoodwinked him into believing this. Now she was adamant. She would talk to the boatman.

When Teesta approached Shabir, he seemed to retreat two steps. What! Was the guy scared of her! "Shabir, I want to go into the forest. Can you moor your boat here?" She looked around at the tall trees, the gentle ripples on the water, and the marshy land in the distance. Those trees looked bewildering, so tall and so dense. Could any one actually pass through the gap between two trees? If humans could not, could a tiger? Were there really tigers in there? Could she perhaps outrun one? Her background in athletics might help her. She looked at Shabir again. He was quiet. Rajat walked up to the two of them

and looked at her. She couldn't fathom the look in those eyes. "Rajat, what is it? What is so sacred about the forest that we can't go in there? What'll happen? Talk to him please. He doesn't even look me in the eye when I talk. Am I some sort of an ogress?" Rajat took her by the elbow and led her away, his voice somber, "Listen, Teesta. We can't go there. Get that once and for all. There are problems and he definitely doesn't want to take up the burden of leading us into trouble or cause trouble by taking us into Moolganj."

"Moolganj? Is that what that place is called?"

"Yes."

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The boat continued floating downstream. The forests went past leisurely, no rush here, in this part of the world. Life seemed to be swaying, gently, smoothly with the river's murmurs and a verdant slideshow. Teesta felt sleepy by early evening. Rajat sat at his diary jottings, there was a world of work to catch up on when they returned. The wind was low now and a strange quietness enveloped the three of them. Shabir moored his boat in order to catch some fish for dinner. Teesta looked gloomily at the predictable sight. The thrill of the adventure had dissipated in this existence-less living of the day. She wished to go into the darkness of the forest, quietly setting foot in territory she knew nothing of, half expecting a growl close at hand, the gleam of those eyes again, the dramatic sighting of a tiger at his kill. She looked at Rajat and realized that he was watching her. "I wish we had gone in there this morning." Her tone had taken on a mournful-yet-hopeful tinge and Rajat smiled.

"Why don't you join the National Geographic? Plenty of adventure and thrill."

"Don't make fun of me, Raj. I don't want to work at finding thrill." She inched close to him, snuggling up on his attention, looking at him, her eyes beguiling, waiting to coax him once again and Rajat looked away smilingly. "Listen, Raj. Let's just go back to that place and make some excuse to go ashore. Can't we? We won't disturb anybody there."

"You will."

"Disturb? Whom?"

"The tiger."

“What? Are you crazy? Why should we disturb the beast?”

“It’ll soon be dark and time for tigers to hunt.”

“That means I did see it last night.”

“Where?”

“When you slept, it was staring at me.”

“Ya, deciding on eating you or letting you be.”

“Shut up. I’m serious.”

“So was the tiger. That’s why it let you be.”

Rajat got up and went to Shabir. “Let’s start back for Moolganj, Shabir.”

“Why Moolganj again, saheb?”

“I liked the place. We’ll moor there for the night.”

“Are you sure? What if bibi ji again ...”

Rajat laughed, “No, Shabir, she won’t scream again tonight. Don’t worry. That was only a bad dream last night, not a habit.”

Shabir hauled in his catch for the night and went back to his oars.

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When Shabir finally moored the boat away from Moolganj, it was beginning to get dark. The anchor was giving some trouble, wouldn’t catch in the mud. Shabir rowed a few feet away and tried again. This time it held. “Saheb, don’t make any noise this time.” Teesta thought that had Shabir known the word “please” he would have repeated it a dozen times. It was written in his eyes, looking at them unwaveringly in the fading light. “Why on earth should we make noise?” As she looked up at Rajat, he spoke with his eyes, asking her to be quiet. She was dying to know what sort of noise they were supposed to not make here in this human-forsaken bit of mud and water. She looked longingly at the forest in the distance, tempted to simply wade through the shallow water there and enter the darkness. Would she see the glow again? The thrill crept through her body once again.

Shabir cooked fish and rice for them. The freshness of the fish eluded their city-bred memories and they enjoyed the meal thoroughly. He warmed up to the two of them as he cooked, their interest in his cooking and the way he managed the meager resources made him swell with pride. They ate in companionable silence under the moon and stars, in the balmy breeze. Shabir slept early. Rajat and Teesta sat together, looking at the stars. Rajat thought of his office and all the work piling up for him, the research he had just undertaken and the report he had to file. Teesta stared at the darkness before them, wondering about the life beyond. Then they heard the gunshot.

They sat up straight, hardly believing their ears, staring at each other. Before Teesta knew what was happening, Rajat was into the water, wading and stumbling towards the shore; Teesta jumped with a splash and tried to catch up with Rajat. “Rajat, wait. What are you doing? Where are you going?” He stopped for her to catch up with him.

“Teesta, go back to the boat and wait there with Shabir. That was a gunshot.”

“Are you some sort of a detective or a saviour? What will you do there? Does anybody even live there?”

“Teesta, listen to me.” There was a tightening in his voice, but she was herself, adamant.

They waded through to the shore. The mud wouldn't let them stand straight. Holding hands, they kept walking. All was quiet here. The trees looked like silent sentinels. Rajat was deep in thought, his senses alert, his feet finding the ground below. Shabir spoke of some disturbances in this village. What were they about? Why was Shabir being secretive? Something was happening here that made the villagers wary of outsiders. What was it? He couldn't sit back in the boat after hearing the gunshot. But he was worried about Teesta. Would she do anything impulsively, though with good intent?

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We were far into the forest now, the darkness seemingly impenetrable, but the forest had its own light, a mysterious, rheumy light. I stopped short and pulled at Rajat's shirt from behind, almost tugged him back to me. “What's it?” his whisper was barely audible. “Eyes.” “What?” “Eyes, Raj.” “Where?” “There, ahead.” Rajat peered and

stepped back, almost on to my toes. I could feel the stiffness of his body, the stillness of his breath, the rooted-ness of his posture. He looked ahead again. Did he see too? He must have, for he slowly pushed into me, shoving me back, silently. The eyes bore into me, fiery points, and my blood turned cold. ... *burning bright, in the forest of the night*. I kept being pushed back, and in a shock, I realised there was no space to retreat further. A tree trunk! I knew what Rajat was trying to do. Without making any noise, without hinting at movement, we had moved.

“Climb the tree and stay put.”

“And you?”

“I’ll come after you.”

We climbed as fast as possible. Had he really seen? I dared not ask him in this eerie silence. Peering into the darkness below, I saw the two pinpricks of light. I was in thrall. They moved closer. Was I hallucinating? The sound of leaves being crushed. Rajat pushed me farther into the leafy branches, away from the branch where the moon slanted in. Silence. Had the beast passed or was it waiting below? The light points had disappeared. Had we frightened it away? Should we clamber down now? I nudged at him.

“Should we climb down?”

“No!”

The vehemence in his voice stunned me. Was it close by now? Why couldn’t I hear it growl? What had I read about tigers? They ate their meal by water bodies. Attacked from behind. The neck. Wasn’t that why villagers in these parts were given masks to wear behind their heads? A faint “splash”! From this height, the ground was enveloped in black. A strong wind was coming up. All else was quiet. The gunshot that brought us here seemed like a distant memory now. As the sky lit up slowly, we came down, weary and cramped from the night’s vigil. Rajat walked calmly in one direction, as if he knew where he wanted to go. Soon, we reached a large pond, amoeba like, spread out flat and wide.

A tiger lay still by the pond, the carcass of a cow lying beside it. Before we could move closer, a group of men emerged from a thicket beyond the pond, carrying spears

and *lathis* and stood beside the tiger. Dead! Rajat and I stood still as they came straight at us, asking us questions we did not understand. He moved a few paces closer to them, they were pointing at the tiger and the pond. They were angry about something. Rajat beckoned to me and we walked with them towards the pond. I bent down to take up a handful of water and the men shouted out in unison. We gasped at them. What was wrong now? And then suddenly, it hit us, simultaneously. That one act of mine would also soon save us from this angry group.

Eventually, we were led to the village. The huts were clustered together in a huge semi circle. There were crudely drawn pictures on the walls and on the cow dung polished floor. But there was a sense of mourning here. Had the tiger eaten up their loved ones? One of the men in our group called out to somebody from the longest hut. “Budhan! Oh Budhan! Come out fast.” The person who answered to this call was a young boy just out of his teens. He looked at the entire group and me in particular. The man who called him out spoke to him in quick whispers and Budhan walked up to us, looking angry and aggressive. Would he hit us? Was he their leader? He spoke to Rajat in surprisingly good Hindi. The pond was poisoned and they didn’t know who had done it. Were we the culprits? We! I wanted to run away from there. Rajat held back. He had to convince them we hadn’t done this. Budhan said we were the last ones to see the tiger the previous night. Rajat said he hadn’t seen any tiger, but he did see a group of men in the distance. I didn’t know how he missed the tiger for the men.

The man who had called out to Budhan came forward and spoke to him. Budhan turned towards me, “Did you try to drink water from the pond?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“What why? I was thirsty.”

“So you didn’t know the pond was poisoned?”

“Of course not! This is the first time we have come to this place!”

Again, Budhan and the rest of the men whispered among themselves and he came back to us. Somebody had been poisoning the water. Budhan’s sister died after

consuming its water; villagers had lost cattle and now two tigers in a month. “Two?” Rajat and I spoke together, shocked. Two in a month. Some farmers saw the first one but before they could return with others from the village, the dead tiger disappeared. The farmers thought it was the ghost of a tiger and didn’t search the forest for it. Rajat said he wanted to return to the pond to see the dead tiger and take the water sample. We hurried. It was already some time since we left the carcasses at the pond. We hurried together but the tiger was not there. At Rajat’s command, all of us fanned out across the entire stretch of forest, but no sign of the tiger’s body. Who had removed it? The villagers were angry. This was the third time a tiger had died in their forests. They blamed outsiders. The tiger’s bones had medicinal qualities. “Do you know who came here before us?” “No, but some strangers were spotted on the river last week.”

There was no point in staying longer in the village. We would have to take this story to the city. The forest looked dark even in the morning. Budhan and his friends escorted us back through the dark greenery. In a pit near a ramshackle hut, there were some bones. The men knelt down. Tiger bones. The hut was new in this area. Where were the people used it? Where did the gun shot come from last night? There were too many unanswered questions here. The forest hid its secrets well and Rajat and I were too tired to think. We needed to rest and plan how to get help for the remaining tigers here.

At the boat, a terrified and anguished Shabir awaited our return. He had no idea of our whereabouts and was mad with fear and worry. He saw some men leave the forest early this morning, carrying something heavy. He thought we were dead. No, he didn’t hear the gunshot nor did he know when we suddenly eloped into the night. I was feeling dazed. Who were those men? Where did they disappear? Where had the tiger’s body disappeared? Why the gunshot? I took a wash and lay down for rest, my mind a vortex. Rajat looked worried too. The whole day long, Shabir rowed us around. He made lunch for us but our lack of appetite saddened him. The wind was strong now. Would there be a storm?

At night Shabir moored near another island. Again, the anchor was giving him trouble. Its hooks would not hold he said. He knew his boat well and we were tired. After a light dinner, our heads still reeling from all the doubts, we turned in for the night. I

snuggled up close to Rajat when Shabir went back to his end of the boat. Soon, we could hear his loud snores across the length of the boat, despite the steadily noisy wind. The anchor should hold.

Rajat's arms came around me and I felt secure, comfortable. We murmured into the night of all that mattered to us, of how I'd seen the tiger's eyes and he hadn't, of various things that would make no sense in the wakeful morning. Slowly, under the clouded moon and stars, with the wind for company, we merged in thoughts and body, lived the story of our life and our future, met and parted to meet again. I would tell the story to our grandchildren some day, of the tiger and the forest, the bones, the hut, and ....

My sleep was disturbed. Who was pushing me? I sat up hurriedly. Rajat was shaking me and Shabir was desperately trying to retrieve the anchor against the might of an angry river and a tearing wind. And I had slept through this! The water leaped into our boat again and again, Rajat rolled up his pants to his knees, he looked worried. Quickly, I tried to bale out the water that had entered the boat. And then ... a mighty surge, a long heave, and water all around. I tried to catch Rajat's hand. It slipped away from my grasp.

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## Epilogue

At 66, Teesta was in no mood to sift among dreams and reality, imaginings and facts. Neither would she let her grandchildren determine them for her. All that mattered to her at this stage was a life lived, a tale told, a memory cherished. All that mattered was the image of her and Rajat under the cloudy sky, the boat rocking them, and the river gently murmuring its benediction. They didn't know when the murmur found voice. And nothing mattered after that. The storm broke, the river roared, the boat turned, and Rajat said he couldn't swim. Nothing else mattered after that. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

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## Puppets

The little boy stared long and hard at the snake slithering by. Its brown and yellow shades glistening in the sunlight mesmerized him and he stood at the spot, rooted, his large black eyes intent on the movement below, his body rigid, hands stiff on the hips. His hair was a peculiar shade, neither black nor brown, but sun burnt, tousled by the wind that swished through the trees. The snake glided across the dappled light on the brown-and-green-and-yellow ground. Behind him, the jungle was dark and dense. The darkness under the trees was such that when you came out of it into the sunlit spaces, the light blinded you for a second. The boy had just recovered from this momentary blindness when he saw the colours snaking past, and he stood, caught in a time warp not of his own making.

When the snake dropped into the hole, he came out of his reverie. He remembered his mission and looked around. He needed a large rock. The last one he hid behind was home to giant red ants and he hadn't slept for two nights after they bit him. They had crawled up on him when he was keeping vigil, eyes focused on the road below, ears in tune with the jungle's sounds, the twittering of birds, rustling of leaves, the occasional full throated trumpeting of elephant herds. But neither his eyes nor ears detected the ants in their silent progress up his legs as they lay straight on the rock face, brown lines across the hard grey surface. When he first felt the bite, he let out an involuntary yelp that he was trained to suppress. He clamped his hand over his mouth, and looked around quickly, but the tear drops coursed down his dusty brown cheeks of their own volition. He sat up and dusted the ants off his legs with a large leafy branch. Some of the ants climbed on to the branch and its leaves and clung there. Despite the pain, he was amused. They looked as though they were afraid of falling off the branch, hanging on for dear life, upside down, their backs, red bubbles on the green leaves.

Now again, he needed a rock, but a safe one. There was one in the distance, about a kilometer away, and it looked ideal. He made his way towards it, treading softly on the fallen leaves, hunched with the weight on his back. The rock loomed before him, a solid black mass among the Gulmohar trees. All around in this patch, the jungle was aflame with the flowers, a riot of orange. He inhaled long and deep, taking in the verdant

fragrance of leaves and flowers and buds about to bloom. He looked at the flowers as they bent towards him, wanting to reach out and pluck at the temptations, but even as his hand reached out, he withdrew and kept walking till he reached the base of the rock.

There was a niche in the rock, a good foothold for him to climb on top. At the broad end of this rock, he found a depression that would be useful for him. Just the place he needed, wide and not too deep. He settled down in the hollow, keeping his satchel beside him. The temperature was rising and he could smell the afternoon grow heavy with pollen and dry heat. He could see the ground and road beyond clearly, the rock was not too high and it concealed him well. He broke off a branch from the Gulmohar tree that almost hugged the rock and swept the area clean of any possible invading armies of ants. And he began his watch. At 14, Pratap Oraon was trained to fight, and he was on duty again.

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When Pratap goes to sleep, he has his rifle by his side. He learnt this late, the others with him are already masters of the game. “Sleep with an eye on the outside world.” Indoctrination lesson n. But on most nights, Pratap forgot the lesson and slept well. On the last full moon night, the police raided their camp. Pratap could barely sling his gun over his shoulder when the blast blinded him to the outside world. “Move. *Chalo.*” His commander’s voice was still ringing in his ears when he found himself face down under a pile of leaves. He lay there, hardly breathing, wishing only for the sleep that had made him so forgetful. When he came out of the pile, the sun had replaced the moon in the sky. And camp had resumed, in another place. This one was far from the blasted site, behind a hill where water was scarce and food a fight away.

“Pratap! Come here. Go to that house this afternoon. Find out how much ration they have.”

Pratap looked at the house. A red tiled roof and a small garden. The windows were barricaded. There was a watchman with a rifle in a small hut at the gate. The watchman’s face was not visible through the binoculars.

“What if there are policemen there?”

A tight slap singed his left cheek. “Who has asked you to tell them about yourself? Just ask for food. Can’t you be hungry?”

His commander was right. Pratap was hungry. The hunger was in his guts. He approached the house with an eye on the gate and another in the trees surrounding the building. Rajesh and Nirmala were close behind, in dark clothing. Nirmala was good with the knives. She could kill at one throw and she was just a year older than him. That’s what the cook in the camp said. He knew her parents before they ran away from the village. Why did they run away? That he wouldn’t say.

As they approached the house, Rajesh went quietly to the back and Nirmala stayed in front, her camouflaged clothing blending with the dappled light. She broke off a twig from a *Salga* tree and chewed on it casually. Her father had taught her how to use this as a *datun*. She remembered all of a sudden how he would make a paste from the *salga* bark and apply it to his painfully swollen ankles. She jerked the memories out of her mind, her pigtailed flapping inside her shirt where she had stuffed them. She watched Pratap as he opened the gate. She watched how the watchman pounced on him, pulling him back by his shirt collar. “Ho! Kaun hai?” Pratap touched his forefinger to his lips and shook his head. “Kya chahiye?” He shouted. Pratap touched his stomach and made a gesture that she couldn’t see, but could well imagine. The watchman gestured to him to wait and went inside. The boy scampered away, to the side of the house where the granary was kept. By the time the watchman came out, he was back at the gate. The watchman gave him a plate of watery rice and salt and pushed him away from the gate towards a place next to his hut where the poor boy could eat. Pratap didn’t want to eat. He was conscious of his friends in the afternoon shadows around the house. He looked meekly at the watchman and longingly at the house and started retreating, one step backwards at a time. The watchman couldn’t understand why the boy wouldn’t eat.

“Crash!” The noise, as of a tree falling on the hard ground, came from behind the house. The watchman forgot all about the boy and hurried towards the sound. Pratap ran. With him ran Nirmala but not Rajesh. Pratap was worried. Where was he? Nirmala

laughed at his fears. “Don’t worry. It was he who made that sound.” Rajesh reached the camp before Pratap did. The ways of the forest were familiar to him.

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The commander was happy. Pratap had passed the first test. Now for the second. The raid at night. The camp was brimming with energy under a fulsome moon. Strange shadows lurked on the tent walls, walking about, stretching, picking up guns, whispering. Pratap thought of the shadows on the mud walls of his house when his mother lit the evening fire for cooking. “Mother, that is a horse on the wall.” He would point out the shadow’s shape on the wall and his mother would laugh. “Mai, that’s a *bhoot*.” And his mother would shush him for fear of invoking the evil spirits.

The *bhoots* had captured Pratap’s life now, at every step. If only the landlord had given more money to his father that night, he wouldn’t have slashed his throat with the sickle and the police wouldn’t have come, and he wouldn’t have hanged himself in the lockup. His mother always told him to be careful with the landlords. They were their protectors, how could one go against them? She went away one afternoon, leaving Pratap with her cousin. When the men with the guns reached the landlord’s house, the ghosts on the walls began to enter his life. The guns and his anger. They promised him that he could kill the landlord’s family when he grew up, if he joined them. Shomit, their leader, would tell him how the landlords were rich and evil, how they exploited the poor and made them die like Pratap’s father did. They needed to do away with these rich people in their big houses, with servants and lots of food. Pratap remembered his father’s body hanging limply from a twisted length of cloth, the eyes bulging, the eyes stealing his sleep and making the ghosts dance on the lonely walls every night. His young body would shake with sobs and the desire to avenge the loss. Shomit taught him all about the guns. He would help him punish those rich people.

The night was rife with the fragrance of the moon-splattered Mahua trees; Pratap’s feet dragged along the grass and his rifle seemed too heavy. The house he visited in the afternoon was already *gheraoed* by some of his companions. On guard duty, he had asked Rajesh, “Why shouldn’t the rich have food? They don’t go around killing people and living in camps. They work for their food.” Rajesh was shocked that anybody could

be so naïve. When he explained, Pratap thought Shomit had entered Rajesh's body. Didn't he know the rich got their food from torturing the poor? Wasn't that why Pratap's father had killed his landlord? Wasn't that why he had to hang himself in the lockup? If not for the rich and their ways, would the two of them and others in the camp be in this condition, running from place to place, being harassed by the police?

Ten of Shomit's handpicked "soldiers", boys and girls, formed a phalanx when they reached the house by the *salgas*. Pratap had made one mistake, he didn't know how many people lived in the house. The watchman was dozing when he heard the sound of the gate opening. Before he could act, he got a knife in his leg. The sight of the group trooping into the compound muted any appeal for help or mercy that may have risen in his throat. Gaping, clutching at his leg, he crumpled on to the mud floor of his hut.

Inside the house, Haren Majhi and his family slept under mosquito nets, dreamlessly. Outside, Pratap, Nirmala, and four others soundlessly carried the sacks away to a waiting cart at the gate. Shomit knew this wouldn't do. He drew his gun and shot at the terror struck body of the watchman. That should bring the bastards out. As the others carried the sacks out, Pratap stopped his work; after the gunshot, the quiet of the night was like a shroud that he couldn't shake off. But neither could he stand and stare. The commander might kill him for the weakness. For a second he returned to the cold winter night when Shomit had kept watch by the river as a petrified Pratap stood in chest deep water. He had mentioned his fear of water and the darkness. The camp had no place for timidity.

And Shyamli was timid. On a gloomy afternoon a year back, Pratap and Shyamli, younger than Pratap, stood in the hot sun, guns at the ready; the target, rows of scarecrows fifty metres ahead. Gun shot after gunshot rang through the sultry air as the two children pulled the triggers. A desolate tear escaped Shyamli's eyes and she was given a half hour extra practice. When she returned to her tent, her fingers were swollen and the nails ached where the blood gnawed at them. Pratap went up and hugged her close, the frail body trembling in his arms, his own tears an inch away when he saw Shomit walk into the tent. He drew Shyamli away from Pratap and took her outside. Pratap was petrified, the sweat beads gathered at his brow and trickled down his blanched

face in slow motion. Agonising eons later, he stepped out into the heat again. Shomit was sitting with the girl under a tree, bathing her hands in water, a tube of medicine by his side.

When Shomit turned towards him, Pratap returned to his work. Rajesh was by Shomit's side. Pratap's hands were trembling but there was no time for anything else. Everything happened simultaneously. The door of the house opened, a rifle shot rang out, Rajesh fell in a heap and Shomit pushed Pratap down behind the sacks of grain. A series of shots rang out after that, one whistling past Pratap's ears. After that he heard nothing for some time. Shomit pushed him farther into the dark and thrust his pistol back into his clammy hands. "Take aim. Shoot, you fool!" The hissing anger roused Pratap from his stupor; he gave cover fire to Shomit as the latter raced towards the house. He could see the smoke still curling up and away into the dark air, Shomit's blurred outline through the threshold, and dead bodies in the garden's black-green expanse. He could make no sense of what happened, how the fire came from the house, or why. He only knew that he had to shoot and he did his job well. Did he take two or three. Three. No two and one in the leg. The man still lay on the verandah, writhing, and ... he saw the uniform. Police! How? Why? Where was Shomit? He looked at Rajesh's inert body, sprawled across the cow-dung-polished floor in front of the gate.

A figure was running towards him out of the night, "Run, Partap, run. They have seen you. Run!" "Who's seen him? But he ran. Nirmala was almost dragging him along with her. They ran as far as they could till his need to know slowed his pace. Wait Nirmala. Wait. What happened? The police? Why? She slowed down. The forest was dense here. The *salga* trees crowded together near an ancient but now disused well. The rope for the pulley still ran through the fork in a branch, but there was no water in the well. Nirmala slowly sat down on a tree bole. Her breath came out in raggedly painful bursts. She pulled Pratap down beside her and said, "Listen! Rajesh made that sound. Remember?" He couldn't make out between her whisper and her laboured breathing. He was staring at her, a stray moon beam slashing down one half of his head and face. "The watchman went to check and couldn't find anything. When he returned to the gate, you were not there." Pratap nodded again. This time Nirmala was impatient. Was he stupid!

“What are you nodding for? Don’t you understand what that meant for the watchman? He reported it to his employer and the police came for us. Stupid.”

They couldn’t return to the camp. Move again. From one camp to another, from one secret location to another. Always on the move. Nights and days, sunrise and sunset, ready for the next move. Shomit came back after a week, when they had already moved to another location. He was injured, haggard and weak. In the police dossiers, he had a number.

Shomit Ganguly: 131.

Age: 33.

Complexion: Wheatish.

History: B.A. pass. Has an outfit. Notorious in the jungles of Jharkhand and Chhatisgarh.

Activities—raiding and killing, extorting food and money from landlords. Group strength: unknown. Exact area of operation: unknown.

Shomit was recovering fast. His well built, muscular body was acclimatized to such hardships. How many years had he lived, doing the same work? He thought back to the beginning of this life. Lying under the dark sky on a charpoy that constantly creaked, Shomit thought he had been on the run for ever. *He had to help his father, a collection agent for the landlord, collect dues from the farmers. Penalty for default? Whiplashes and further mortgage—of land, daughter and wife. “Bapu, why do you do this? Let’s go away to the city and earn our money well.” “Who’ll give you work?” Shomit decided to study. As a daily wage earner and the streetlamps for light, he completed his B.A.. But then, the police took his father away. Reason? Wasn’t it enough that the landlord accused him of embezzlement? His father, the loyal employee who killed for his master’s sake, who abducted for him, did his every bidding, for that was his job. The policemen and landlord would give no explanation or help. The grey areas of the case got murkier with each attempt and when he began to ask for proof of his father’s guilt, the only other member of their family, his niece, went missing. Everybody knew what could have happened to her. Hadn’t it happened to others? What greater warning could Shomit have got? He vowed revenge. He wasn’t the only one whose family had suffered. Didn’t his*

*friends suffer too? Didn't the daily wage earning people go missing after refusing to do the landlord's bidding? Couldn't they get together and do something to end this oppression and injustice? They did. By torching the landlord's house when the family was asleep. Shomit's anger had found its outlet. A band of men and women to deal with the exploiters. So began the journey—from village to village, forest to forest, hill side to hill side. Shomit shuddered when he thought of his life. How long would he live? His outfit had grown in strength and notoriety. His ability to speak, to convince, to punish was renowned. Nobody questioned him, except Aditya, his old college friend.*

*"I can understand why you feel angry and frustrated, Shomit."*

*"What is it you don't understand?"*

*"Children, for one."*

*"What about them?"*

*"Why they? You used to love kids, Shom. Then why this dangerous work for them?"*

*"Let them learn, Adi. They are our future."*

*"No, Shom. I don't agree. This is not what children should be doing? What if they get killed doing this work?"*

*"Nobody shoots at children."*

*Aditya looked around at the group of children playing gilli danda and felt something tug at his heart. Looting, killing, sloganeering, and now children. Where would it all stop? Would it ever stop? Was Shom the only one doing this? Wasn't society itself culpable of the crime? Where would these children go if left alone? He thought of Shyamli who was a bright student in school. Could she ever go back now?*

*Aditya couldn't deal with what he saw. He got up to leave. "Shom, just a word of caution. There's a new police station outside the forest limits. Made only to catch your outfit. Don't let them get to the children."*

*Shomit laughed. "Don't worry. They'll not shoot at children. They are too decent for that."*

*Remembering Adi, Shomit smiled to himself. Children. He remembered the day he found Pratap. Lost, scared, cold, the boy sat in the police chowki where his father had hanged himself. Pratap became Shomit's disciple. Didn't he promise the little boy to help avenge his father's death? Wasn't that when the boy's dead eyes lit up with hope? Shomit knew he was on the right track. Those people had to be taught a lesson.*

Shyamli came out from the tent and knelt before Shomit. "Your medicine, *chacha*." Shomit's reflexes were conditioned to perfection. A hand shot out from under the *chadar* and slapped the little girl hard. "I've told you not to call me *chacha*, didn't I?" She cringed at his fury. "There is no uncle, sister, or father here. Remember that." She withdrew slowly, timidly. The girl needed more training. When he saw her at the flesh market, awaiting her auction, he thought he had found a readymade soldier. His joy at finding her and anger at what had happened to her was nothing compared to what he thought she possessed. Raw anger. Humiliation. Vengeance. But that was an illusion. Pratap had turned out better than her. Perhaps Nirmala had had a hand in that. Tomorrow, the two would be on guard duty again. The lad had learned the ropes fast.

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When Pratap settled down into the niche with his satchel beside him, the road looked like a silvery ribbon melting in the hot sun. Nirmala must have found her perch too by now, he thought. It would be good to be on duty together. But today was an important day. A signal from him, and the minister would be taken. Why did they have to kidnap the minister? "Don't be silly, you fool." Nirmala seemed to know everything. Always. "If the minister is taken, the government will have to listen to us. Kuch nahin samajhta yeh." She was frustrated with him. He was not happy but duty was duty. Shomit had explained it well to him.

The afternoon sun was scorching his back through the Gulmohar branches. A glint in the distance. Dust. He squinted hard and long. Some more dust. A long line of white against the brown and green background. He crouched under the branches and let out a screech. From the distance, like an echo, another screech. Another screech, and a blast. Pratap could not see well, but there seemed to be a plume of smoke and fire rising

in the distance. What happened? Where were the people who were supposed to kidnap the minister? Did Shomit forget to send them?

Jubilation in the camp. Pratap went up to Shomit. “Sir, where is the minister?” “Dead.” What? Why? “We don’t want extra baggage.” But sir, the plan was for kidnapping. Shomit now smiled. “That was information. For you.” He ruffled Pratap’s hair and walked away. Darkness was fast crowding in on the excited group. In the mango grove where Pratap played out his daydreams and caught the dragonflies, there was complete silence. He sat numb and weary under a tree, and shut his eyes. Gulmohar flowers and dust. Gulmohar flowers in the dust. Dust, dust and smoke. Everything was a medley of sight and feeling and Pratap felt dragged into an abyss. There’ll be no revenge for my father. How had he taken so long to understand this?

Nirmala came looking for him. “Jaldi chalo, Partap.” “Kahaan?” She smiled. Big night. They would be raiding the police station outside the forest. All of them? “Hmm, but we will be at the front.” Why? Shomit sir says they won’t shoot at us children. Everybody was falling into position, single rows. All his friends were in the first three rows. He quickly went and took his place, gun in hand.

The troops marched, the children in the front rows. Low swinging branches scraped against their faces and necks. The soft sound of leaves crushed underfoot was like a cadence. Left, crunch, right, crunch. Left, crunch, right, crunch. When they came out of the forest, Pratap remembered the snake he had seen in the morning. Shomit sir said they would kidnap. But they killed. He says nobody will shoot at children. What if some body did? Did they not kill Rajesh that night? In the cool night, the sweat gathered at his nape, but there was no time to think. Shomit sir may be right. Maybe he was preparing him for the final revenge.

In the distance, lights shimmered against the darkness. There were twenty policemen there. This information they already had. The policemen must have sixth sense. Switching off some of the lights, they came out on the long verandah, guns at the ready. Night vision binoculars. Their latest acquisition to fight the enemy. But the binoculars showed them the true nature of their enemy all too well.

“Sir, row upon row of children, both boys and girls. What do we do? Who are they?”

The officer in charge took the binoculars once more from his subordinate and focused.

“Shit!”

“What to do sir?”

“Wait for my orders. Hold fire till then.”

Hold fire? Were they to shoot at those children then? “We can’t do this, sir.”

“Then shoot yourself, Kumar. Those children are not like yours or mine. They are trained to kill.”

“But still, sir.”

By the time the troops reached the river, something seemed amiss. There was some movement ahead. In the front row of children, Pratap felt fear clutch at his chest. He could hardly breathe. Shomit had said nobody would shoot at them. Where were the adults? Were they far behind? He dared not ask Nirmala who marched beside him. A thousand moons waxed and waned in his mind. What was happening? Did they have to shoot again? They were close to the building now. He wanted desperately to turn and look for Shomit.

“Shoot!”

The rows halted, confused at this unexpected order coming from the river banks. The shots rang out. The moon waxed and waned, waxed and waned. The night air was heavy with broken promises. When the police inspected the bodies, they couldn’t find Shomit Ganguly. The policeman who had trampled over Pratap’s arm bent to touch the pulse at his wrist and shook his head. No use. Pratap Oraon lay on the dark field in a pool of blood and urine. At 14, he was trained to die. In the police files, he was only as number.

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“Sir, somebody called Aditya wants to claim the children’s bodies.”

“Ask him in.”

The policeman came out to the verandah and spotted the man standing by a paan-stained pillar. His kurta was crumpled and sandals dusty. “Eh, you? Come in.”

Aditya walked in quietly. The officer showed him the dead bodies, covered in white.

“Why do you want to claim these bodies?”

Aditya ignored the officer’s suspicious tone. “I knew them.”

“How?”

“Shomit Ganguly was my friend.”

The officer screwed up his eye and looked at the unassuming man before him. “Where is he now?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to know, officer.” His voice sounded dull and disinterested. Something about him made the officer believe him.

The quietness of the afternoon lay heavy on the men gathered for the mass cremation.

“How could you fire at innocent children, officer?”

“Mr. Aditya, do you know these children could have killed each one of us standing here today?”

“Did they shoot at you?”

“No, but they were capable of it.”

“That was their indoctrination, not will.”

“So we die for their indoctrination. Is that what you want to say?”

“They would have died anyway. They never really stood a chance.”

The flames shot into the hot air and Aditya thought of how he and Shomit used to hold their magnifying glasses over a piece of paper to make the sun light it up.

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