AROUND US

TALES OF TERROR

NAG MANI

PITRA

I first saw Aniket in a photo I found on our dining table. I was in my final year in Patna Women's College then. A family friend had introduced him to my parents. Despite my objections, a meeting was arranged and he and his parents were invited to our house. He was a rather lean fellow, slightly unkempt, smart maybe, but I hated him, just because he could be my potential husband-to-be and I was not ready for marriage. He worked in a private consultancy firm in Patna and earned well. His parents had even brought his bank statement, in case we asked. His face had gone red when they actually took it out to show us. He kept quiet for most of the time, speaking only when spoken to, nodding every now and then.

My mother was in the seventh sky after they left. She seemed to have found the perfect match for me:

- 1. The young man was rich.
- 2. Owned a big house in Purnia, and two other plots in neighbouring cities.
- 3. His father had retired as a regional manager of a government bank. Theirs was a respected family.

What else could a woman want?

My mother urged me to have more talks with him. I kept my feelings to myself and did as told to. We met

for a week or so, and I didn't see our conversations go anywhere. Then one day, he told me that he would be quitting his job and starting a dairy business. It would be a big risk. And yes, his father did own some properties, but they were to be split with his uncles as well. He thought that I should know what I was getting into.

I could not think of a reply. So, I kept quiet. He observed me for some time, then took my hand and said that he knew he was probably making a wrong decision leaving the company, but it was something he had always wanted to do. He had planned it for years, even had a small saving in case things went astray and he had to look for another job. However, if I was not comfortable with it, he would leave it all, and continue working in the company. "It cannot be just my decision. Once we are married, we are in it together." He had told me that day.

I did not tell my parents about it. And we were engaged.

Our marriage was definitely not what I had in mind. A quarrel broke out just before I was being taken to the *mandap*. I did not know then how it had started, but it ended with a fist fight and the marriage was called off. His family and guests, coming from the groom's side, had been very bossy from the very start, the way they always are. Apparently, one of his uncles' son had talked rudely to an elderly from my family, and took insult when scolded. The matter was hushed, but the sparks lingered, only to rekindle during a ceremony. I was terribly angry with the way his family behaved with my parents. Even then, I could not help but feel a tinge of pity as I watched him helplessly plead others to calm down. But no one

was willing to reconcile.

Our neighbours watched as our men escorted them back to their vehicles. Just as they were leaving, Aniket stepped out of his car. Despite the angry glares, he marched right up to me and put his hand forward. "I am not going to leave you behind, no matter what."

Normally, I would have upheld the honour of my family, but that night, I didn't. They say love can conquer all, and it did. It brought tears to men who were once thirsty for blood. And we were eventually married that eventful night.

It has been over two years since then. We are a happy couple. He did not only open a dairy farm in Patna, but has started a smaller plant in Purnia as well.

It was during that period that we had to stay with his parents for over five months, and I first saw the Pitra of his house.

I cannot say that Aniket had intentionally kept it a secret, maybe the subject never came up, but his dead grandmother lives in the form of a sparrow in his garden.

*

I had spent a couple of weeks in Purnia after our marriage; maybe I had missed the sparrow in all the celebratory hustle and bustle. The house was a lot quieter when we returned a year later to work on the second farm. A full moon was shining through our window that night. Aniket was tired, and had gone to sleep almost immediately after dinner. But sleep eluded me.

DAAYAN

 $oldsymbol{A}$ SHRABH was my best friend in Kindergarten. He lived in Line Bazaar. It was the medical-hub of my city and I had been there many a time, especially to get a tooth or two pulled out. But never once had I been to his home. He came to school in a car, and I in a rickshaw. But I had the privilege of choosing my seat as I was the first one to board. Jitendar Uncle, the rickshaw-puller, lived in a slum somewhere near my house, and his son came daily to deliver us milk. There was place for three on the coir-cushioned seat of the rickshaw. Though it was more comfortable than the wooden bench placed on the footrest area to accommodate four extra children, I never sat there. Rather, I was not allowed to sit. The three seats were reserved for the three senior girls who studied in Standard II. They would scold me if I ever sat there, and also tease me all the way to school. So, I always chose one of the two side seats protruding out of the rickshaw. Out there, I could swing and kick my legs as freely as I wanted. Of course, I had to wait for someone else to sit on the other end because, as Jitendar Uncle always warned, the bench would topple over and I would fall.

A gang of mean girls always picked on me in school. Their leader was a lanky girl named Neha. She was my classmate and thought it was funny to pass comments on me during classes. She and her friends broke my pencils and cut my new erasers into two halves. Sometimes, they even hid my lunch-box or scribbled in my notebooks.

It was Asharbh who got me rid of them and that was how we became friends. One lunch-break, these nasty girls snatched my water-bottle and passed it around, while I hopped about trying to get it back. Other students watched the game and cheered. I was on the verge of crying. It was Asharbh who came forward and asked the girls to return my bottle. It was Asharbh who got into a quarrel with them. It was Asharbh who slapped Neha and made her cry. She threw my bottle and ran away, and never bothered me again.

Asharbh and I became inseparable since then... until the Daayan took him away.

*

Daayan was an evil woman who prowled the toilet premises and took away lone students wandering in that area. She would then boil and eat them. It was because of her that we were not allowed to visit the toilet during classes. We were given a five-minute Toilet-Break after every two periods during which anyone who needed to visit the toilet had to get in a line and wait for Didi, a middle-aged woman, to ferry us. She also swept the corridors and cleaned the blackboards every morning. She was extremely tanned and kept her hair oiled and neatly tied. She had a set of big stained teeth visible whether she was smiling or not. She would accompany us from our classrooms and guide us in a single file across the playground to a wide, raised platform on the far side of the school. Two rows of old cubicles fitted with wooden doors, with lots of cracks and holes, were built on either side of the platform. In between the rows were two large, circular concrete water tanks not more

than three feet high. Though each cubicle did have an iron flush with a long chain, we had to fetch water from these tanks as only a few cubicles had running taps. On the far end of the platform was a low wall separating the school from what seemed to be a forest.

"It is a forest," Didi often told us. It indeed had trees that did not grow in gardens – large bare trees, trees with thin trunks and lush green leaves, trees with branches touching the ground. I did recognise some of them though, a few bamboo stems grew here and there, and then there was a peepal tree. But the most famous of them all was the guava tree just before the line of tall trees with dense foliage that obscured everything beyond. Senior students sometimes jumped over the wall, across a low cacti fence, and ventured till the guava tree to collect its fallen fruits. Some even climbed the tree. But for most of us, the *forest* was some spooky sort of place. The trees were dark and quiet and still. We did not even dare to go near the wall, or use the toilets on extreme ends.

One Toilet-Break, I stayed back in class to complete a drawing home-work. I had drawn a brown mountain range with a brilliant yellow sun shining above it. A beautiful house stood under a tree beside a lovely blue river flowing out of the mountains. I was drawing some fruits on the tree when I suddenly felt a familiar sensation in my abdomen. I needed to go to the toilet. But the Toilet-Break was almost over. I looked around. There was no teacher in the classroom. What if I quickly ran and... But it would take time. Plus, Didi would not allow me to use any of the cubicles. I tried to control. I just had to control for two more lessons. Then there would be Lunch-Break and then I could... two more lessons...

that would be one hour. One whole hour!

I sneaked out of the classroom and ran across the playground to the toilet. Didi was already driving kids back to their classrooms - knocking at closed doors, shouting at students to hurry, hurling a long stick at anyone who did not find it urgent to go back. "The Daayan is coming!" she yelled. "Hurry up! Or she will cook you and eat you!" While she was clearing the left row of cubicles, I quickly grabbed a mug, filled it from the tank, ran along the right row and shut myself in one of the rarely used toilets towards the wall. She would not go looking there. I undid my belt and sat for some time, listening to the fading voices, the scurrying of feet... then everything was quiet. I was nervous. I heard a bell ring. Soon, teachers would enter their classes. Would Miss Mary notice I was missing? And what about my drawing! It was still incomplete.

Something moved in the trees beyond. Maybe just a rustling of leaves, maybe... I quickly began to wash. Somebody began to hum. I stopped. Jingling of bangles. Tinkling of *payal*. I tried to peep out of the many holes in the door. My sight was limited till the water-tanks. But one thing was certain - someone else was present there. I kept the mug quietly on the floor.

Someone was coming closer.

Humming.

I began to sweat.

Soft footsteps.

THE DATE

IT had been all blood and rage. I ran down the market in a heavy juggernaut suit. Enemy personnel were being deployed not more than two blocks away. I barged into an empty shop and planted my M249 Saw on a window-sill.

10 o'clock.

They were hiding behind a bookstore. More troops of soldiers were coming in, taking cover behind cars and buildings. Glass shattered as bullets came raining in. This had been a poor move. I was vulnerable. I moved back, returning bullet for bullet. I heard tires screech to halt on the street outside.

A Technical!

Get down!

A volley of bullets shattered the wall behind me. I ran out and took cover behind a burning car. The street ahead was crawling with hostiles.

Keep moving! Keep moving!

I made my way forward. A soldier tried to cross the street in front of me, his team providing cover fire from a coffee shop. But then, you don't cross path with someone in a juggernaut suit, covering fire or not. I shot him dead and entered the shop where his team was hiding.

Some fired at me. One threw a grenade. Others ran for the exit.

The explosion caught me off guard for a moment. I fired blindly. Men fell in piles. Blood and concrete flew across the room. I emerged from the smoke and headed for the exit.

And then it came, crashing through the window and hitting the wall right beside me. An RPG!

I was swept off my feet. I crashed on a wall. My vision blurred. For a moment, I couldn't hear anything except my heart pounding. I looked out. They were closing in. I threw a signal flare out on the street. Red smoke rose high above the buildings and into the open sky.

"Take cover!" I heard the soldiers shout. They retreated.

My radio crackled. "Target located. UAV on the way. Stand by."

The sky began to rumble. Something black darted across the blue expanse, bombarding the street in its wake. The walls trembled as a series of explosions rocked the street outside. I hid in the building and waited for the strike to end. The rumble overhead began to fade, leaving the street clouded in dense smoke and fire. I emerged from the building. The Technical had been destroyed.

I was scanning the street when the radio crackled again. "Be advised, enemy personnel have marked your

location..." I didn't wait to hear more. I turned around to see green smoke emanating right behind me.

Damn! Damn! Damn!

I made a dash for the building ahead. The sky began to rumble again. Something black shot overhead, series of explosions trailing behind...

PAUSE.

My phone was ringing. "Hello?"

"Hi! What is my baby doing?" a cheery, seductive voice asked from the other side.

"Busy! Talk to you later."

"Busy? Where are you?"

"P.G."

"Friends in your room?"

"No."

"Err... Okay. So... you are busy with?"

"Playing..."

"What the hell? Seriously!"

"Will call in some time. I am in the middle of a bloody war! Bye." I cut the phone.

It is high time girls understood that playing Call of Duty is a valid reason to be busy.

I had just adjusted myself, getting comfortable on my chair, when someone knocked at the door.

I opened it to find Murga holding a bottle of Old Monk. He, like me, was in fourth year. But unlike me, was fat and plump and had too much hair – on his head, on his face, chest, arms... He was in a pair of wrinkled and dirty shorts, revealing his fat hairy legs.

Mechanical.

"Call of Duty!" he proclaimed as he entered my room, eyeing my computer with his beady eyes, and hairy eyebrows. "Counter Strike is far better!"

"As if CS is a real game!" I retorted.

He stopped dead in his track. His fingers clenched. Hairy face reddened. Blood in his eyes.

"Hey, hey, you two!" A lanky fellow in skin-tight jeans pushed us aside. "This," he carefully unwrapped a piece of paper to reveal bits of dry leaves, "is the real game!" He was tall. Bloody tall. Wavy hair. Sunken eyes. And had the decency to cover his legs.

Avi. Computer Science.

Murga placed the bottle on my desk and went to the kitchen. I was about to shut the door when another student walked in, his head buried in his phone. I didn't know his name, but had seen him in college. "Hey!" I greeted.

He didn't as much as look up.

"What's with him and his phone?" I asked as I latched the door.

Avi was rolling a few pinches of finely crushed dry leaves in a piece of paper. "He is Mayank. First floor. Don't mind him. He just found a match on Tinder."

"Oh! So, he is planning a date with her or something?"

"No bro! Waiting for her to reply!"

We laughed.

Mechanical, I assumed.

"Hey," Mayank finally looked up and sat down next to Avi, "should I ask her why she is not replying to my messages? Look at this! I have sent her twelve messages in the last ten minutes and she doesn't have the courtesy to reply even once."

Definitely Mechanical.

We sat on my bed in a circle and passed the joint around. Murga handed us a glass each and poured Old Monk and water. He himself mixed it with Pepsi. Packets of peanuts and chips lay open in the centre. Mayank was still waiting for his girl to reply. He had his hopes high. Like all boys, he honestly believed that if a girl swiped right and liked his profile, he was definitely getting laid.

The room began to fill with smoke. Someone was playing guitar in the room next to mine. Someone else

was watching porn at full volume. Boys in towels were having a water fight on the second floor. We could hear them scream and abuse as they hurled buckets of water on each other. A little kid in second year was struggling to place an order for pizza over his phone in the corridor outside. A pale moon was shining through a dirty window. A slum slept under a hazy blanket of air three storeys below.

"She is not going to reply, man! Let it be. Don't spoil the mood," I said after a while.

"But she liked me!"

"I bet she did! Guess how that turned out for her!" I gulped down my drink and took a puff. Murga poured another glass.

"Bro, I tell you," Avi was leaning against the wall, eyes already drowsy. "These dating apps. Most of them hire models to make accounts and put up their photos. Bro, you actually get paid to make an account! I mean look at her!" he snatched Mayank's phone and showed us a picture of a stunning young woman. She was smiling at us as if she could have never been happier, all her flaws hidden behind layers of makeup, and then image processing algorithms. "I mean, does she *need* to make friends? All she has to do is smile at a guy and he is flat for her. You get what I mean, bro?"

My phone began to ring again. My girlfriend. I couldn't pick up now, not after cutting her off saying I was busy and then boozing with my friends and a desperate guy.

"There is this another dating app I came across just today on some random site." Murga scratched his hairy legs, "Ginger. "Find the LOVE you would DIE for!" A dating app where you can date the dead! Can you believe it, man? The guy who made it committed suicide after launching it."

"Why? He couldn't get any girl to like him even after all that?" I asked.

"Actually, it was his plan all along. He created the app and killed himself to be a part of it."

"How many downloads?"

"It's not on Google Play. They put it down."

"Why?"

"It has actual photos of dead people, man! Not very appealing. So basically, you create an account and swipe through profiles of the dead. Apparently, the dead can do the same. Now, here is the real deal – if you get a match, they guarantee you a date within a week. And then, you die!"

"Great!" I raised my glass. "A full-fledged dating app for your afterlife."

"It's a marketing scam, bro!" Avi was looking up at the ceiling. "Create a theme. Then circulate stories that add to the curiosity. Arouse interest and fool people into downloading it. Marketing strategy bro! Marketing strategy."

"Then why have they removed it from the store?"

Mayank asked. He had finally put down his phone.

"There are numerous reasons. Blood. Violence. Explicit content. Security," Avi replied.

"And the profiles of the dead? The chats?"

"Bots, bro, bots! Artificial intelligence. And who knows they actually pay someone to create and maintain these profiles. What else is more probable? You are messed up bro! Here, hold my glass. I'll make another joint."

And that was the end of the Ginger episode, or so I thought. We talked of girls and our plans for the future. Debated whether the latest iPhone was just another hype. "It's all marketing strategy, bro!" We searched for funny videos on YouTube. Laughed at Dhinchak Pooja. Agreed to look into hacking techniques to delete all her videos. Then, we decided to make our own videos and become millionaires. As the last of the dry leaves turned into smoke, we had another philosophical discussion on girls.

I was wasted by the time my friends left. I could barely latch the door. I switched off the lights, turned on the night-light and slumped down on my bed. I watched the ceiling swirl above me. It was past two. I wanted to call my girlfriend, but thought better of it. I could make an apology card for her. Buy craft-paper and ribbons. Then decorate it with small LEDs wired to a hidden button-cell and a microcontroller programmed to blink them in colourful patterns. I could also attach a tiny speaker that emanated melody, or maybe a recorded message, every time she opened the card. Let her say no to that!

Yeah! Or I could have just talked to her for five more minutes when she had called.

My phone buzzed. I smiled. Speaking of the sexy angel...

I unlocked the phone and pulled down the notification... and grunted in disgust. Turned out to be an email from Murga. Not a WhatsApp message. A bloody email! Oh! And look at that! It had a zipped .apk file attachment as well.

I downloaded the app and permitted installation from unknown sources.

Ginger's home-screen was in sharp contrast to its reputation. Cheery and appealing. The designer had a bloody good sense of colours.

I clicked on New User? Sign Up. Surprisingly, there was no option to Sign In.

Choose Username arjunkg234 ✓ Create Password ****** Confirm Password ****** First Name Last Name ARJUN K GUPTA DOB 22 / 09 / 1996 Sex Male ▼ Location NEW DELHI ▼ NEXT

I filled in the details and hit Next.

YOUR INTEREST

MEN
WOMEN
BOTH

Women.

Definitely women.

FINDING PEOPLE NEARBY... 💍

The first picture that appeared was of a woman called Niharika. She was pouting in front of the Taj Mahal.

Age: 29.

Died: 2015.

Died: 2015?

I flicked my finger and more photos of her swept across the screen. All smiling and posing. All alive. The app dropped a hint. If I happened to like the girl, I could Swipe Right, else Swipe Left. If the girl liked me on her end, we had struck a match!

I swiped right... and waited.

Nothing happened.

I chuckled. What had I been thinking? It was like Tinder after all. I viewed the next profile and swiped right. Then next, and next. I don't know for how long it went. There was nothing dead or spooky about the app. No violence. No gore. Avi was right. Just a marketing stunt. All the pictures were of women pretending to be happy with their lives. They posed with dogs and cats, in clubs and mountains, in saris and skirts...

And I dozed off.

I didn't know what woke me up. A little smoke still lingered in the room. I squinted at my phone's screen.

3:14 AM. There was a new notification from Ginger.

Congratulations! You have a new match!

Interesting! I unlocked the phone and opened the app. A girl from Miranda House, who claimed to have died not so long ago – in 2017 itself! Radhika. She was rather attractive. I had seen all her photos before; nevertheless, I went through them again. I had swiped right a lot many girls and didn't quite remember all of them. She was 20 and had all the glamour and attitude of Delhi girls. The last photo was in a pub. She was with her friends, all poking their tongues out, fingers held in victory in front of their faces. That had been the last photo the last time I had checked, but now that we had struck a match, I found a button at the bottom of the screen that said, "SEE MORE".

I tapped, and there she was, Radhika, lying dead on what seemed to be a steel bed, her skin horrendously pale, eyes opened and unfocused, lips sore, a thick purple mark around her neck.

The phone almost fell from my hand.

There were more photos, from different angles, and the last one was of a charred leg jutting out from a burning heap of logs.

I dropped the phone and shut my eyes. Damn! These people! What can they not do to sell their product? I wanted to call my girlfriend, but it was quite late. I rose to my feet to go to the toilet. I was still disoriented. I drank a glass of water on my way back and sank into my bed.

The phone beeped again. There was another notification from Ginger.

You have a new message from Radhika. Tap to reply.

Damn the hell! Was I that lucky or was she just a hooker?

I wriggled up on my pillow, unlocked the screen and tapped on the notification. A chat screen opened in front of me.

Today, 21 Nov, 2017

Hi...
03:21 AM

I wanted to go to sleep. But I cannot justify why I didn't. I had no intention of flirting or even striking a casual friendship. But still, I did it. I replied.

hi radhika :) how r u... ✓ 03:23 AM

I am well. You say. What do you do??

i m an engineering student... 4th year electronics & comm

✓ 03:24 AM

Why do you engineers always put your branch in front of your bio?? LOL!!!

03:24 AM

just a habit.. ha ha n what do u do ✓ 03:25 AM

Nothing much...

03:25 AM

i mean which college???

✓ 03:25 AM

I am not in college.

03:26 AM

then? tell me u r super rich n we can meet tomorrow...

;)

✓ 03:27 AM

Not super rich either.

03:28 AM

ha... ha... but u r drop dead gorgeous!

Thank you!

03:29 AM

anyway... other than not going to college... what do u do??

✓ 03:30 AM

I have nothing to do.

03:30 AM

really? nothing ???

I cry...

sometimes...

03:31 AM

y???? ✓ 03:31 AM

I feel lonely... in pain... 03:31 AM

y?
r u alright
what happened...

✓ 03:32 AM

THE DARKNESS AROUND US

I woke up to a rainy morning and found some workers waiting anxiously at my door. A section of the bridge under construction had collapsed again. It was the third time in a mere span of two months. And it was not because of some carelessness from our side, or quality issues. We had done everything by the book. I had personally monitored the construction after the first failure. Yet, it collapsed again, and again.

And it always happened at night.

The young junior engineer working under me was almost glowing with excitement when I reached the office. This was his first project. He was inexperienced, but was more than willing to do his best. He laid out the section plan before me and began to point out possible structural lapses, paying no attention to the workers waiting outside the office, or the local contractor who sat in a visitor's chair wearing a troubled countenance.

When the junior engineer had explained his plan of action, backing it with some elaborate simulation results he had gathered overnight, he sat back, pleased with himself, and waited for my approval, maybe even appreciation. I gave him a long, searching look in return, pondering whether to give him an explanation or not; and decided against it. I suppose it takes experience to truly understand the laws of nature, not mere education.

Instead, I took out one thousand rupees from my wallet. "Here," I beckoned the contractor over, "take this and arrange for a sacrifice. Collect money from all the workers on the site, one rupee at least, but no one should be left out, not a single person involved in the work. Come to me if more fund is required."

The contractor sighed with relief. The young engineer sat frozen in his seat, unable to process what had just happened. He watched back and forth between his drawings and simulations and the money, all spread on the table. But he had the discipline to keep quiet, and sense to take out a hundred rupee note and place it on the table.

We sacrificed a goat on the site that day, and then began the process of re-erecting the section. I let the young man execute his plan.

There was no accident this time.

Maybe the new plan was indeed better.

Or maybe, it was the sacrifice.

We would never know.

*

I was very similar to the junior engineer when I had joined the services more than two decades ago. Young, ambitious and full of energy. It was in the early 80s then. My first project was in a village called Shri Mata in

Purnia district of Bihar. The government had sanctioned a huge storage facility to assist local agricultural trade. I packed my bags and took a bus from Bhagalpur to Rupauli. And then, a *tanga*, or a horse-cart, all the way to Shri Mata. My father knew someone there and had written him a letter about my arrival, requesting him to arrange for accommodation.

The *tanga* cut across fields and farms. My fellow passengers watched me inquisitively. The curiouser ones kept riddling me with questions. We were halfway to the village, crossing a rather treacherous patch of mudtracks, when we were stopped by a well-built man on a motorcycle. He was the person my father had written to. He had replied that he would come to pick me up, but somehow, the letter never reached. As the passengers watched, I had to explain to him why I did not wait for him at the bus stand and took the *tanga*, that I was not the 'impatient young man' he was judging me to be. Well, that was how I first met Shyamlal Yadav. At the end of it, he made me sit behind him and ordered the *tanga* owner to deliver the luggage to his house.

Though he had arranged for a rented room for me, I had to stay with his family for a week or so, before I could finally shift. I would say I hardly faced any problem settling in, Shyamlal Yadav made sure of that. He had a son, a few years younger than me, who went by the name of Guddu. The two of us got along well. I was thrilled by the freedom that I suddenly found at my disposal. Villagers showered me with respect, and I tried my best to stay humble. Those were good old days... until the old village tales I had heard growing up began to unravel themselves.

In my younger days, I did have difficulty accepting what I thought was not justifiable; I was a man of science after all. We believe in reason, solid facts, experiments and conclusions. But sometimes, even we turn a blind eye to something right in front of us, just because it was unexpected, inadmissible, something that did not fit in our ever-changing equations... You see, we have gone far into the space to discover other forms of life. We look up at the stars and wonder about existence of life in the vastness we cannot see. Yet, we tend to ignore the evidences of the *other world* thriving not in the darkness above, but around us.

*

My rented house had several rooms and a cemented courtyard in the centre. Two other families, complete with three children each and even a dog, shared the house with me. I had a large room for myself, with a window overlooking the main gates. The compound was huge. It had several trees surrounded by a shoulder-high boundary wall. What must have been a garden once, had then been turned into small vegetable patches by the two families.

The children and the dog would run around the campus during daytime, climbing on trees, chasing and bullying each other, screaming, crying... but come night, an eerie silence would descend over the campus. The women would light kerosene lanterns and place them in the corridors. They didn't mind cleaning and refilling

a lantern for me. The children would huddle in the courtyard under the starry sky and watch their mothers prepare dinner, while an old lady, their grandmother, sat on a sagging *khatiya*, or charpoy, and told them tales of her younger days. I had made all necessary arrangements to prepare my own dinner, but it proved to be a futile effort. Whenever I returned home late, I always found my dinner waiting for me. Soon, I became a part of the two families.

During the initial days in my new house, I developed a habit of reading in the front veranda after dinner. I liked it there. It was calm, soothing and smelled of freedom. Fireflies hovered over a pond in front of the house. The moon was brighter then. It glittered on the surface of the water, sometimes as still as mirror, with a hurried movement here and a tiny splash there, and sometimes filled with ripples in a cold breeze. Dark shapes of huts and coconut trees silhouetted against the night sky, dotted with the feeble light of oil lamps. I would read till the village fell asleep. I was advised to return to my room and not stay in the veranda. But I didn't heed it until one night when I saw it for myself.

As usual, the children had gone to sleep. The women were cleaning the kitchen and making preparation for the day to come. It could not have been over nine that night, and I had already been told to come indoors and lock the door. The compound was alive with the buzzing of insects. Bats flew across the sky. Random calls of animals cut through the air every now and then. It was after one of those sounds that I looked up. It disappeared in the blink of an eye, but I had seen it.

Someone had darted across the garden

I leapt up with so much force that my chair crashed into the door, and woke everyone up. The men laughed it away when I told them it was a dacoit, though I myself didn't believe that a man could have run so fast. The figure I had seen seemed to have been floating, not running. The women stayed at their rooms' doors, quiet and concerned. They did not find my story funny.

The two families had interesting tales to tell me about the house, its owners and their ancestors. However, no one dared to talk about it once darkens fell. "Shhhhh..." the old grandmother would put a finger to her lips whenever I raised the subject during dinner. "We will talk about it tomorrow. Who knows what may catch their attention!" She would look around, as if searching for someone in the darkness, then spit on the floor.

One among the few things I remember clearly even now, was the pond across the street. Little children would dive into the water, or throw in fishing lines and wait for hours. I never saw any fish being caught, and was under the impression that the pond had no fish, until the young woman who lived right across the pond proved me wrong.

It wasn't the woman, actually. I first saw her when I was out, strolling along the street one morning. She was at a hand-pump behind her house, filling a bucket. I must admit that I was rather charmed by her beauty, for, after that, I spent many a morning lazing around on the street just to catch a glimpse of her. I was careful though, least someone noticed – I made a fishing line myself and

pretended to fish. And it was during one of those fishing sessions that I actually caught a small black *kawai*.

I did get to meet her... but that is a different story.

The construction site was in the market place, about four and a half kilometres from where I stayed. The chief engineer himself hardly ever visited the site, maybe once in months, and left me to bear the burden of his responsibilities. I wasn't really bothered about it. For me, it was an opportunity to win his favour.

Shyamlal Yadav used to ferry me on his motorcycle for the first few weeks. He would pick me up at my gate in the morning and we would ride through a stretch of muddy road with deep tyres marks. Tall flowering trees of amaltas, gulmohar and sagwan grew on either side, their dense foliage perpetually keeping the road in shadows. Farms swayed in the winds as far as eyes could see. Farmers toiled under the sun, from early morning till dusk. Shyamlal Yadav would point to the fields around, proudly telling me about all the land he owned, sometimes even shouting out to the workers from his motorcycle to tele-introduce me. The road would emerge from the shadows at small junction, from where more paths branched out to different villages. We would drive straight ahead, honk, then cross a wooden bridge built over a stream that cut through the fields, and after a short ride through sugarcane fields, emerge in the marketplace.

I bought a cycle as soon as I received my first salary. I had decided to stop troubling Shyamlal Yadav and travel by myself. But once the monsoon came, water would fill in the pits created by tractor tyres, making

it almost impossible to cycle without falling or getting stuck. The condition of the road didn't improve until you crossed the bridge. So, I locked the cycle in my house after a few weeks of use and made it a habit of going to work on foot, even when the weather improved.

One day at work, Guddu, Shyamlal Yadav's son, visited the site to invite me to a *Bhumi Puja*, a sacred ceremony in which a piece of land they were selling was to be worshipped. I was rather perplexed because I had so far believed that it was the buyer who worshiped his newly acquired land, and not the seller.

On my way home, I stopped at a sweet shop.

"For Shyam Ji?" the shopkeeper asked, and without waiting for a reply, he wrapped a handful of *jalebi* in a piece of paper and held it out for me. "One rupee." I must have stared at him a bit too long, because he began to chuckle. "This is for the *puja*, Afsar Sahib?" I nodded. "Then this is enough."

I asked him to pack a kilogram of *sandesh*, a delicious Bengali sweet, paid him and headed back home. I couldn't just give Shyamlal Yadav a handful of *jalebi*. It was one of the rare occasions I got to gift something to him. Plus, I had a social status to maintain.

The following morning, I wore a set of new clothes and set out for the fields. Throngs of men, women and children, all dressed as if for a festival, were heading in the same direction. A crowd was gathered around a *peepal* tree in a tilled field. Children were running around, chasing each other, screaming, laughing. The older ones had climbed trees to watch the ceremony

progress. A pandit sat on a neatly laid piece of cloth and was chanting under the shade of the *peepal* tree. A fire burned in a cleaned, watered and cow-dung plastered patch of ground in front of him. I noticed that the villagers would approach the tree, place some *jalebi* wrapped in paper, fold their hands, and then retreat. Shyamlal Yadav was seated next to the priest, offering the fire god petals, grains and ghee whenever the priest indicated. When he saw me, he beckoned me closer. "Ah! I see you have brought offering! Good! Good! You are getting hold of our village's traditions. Give! I will personally offer it for you. And don't you go yet. I want you to take the Bhumidev's blessing as well." I handed him the packet of *sandesh*. "So much! There was no need for this! Just two *jalebi* would have sufficed."

"This is for you and your family as well."

"Oh! This is for my family! Thank you, son!" he beamed at me and carefully placed the packet beside him. "Where is the offering then?"

"I... I did not... We can offer a piece or two from the packet itself. You see, I did not buy separate..."

His smile faltered. "Oh no, son! We cannot offer this to the Bhumidev. You see, you bought this for me and my family. If we offer it in the puja, we will get his blessing, not... I wanted you to... Oh, don't you worry!" He called for his son. "Give him a coin or two, if you don't mind. He will go to the market and buy some sweets for you. Just a rupee should be enough."

I too had some work on the site, and decided to go with his son on the motorcycle. After stopping by my

office, we visited the same sweet shop, and the young man began berating the shopkeeper for tricking me into buying a whole kilogram of *sandesh*. I intervened, and much to both the men's surprise, ordered another kilogram. Guddu protested that it was not required, but I stood my ground. Again, I had a reputation to maintain, even if it was just an offering.

My curiosity got better of me on our way back. "Why is your father performing this puja when he is selling the land?" I asked as we drove through the sugarcane fields.

"Oh! Bhaiya Ji, it is to take permission of the Bhumidev."

"Bhumidev?"

"Our ancestors. You see, these lands were handed down the generation. They were cultivated, watered... protected... for centuries before us. They are not ours alone to sell. If we do need to sell, then we have to perform this puja to seek their permission."

"Really? And what do you mean by their approval? How would you know if they agreed or not?"

"There are signs, Bhaiya Ji. Warnings, initially, if they don't agree. These must not be ignored. The buyer will make the payment only if the signs are favourable. And even then, the name of the Bhumidev must appear along with the name of the seller, and the buyer. That is, you can disown the land, but not the Bhumidev. Generally, we make the legal papers before the puja to let the Bhumidev know that we have kept their name."

"You mean you actually sign away legal papers without any payment! What if the other party makes a legal claim without paying?"

The young man looked at me in the mirror, then laughed nervously. "Don't even think of it, Bhaiya Ji, if you want to return from this village alive. There is a reason they are called Bhumidev. They are the guardians of the lands and the families that pay homage to them. You cannot as much as pluck a leaf in their land without repercussions."

"What repercussions?"

"Now, how do I explain! They will harm you if you mean ill to their land. Well, consider this incident as an example – there was this farmer who got jealous of his neighbour's produce one harvesting season. He and his three sons sneaked out one dark night to damage the crops. All four of them were bitten by a large, black snake. They died before they could damage a single plant."

"How did you know that the snake was large and black when all four of them were dead?"

"What is there to know? It was the Bhumidev! It had been spotted several times in the field."

"Or, it could just have been what it was - a large black snake," I concluded.

"Yes, it could have, and I cannot make you think otherwise from one incident alone. Listen to this story then. There was a British officer once who bought a land

THE SILENCE OF THE PINES

I want to tell you about my village. I would have started with its name, but then, you wouldn't have heard of it. So, I think it would suffice if I say it sits unnoticed somewhere near the lofty mountains of Nainital, away from the din and confusion that has penetrated the main town. Since there is no lake in my village, no tourist bothers with its name. If you walk three miles or so up north through the pine trees, and look down from the cliffs, you can see the town of Ranikhet below. I would have liked to tell you more about my village, but I have to admit, there is not much that I can tell.

I get down from the bus and look around the once familiar landscape of Ranikhet. Taxi drivers swarm around me. I want to pretend like a 'local', but whom am I fooling? A 'local' who has a British accent? The market has all changed in the fifteen years that I had been away. I myself cannot recognize it. Yes, the mountains are still the same. The cold still bites. The air still feels fresh. But everything else, like me, has changed.

I am a little disappointed that there is no one here to receive me. I had called my father when I landed in New Delhi a couple of days back, thought I would give him a surprise. As usual, his phone was out of network coverage. I then called my distant uncle in Ranikhet. He was out of town, but had assured me that he would inform my father.

The taxi drivers scatter away when I tell them where I want to go. Apparently, my village is too remote to be profitable. I persuade them a little, eventually even agreed to pay two-way fare, but they simply seem uninterested for reasons they longer explain. I think of my cousin, but then I don't have his number, nor have I spoken to him since I went to boarding school when I was twelve. I call my uncle again. He is most apologetic as he tells me that his son is in Bareily. He informs me about state-run buses that ply on that route. He can also arrange a night stay for me and ask someone to drop me home the next day, because even if I take the bus, I will still have to walk about half a dozen kilometres from the bus stand, with my luggage, to reach home. I thank him for the offer. But I am really excited to be back home.

It is almost evening when the bus arrives. It is in a poor state. The seats are too straight and cushions too thin for my comfort. I try to focus on the scenery unfolding before me as the bus meanders upwards. And I am lost in my childhood again.

Back in the 90's, I was a small kid who loved to roam around in the mountains with my dogs, puppies rather, as they were then. I had five of them. They accompanied me wherever I went. Together, we collected pine cones and chased after monkeys. My father was a government school teacher and very well knew the importance of education. When my puppies had grown into adults, I was admitted to a school 8 kilometres away, with no modes of transportation. My mother used to walk me to school every day, and the dogs trailed along. She would then walk back to do her house chores and come again to pick me up in the evening. In those days, my father was

posted in a town far away. He only came home during weekends. Those were hard times. But I had nothing to complain. I had my mother to pamper me, my father to bring me small gifts, though very rarely, my army of dogs at my command and a whole world of mountains waiting to be explored. I had little ambition then, and I was happy.

When I outgrew the education facilities of my village, I was sent to a boarding school in Nainital. My father began to stay away even on weekends to give tuitions. My mother started to grow vegetables and carry them to Ranikhet to sell. Unaware of their plight, I was drowned in my own sorrows. I missed my dogs. I missed my home. But, as years passed, I made more friends, learned more about the world beyond my little village. After school, I went to Delhi for graduation. My mother continued with her vegetable business, and she did well. My father had been promoted to a high school teacher. When I bagged my first job, I almost cried with joy. But I was required to join immediately and did not get a chance to visit home. Mobile connection was still a thing of future back in my village and I had to call my uncle in Ranikhet to give my parents the news. Then there was never-ending work, one promotion and then the next. Three years later, I shifted to Bangalore. Another couple of years... and I got myself admitted in an MBA college. Then another company. More promotions. And finally, I flew abroad and worked in London for four years. Telephonic conversation with my parents had always been an issue, but I wrote letters and they always replied. When I moved to London, even that stopped.

The bus stop used to be just a shade then. When I

get down, it has transformed into a concrete room, with a seating slab currently being used by a mongrel and its pups. The bus roars off and I find a motor cycle parked on the other side. Behind it, another road marches up through a pine forest. The majestic pines, rising straight upwards into the darkening sky. I close my eyes and inhale deeply. Old memories flood me with emotions. I hear dogs bark. A child's carefree laughter echoes around the mountains. The pines watch the same child standing before them, the five dogs replaced with pieces of luggage. The pines were silent then and they are still silent now.

A young man approaches me, all smiling and happy. Apparently, my uncle had requested him to drop me to my village. He lives somewhere nearby – he keeps pointing up the road where the bus had disappeared. We manage to secure the bags on his motorcycle and then we are off, meandering through the pine forest. A wide stream rushes noisily in the opposite direction in a depression below. The tarmac road used to be just a *kuccha* road when I was in school. I ask the young man why the drivers seem reluctant when there is a good road to the village.

"Ah! These drivers," he laughs, "they say that this road is haunted."

"Haunted, is it?"

"That bus stop you saw there? They say a woman waits there for someone. Many drivers have seen her even at night, sitting all alone in the darkness. No one wants to come here alone."

"But you were parked right opposite the bus stand."

The young man laughs again. "I am not one of those drivers, sir! Your phone was unreachable. How would I have met you otherwise?"

He starts enumerating the changes and development that have been witnessed in the villages around in recent years. I listen to him for some time, then my thoughts begin to drift. I watch the waters splashing and tumbling over rocks in their playful journey down the mountain, as I used to when I went to school, my mother beside me, my dogs following like bodyguards, sniffing random tree-trunks and barking at birds and monkeys. My white sneakers never lasted long. Walking on the rocky terrain everyday wore out the soles within few months. I would crib and plead not to go to school and my father would have to buy a new pair. It never occurred to me then that my mother, who accompanied me every day, never bought a new pair of slippers for herself. Hers were so worn out that the blue material of the soles was visible in patches from above, cracked and filled with thorn holes. She walked the path four times daily, without complaining even once. Like all children, I too thought that my parents were super-humans and had no pain or problem of their own.

As we come closer to a bridge that cuts across the stream, I begin to smile. The young man notices this in the rear-view mirror and is curious. I tell him that long ago, when I was a kid, I got lost in the forest. I was out exploring with my dogs and lost my way. I panicked, and even after hours of frantically running around, I could not find my way back. I was eventually spotted by two

women picking firewood. They consoled me and led me out of the forest. We were on this bridge when a man from my village happened to cross us.

"This bridge," asks the young man. "But your village is on the same side."

That was the same question the man had asked the women. They said that they were only taking me to the village I had told them about. A scuffle issued. The man accused them of child trafficking. Onlookers began to collect. They roughened up the women, who were on the verge of tears, begging innocence. I sat on a pillar a little way off with my five dogs and excitedly watched the whole drama unfold before me. Afterall, I had just escaped from being kidnapped, and I was proud of myself. The women would have been beaten up for sure, had not a sensible person intervened and questioned me. Apparently, I had mispronounced the name of my village and thinking it to be another one nearby, the women were taking me in the wrong direction.

The young man has a good laugh. I smile and shake my head. And suddenly, I begin to miss my dogs. After all these years... They are all long dead. I was in boarding school when a panther sneaked into my house campus. It was outnumbered by the dogs. It ran to seek shelter in the pines. The dogs wouldn't give up. In the fighting that ensued, one of them was grievously injured. It did not last the night. I had cried when I heard the news. When I came home for holidays, I would gather flowers from the forest and place them at the little mound where my father had buried it. The others died in years to come, but I had grown so busy with life by then that it did not bother me.