

DEVI

A woman in a saree stands in the center of the frame, her face obscured by a dark mask. She is positioned in front of a large pile of rubble and the ruins of an ancient temple. The temple's entrance is visible in the background, with a dark figure standing within. The scene is set in a dark, overgrown forest with twisted tree branches hanging from above. The overall atmosphere is dark and mysterious.

NAG MANI



DEVI

Somewhere in a faraway village, there is the ruin of an ancient temple where no one worships. If you happen to come across it someday, you should bow your head and walk away. Do not be tempted to go in, and tempted you will be, for the Devi of the temple grants wishes. But she must be promised something in return...

Aditi talked to the stars when she was married to a man ten years older than herself, and they whispered to her that she was responsible for her own happiness. And that was what she had been struggling to do, searching for moments of joy in a patriarchal society... until she had to shift with her husband to Ufrail, a remote village in Bihar infamous for its blood-curdling history. And then she hears about the temple of the Devi...

...and she is tempted!

CHAPTER 1

THE RITUAL

Amavasya is the night of the new moon.

The inky expanse of a clear starry night. Cold, refreshing breeze. A river gushes nosily besides a dark canvas of tree-tops. Lights flicker on the other side of the trees – dim oils lamps hung outside huts and shades, emanating feeble rays of hope and strength against the cold darkness of the night. Dogs curl on the softest spots they can find. Bells tinker as cows and goats shuffle under their shades. An old woman coughs.

The night grows older...

Away from this sleeping village, under the foliage of the trees, walks a lone human figure amid silent glares of the trees. It is holding a candle. Slung over its shoulder is a heavy jute bag. A little white goat follows close behind, tied to a rope. The light from the candle falls on thick, twisted trunks of the nearest trees, dark and gloomy, but nothing beyond. It is bright enough to see a crumbling brick-path on the ground though.

The figure un-hears the whispers coming from the trees; it un-sees the movements beyond the dwindling sphere of light and recites an unholy prayer in its mind, for it has come so far to pray, and pray it must...

A clearing in the foliage. The night sky peeps down from the heavens. And in that clearing sleeps an ancient mango tree. It has grown taller and deeper and broader for centuries, looming high above the canopy, its foliage forming a dome above the clearing. The branches spread wide and hang low. Its crown looks down at the vast expanse of the trees around. It sees the rushing river. It sees the sleeping village. It sees the glittering stars. And it sees a human and an animal enter the clearing.

Graves protrude from the ground along the periphery of the clearing – a broken stump, a withered slab of stone, mounds rising under layers of decaying leaves, a crumbling stone pillar...

In the silence of the night, the cloaked figure sits under

the gnarled branches of the ancient tree. Close to the trunk not only grows, but blossoms with exuberance a red rose shrub. The jute bag is put down to one side. Two more candles are lighted and fixed on the ground. A blanket is pulled out. Draped around the body. Hooded over the face. The field of vision is narrowed. The narrower, the better, for then it will see less of those who intend to interrupt the proceeding. It closes its eyes. Folds its arms. Takes a deep breath. And the ritual begins.

First comes the awakening.

Its lips move in silent verses. The chanting grows louder and coarser. The figure begins to sway. The young goat is terrified. It noses its way into the blanket, away from the coldness that is rising from the graves.

The chanting stops abruptly.

There is going to be pain now.

The cloaked figure pulls out a rope from the jute bag. It drags the goat out from under the blanket. Puts a knee on its chest. Pins it down. Ties the rope around the snout. A rusty and not-so-sharp dagger comes out of the jute bag.

One by one, the limbs of the goat are hacked off. Red stains the white fur. The little goat wriggles in pain, faint bleats emanating from its throat. Blood falls on dry leaves. Blood on the blanket. Blood in the air.

The cloaked figure arranges the limbs into two crosses in front of the tree while the goat squirms like a fish out of water. Eyes wide. Gasping. Gaggering. Bleeding.

The dagger now pierces the left eye. Gouges it out. It is placed above one of the crosses, moist and steaming. Now comes out the right eye. The little goat bleeds and kicks with the leftover of its limbs protruding from the body, eyes replaced with red holes. Leaves and twigs cling on to its wet, white coat.

The hood slips and the figure sees the *things* it had tried not to see. They have begun to appear in the darkness of the tress, away from the clearing – dark *shapes*, vague, alive, floating amidst the trunks. Some still emerging silently from the graves. Some floating down from the trees.

The human lowers its gaze. It pulls down the hood and continues the ritual.

The not-so-sharp dagger plunges in between the ribs

of the goat and tears through the flesh. Blood rushes out and fingers go in. They grab the bones and pull, and shove. Soft, distinct snaps. The ribs break. A hand goes in. Pulls. And pulls again. Harder... and out comes a heart glistening in the candlelight. Warm. Fresh. Beating.

The cloaked figure stands. It raises the heart to the ancient tree. Bows its head, then tosses the heart at the roots. The goat has stopped struggling – it is a mere mess of sagging flesh, broken bones and warm blood. Its ears are grabbed. Pulled back. Throat exposed. Slit...

More blood. The dagger works its way up. A little twisting. Turning. And the bones snap. The head comes off. It is placed tidily in between the two limb-crosses and the body is flung at the roots.

The awakening is complete.

The cloaked figure closes its eyes. Folds its hands. And it waits...

The ancient tree is silent and still. The stars watch. So do the floating *shapes* at the periphery.

Is something wrong?

The human panics. The silent *shapes* feed on its emotion. They move impatiently amidst the trunks outside the clearing. It must not look at them – for the terror they inflict brings instant death. But there is no turning back now. The ritual must continue.

A wish must be made.

From the jute bag comes out something wrapped in a piece of red cloth. It is placed inside the severed mouth of the goat. The hooded figure cuts its thumb and runs it over the snout. Makes small heap of dried leaves. Adds twigs on top. Lowers a burning candle. Waits. The heap catches fire, and on that little fire and the lot of smoke that emanates, it places the head of the goat with the piece of red cloth still in its mouth. There is smell of burning hair. Now the tingling scent of burnt skin. It closes its eyes and sings an ancient song. The fire dwindles by the time it ends. It rubs a little ash on the decapitated head and rises, holding it high in the air. The blanket falls. The dark *shapes* have come closer now. It immediately lowers its gaze again, walks around the thick trunk of the ancient tree and disappears.

Moments pass. The cloaked figure reappears, trembling.

The act is done. It hurriedly goes back to the seat and covers itself again, its eyes always lowered. It touches its forehead on the ground before the tree.

The wish is made.

Now comes the price it must promise to pay for the wish.

The cloaked figure gets up again and plucks a rose and a thorn. Two petals are pulled out. A pinch of mud from the roots of the tree is placed in between them. Blood from the heart is smeared. The rest of the rose is neatly placed next to the eyes. A finger is pricked with the thorn. A drop of blood falls on the petals with mud in between. It's time now. It closes its eyes. Takes a deep breath...

"Zeena!" the figure speaks aloud the name and throws the petals in the dying embers. They shrivel and shrink and turn into ash.

The ancient tree is silent and still, waiting, watching...

The human under the cloak is terrified.

The *shapes* have begun to enter the clearing now. They are no longer silent. They dance and they laugh... and they whisper to the night.

The figure kneels in front of the tree and begs to accept the price offered. Something went wrong during the ritual, something must have. There is no escape now. The dancing *shapes* will not let it leave, not after coming right into their territory and provoking them. Yes, something was wrong! Else the ritual would have been complete by now. Did the goat not die painfully enough? Was its soul not innocent enough? The figure folds its hands and begs forgiveness. It has meddled with powers beyond its control. It now wishes to be away from the tree, far away where no such things grew.

A thought suddenly comes whispering into its head – what if the price was not high enough?

No. It has agreed to pay far more than what it asked for. It cannot afford more. But it must offer a higher price, or die, for the ritual will otherwise be left incomplete.

The cloaked figure looks pleadingly at the tree as it rises again. It plucks another rose and prepares two more petals for the ritual. It closes its eyes, wishing this was not happening. Guilty and grief-struck, it takes another name and throws the petals into the embers.

“Zeba!”

The ancient tree is silent and still, waiting, watching...

More *shapes* glide into the clearing. They seem delighted. Their whispering grows louder, more excited.

A child begins to cry in the foliage above. A woman tries to hush him. Bangles clink.

Someone giggles...

The ritual seems to have failed. The figure begins to sob. Its lips tremble as it again begs forgiveness. It knows there will be none. It is scared, terribly scared. Out of desperation, it utters the name of a god – and creates a stir among the *shapes* it is surrounded with, for such words are not spoken in the realm of the ancient tree.

Its teeth are clattering, its body shivering, when another thought appears – what if the price was still not high enough? It is broken now. It can no longer continue the ritual. This cannot be! It cannot think of another name.

An evil voice speaks inside its head. It had been there all along – another name – but it cannot say it out loud. It begins to cry. No. Not another name. Never.

Something is floating above its head. It looks up and cringes, shutting its eyes immediately – a hand is protruding from the branches above.

Something pulls at the blanket.

The candles blow out.

The jute bag is being dragged away from the clearing.

And that dead, headless goat, why is it moving? Why is it wriggling, its severed neck rising and falling? There is a faint bleating coming from behind the tree, from inside a deep cavity in the trunk in which lies the burnt head with gaping eye-sockets.

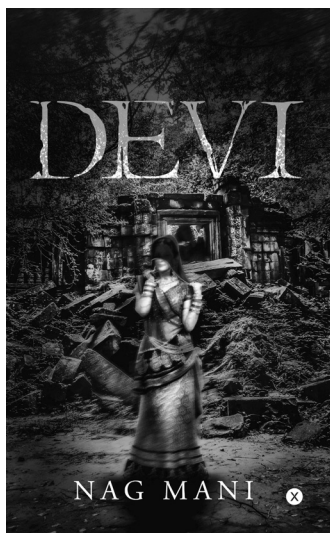
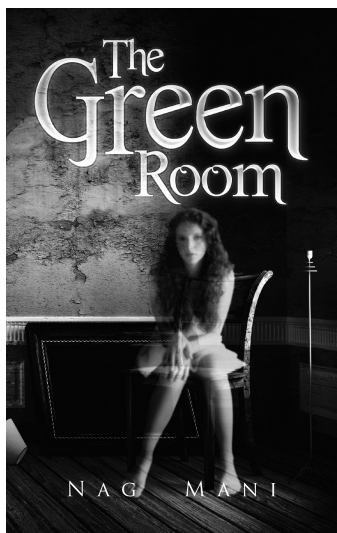
The hooded figure makes up its mind as a bony finger pokes its thigh. It plucks another rose and another thorn. It places a pinch of mud in between two petals. It rubs them on the heart. Yet another finger is pricked. Another drop of blood falls on the petals.

The dark *shapes* retreat into the night.

“Zoya,” cries the figure and throws the petals into the embers.

They shrink and shrivel and turn into ash...

...and the ancient tree begins to speak.



scan the QR code to order your copy



Amazon



Flipkart



CHAPTER 3

THE SUMMONS OF THE VILLAGE

In the September of '99, a man presented a cheque worth Rs. 40,000 to the cashier at the Katihar Bazaar Branch of State Bank of India. It was forwarded to the then manager – Mr Manoj Prasad. Mr Prasad verified the signature and cleared the cheque. In a span of two days, the same man visited four different branches of the bank in the neighbouring cities of Purnia and Araria and withdrew cash amounting to 2.1 lakhs. A week later, a Purnia based doctor reported fraud. He claimed he had lost his cheque-book and someone had forged his signature to withdraw the money. He personally visited the Regional Business Office in Purnia and had tea with some men in closed cubicles. The outcome of the meeting was a phone call to Mr Prasad. His senior informally told him to arrange the amount cleared through the cheque and deposit it back into the doctor's account. The matter should be taken care of before higher authorities caught the slightest wisp of it and initiated a probe.

Mr Prasad cried foul. His job was to check if the signature matched with the one present in their database and not track down its origin. The signature had indeed been a match, for it had safely passed the scrutiny of four other branch managers. It was the duty of the doctor to report theft and invalidate all the cheques. That evening, Mr Prasad received a call from an even higher authority. He was again unofficially told to quietly settle the matter by the following morning. There was no time for unnecessary investigation given that the bank was

already burdened with work. The other managers had already complied.

Mr Prasad consulted his wife, Aditi Prasad. "It's okay," she said. "Pay the money. It's not going from your salary, after all." Yes. Because after all, she knew, like others, that as a manager what sort of income he made with every loan he passed. The rates were fixed. He would take his share and pass on the rest to the divinities seated above. And that was the main reason the other four branch managers didn't flinch depositing the money back into the doctor's account. They were just giving back a percentage of what was never theirs to maintain regularity in the bank and continue receiving what was not theirs.

But Mr Prasad would not budge. He had done nothing wrong. He would not succumb to pressure. Eventually, the clerk who had actually handed the cash had to cough up the amount and return to the bank. Mr Prasad felt a tingling sense of pride for what he had done. He had stood for the right. He was a brave man.

One busy day in April, 2000, he received a transfer letter ordering him to take over a branch in one of the remotest villages of Araria near the Nepal border – Ufrail. No promotion. Just a transfer. The designated branch was a crumbling guest house built in the British era. There was no electricity. Mr Prasad found out that the village was on the other side of the Bakara River flowing southward from Nepal, which cut it off from the rest of the area. A makeshift bridge had been built across the river by the villagers. The bank ran on a generator puffing throughout the day.

He had been allotted another of those ancient guest houses on the edge of a mango plantation, more commonly referred to as the forest, or the *Aambari*. The branch was a mess. It was suffering from numerous bad loans. He sweated day and night working at his desk. Innumerable files lay in piles, dozens of accounts waiting to be opened, loan defaulters working their way up for more loans. The staff were most unpunctual. Most of the managers who ran the bank earlier did only so on paper. Though their attendance records were flawless, they were themselves touring the neighbouring cities of Nepal with their families. It was frightening in the beginning. But he managed to hold himself together, for some

of her three sisters and a brother, but unlike them, she was not fair and pretty. She was rather dark skinned, with bushy hair which she always kept tied. She was of average height and average features. After completing college, she wanted to prepare for IAS. But Marriage is the ultimate destination of a girl's life and she was married to Manoj in '95.

And then Marriage happened.

While Manoj was away, Aditi tended to her garden. She loved roses, and was a proud owner of twenty different shades and colours. Then she would study. She had been able to apply for the exam twice earlier but never had her admit card been delivered to her. She often wondered if Manoj received them and threw them away. Now that he was away, she assumed this would not happen. She would even go to the post office regularly when the time came. She brought out all her packed books and started her preparation. She made a "Daily Routine" and pasted it on a wall. Then she made study plans. Plans were set into practice. She thought she would make it this time.

The manipulation to shift to Ufrail came in stages, one small piece at a time, so that she was taken off-guard. First came small complains. Manoj would visit her on weekends and blabber about the work conditions. There were only two other official staffs in the branch. One was on leave and the other was a year away from retirement and took it for granted, as no one wanted to spoil the work record of a colleague so close to the end of his career. Manoj practically ran the branch by himself.

Then there was this unofficial assistant – Arvind. He was large and black and was in charge of maintaining and operating the bank's generator that huffed and puffed throughout the day. He also cooked food for the managers and took care of their needs. Owing to his bulky size, he even accompanied them on field trips. He had been hired by some manager about eight-nine years ago and had stuck to the bank ever since. Other than procuring diesel, he also brought along villagers on promises of granting loans – instant approval, no hassle. Most of them didn't have the required documents and when Manoj turned them away, Arvind would spend the entire day pleading him to accept their application. Due to lack of documents or securities, loan applications were rarely

accepted and the villagers would leave abusing the banking system.

Aditi spent her weekends listening to the various problems the village had in store. No electricity, because of which Manoj stayed back in the bank till as long as midnight. It at least had a fan and lots of work to do. The thin and old guard didn't mind staying back so late, for he was seldom seen in the bank during daytime. Manoj's house was far from comfortable. It was old and moist and suffocating. No one bothered to have it painted. It just had a bedroom, a hall, a kitchen and a small bathroom. The toilet was built in the back courtyard along with a cemented platform for a hand-pump and a room in one of the corners of the boundary wall. The room was locked and Manoj never bothered to tell her why.

Weeks turned into months, and grumbles transformed into frustration. Manoj could not adjust to his new environment. His mother came to visit them during the onset of winter. He had turned weak and thin – something Aditi had failed to notice as the transformation had been gradual. Due to his irregular banking hours, Arvind had stopped cooking meals for him altogether. Manoj would hurriedly cook rice and pulses on a cheap kerosene stove and leave for the bank. Many a day he went without lunch. He would come late at night and eat the leftovers of the morning. The utensils were always dirty. The house needed thorough cleaning.

Manoj managed to put up with the village because of his helpful neighbour Razzak. Razzak was a loan agent in the bank. He helped villagers with the necessary papers and brought them in contact with the manager, in return for a small commission. Before working for Manoj, he and his two younger brothers used to drive rental vehicles. Their major income came from city dwellers who hired taxis to go to Nepal in search for exotic and cheap markets. He came in touch with Manoj when an auditor, sent to inspect the branch, put forward his desire to tour the neighbouring cities of Nepal, in return for a commendable report. And ever since, Razzak gave up his driving job and started working for the bank. He brought loan-seekers to the office, cajoled Manoj into accepting their applications and helped them with the process on commission basis.

One night, while serving dinner to Manoj and her

mother-in-law, Aditi told him to hire a maid. Razzak could definitely arrange for one. Her mother-in-law dropped her jaw, shocked. "Maid? Hire a maid?" Then she clapped her palm over her head. "Mercy, oh god! Why do you not call me home? Do I have to live to see this day? All alone, my son... hire a maid? While this queen sits in her palace! And he can't speak, oh, my son..."

Manoj cleared his throat and gestured at his plate. He needed more rice. Like always, he didn't say a word. And the conversation ended.

A year after his transfer, he came home and told her he would commit suicide when he went back. Aditi had assumed that he would take time, but eventually, he would settle. But the problems were serious now. He had fresh bruises every time he came home, mostly on his shins and elbows. He had stopped using public transport to go to Ufrail and now rode his motorcycle – a blue Rajdoot. The road was rubble for the major part of the 42 kilometres stretch to Araria, but at least, it existed. The road then left the main city and cut through farms and fields and brick-kilns for a dozen kilometre or so and then it was all mud and treachery for another 30 kilometres through Forbesganj. Manoj often lost balance and fell, sometimes due to his own inexperience, but mostly due to a stray goat or a buffalo.

Villagers would flock his house in the morning to withdraw cash or ask for loan or even write a letter or two to their sons in the *foreign* state of Punjab. And Razzak would come with his brothers to drive them away. Then there was this problem of electricity theft. The bank was near the main market of the village, and every evening, villagers swarmed around to buy fresh vegetable and gasping fish and blood-coated meat. Manoj had had a bulb installed in the market which was connected to the bank's generator. Soon, the hawkers stripped naked its wire and began to connect their own bulbs. The money the bank gave for diesel began to fall short and when Manoj went out to have their connections removed, a rude mob encircled him. Frightened, he returned to his bank. The problem was sorted out when the Mukhiya, the head of the village, visited the bank for some work and was made aware of the fact that Manoj was considering cutting the line to market. No Bulb = No Tension. It was then that

the Mukhiya ordered his men to beat up anyone seen using the connection to the bulb. He even went ahead to announce that no one would visit the manager's house for office work. To make sure his words were taken seriously, he randomly pointed at a customer watching the scene from the bank and asked Razzak if he had ever seen him near their house. Turned out he had been standing in the queue just that morning. The men roughened him up and sent him home.

But the most interesting problem was that present in the house. Manoj never said it openly, but it seemed that he heard a woman singing there on various nights. Sometimes he had strange dreams. Aditi guessed it was one of the reasons he stayed in the bank so late – so that he could stay away from his house. He was a firm believer of gods and attributed his dreams to the one thing he didn't do when he entered the village. There were the ruins of an ancient temple in the village. Though no one worshipped there, many villagers had told him that since he was a newcomer, he should go there at least once and bow in front of the Devi. He wished to, but never got the time. It was only a few days before he came to Purnia that something happened one night – he never told her exactly what – and he ran out of the house, screaming. He told Aditi that he came out to raise an alarm for he thought it was a dacoit and that Razzak offered him to spend the night at his place. She knew it wasn't a dacoit, for the very next morning it was not the police but the Mukhiya himself who paid him a visit and escorted him to the temple and watched over as he bowed in front of the shrine.

Aditi felt guilty that her husband had to go through all this while she stayed back at home. Many a time she suspected that he was just making it all up. But the guilt lingered. So, little by little, Manoj obliged her to shift to Ufrail. Though, he never asked her to come.

She packed her clothes and her books. Tore off the study pan. The "Daily Routine" fell to the floor and the maid swept it away some day. She cut a few stems of her red roses and wrapped them in moist mud. The house was rented to another banker with a fat wife and an ugly son. Manoj came back a month later to take her. She sat silently on her way to the bus-stand. He slept all along in the bus to Araria. But she couldn't sleep. She thought of her flowering garden. She had paid the

maid to take care of it. Her plants were her best friends. She didn't miss her neighbours. Just her garden, and her house.

It was going to be a tiring journey. She found a local magazine stuffed somewhere in Manoj's bag. She was just skimming through its contents when one of the articles caught her attention. Growing up in a village, the story was not unfamiliar:

Once upon a time there lived a rich man who had no son. He consulted old books, practiced traditional techniques and bought exotic herbs from any nomad claiming to know the secret to conceiving a male, but his wife bore him none. It was only after his sixth daughter that he heard of an ancient temple in a remote village. It was said that the *devi* of the temple granted any wish if she was promised a sacrifice worthy enough.

He immediately left for the village. The temple was built on the roots of a very old and large *peepal* tree. The base of the trunk was coated with holy cow-dung. A pair of eyes were painted with vermilion and sandalwood, depicting the *devi* who had been residing in the tree for over a thousand years. After donating a ridiculously large amount of money to the priest, he knelt in front of the red eyes and promised the *devi* heads of eleven young goats if his wife gave birth to a son.

By the end of the year, he was blessed with a baby boy.

The family rejoiced the birth of the new born child. His sisters kissed him and fought with each other to hold him. His mother loved him the most and never let him out of her sight. His father threw parties to herald his birth. Everyone was absorbed in lavishly raising him. And the rich man forgot his promise.

A year passed. Friends, neighbours and relatives gathered to celebrate his first birthday. A candle was placed upon a big, delicious cake and the youngest daughter lit a match-stick. But the candle wouldn't burn. Then tried her elder sisters. One after the other, they lit match-sticks, but each failed to light the candle. The rich man scolded them and tried himself. Still, it wouldn't burn. The guests eyed him impatiently. He was about to call for another candle when he noticed his son – his eyes had turned red... red like the vermilion eyes on the *peepal* tree.

The baby was sick. His mother cried uncontrollably, but he remained silent in her lap. He did not cry, or move... or blink. He just stared at his father with his red eyes. The best of doctors were summoned, but the baby died before anyone could arrive. His eyes were still open. They were still staring at his father.

Within a week all his business activities came crashing down. Helpless and bereaved, he held his head one night and slumped to the floor. But before tears would form, his wife came running to him. His youngest daughter had fallen sick. He rushed to her room. She was staring at him with the same red eyes. He did not call for any doctor. He arranged for eleven young goats and left for the temple immediately.

The goats were washed and worshipped. Vermilion was smeared on their snouts and garlands were put around their necks. The youngest goat was chosen to be sacrificed first. Its legs were tied and head locked between two iron rods on a wooden post in front of the shrine. The priest began to strike the temple bell continuously. The red eyes watched. A swarthy man bowed to the goat and raised his sword...

...but it wouldn't fall.

Something held it firmly!

The *devi* wouldn't accept the sacrifice.

The swarthy man let go of the hilt, dropped to his knees and held his ears. Onlookers gasped and retreated, for the sword hovered in mid-air. The priest let out a scream. He knelt in front of the eyes and begged forgiveness. The blade fell clattering to the ground. The goats were released.

The rich man somehow knew what he had to do next. He sat in front of the *peepal* tree and cut his palm. He collected his blood in a bowl and poured it on the roots of the tree. He sat there for eleven days, offering a bowl of his blood daily. His family pleaded him to come home. But he stayed. His youngest daughter revived on the twelfth day. But he couldn't see her. He died on his way home.

Aditi sighed and reclined on her seat. That was what happened when they dealt with powers beyond their control. From the many stories she had heard growing up, she knew that these powers didn't interfere with anyone's life unless given a reason to; but if someone did give them a reason, he had to live by the rules set by them.

The bus stopped at a crossroad in Araria. There were small shops that sold local water-bottles and home-made food. A few vendors sold fly infected *jalebi* on the roadside. Young boys ran under the windows of every bus that stopped with *peda* and *burfi* stacked neatly on plates held high above their heads. Aditi watched buses and auto-rickshaws halt at the crossroad to pick up passengers, then linger a little to pick up a few more and drive away, continuing either straight or turning left. None of them turned right.

Her bus stood at the right turn.

The road ahead was narrower than the main road, but in better condition. The bus passed through a small, busy market with grocers and cloth-shops and hardware stores. Then the settlement gave way to a vast expanse of greenery. The road was raised and lined with trees on either side. Men, women and children worked on fields. The sky was blue and mostly clear, with only one dense white cloud resting in the west. A few colourful houses passed now and then. Then there were huts and brick-kilns and toiling people. The air was hot and marginally humid. The conductor shouted something, probably the name of the stop about to come. Manoj was sleeping on her shoulder. The road was a mere clearing in the fields and greenery around, when all of a sudden it turned and stopped at another crossroad with another sprawl of huts and shops and faded signboards. A small waiting hall had been erected what seemed a long time ago for weary travellers. Only a dog now slept on the crumbling seats.

The conductor approached them. Though she was wide awake and eyeing him enquiringly, he chose to wake up Manoj. "Sir, here. Your stop. Forbesganj."

They stepped down from the bus parked carelessly in a congested market and marched to the rear. The conductor pulled out two suitcases, five bags and five large cartons. An auto-rickshaw was hired and they set off again. She held onto a plastic handle hovering above her. Up and down went the auto-rickshaw, bouncing through busy markets and narrow lanes. The land opened out again and they made their way in between fields and farms.

They came out into a clearing and halted abruptly. A river cut across the land in front of them, its water brown and swift, confined to the deeper part of a wide bed. The road

broke into patches of grass and weed and ran ahead over a red, rusted iron bridge that projected out almost till the middle of the river before twisting around and coming to an adventurous end. All that remained of the bridge on the other side were broken ends of four concrete pillars. The driver restarted the engine and rolled the vehicle to the right. A little way up the river another bridge had been built, but instead of concrete pillars and red coated iron, it was made of large bags of sand placed skilfully over hollow cylinders of concrete, held in place by sections of bamboo poles tied together. Up ahead near the middle of the river, Aditi noticed that there were no cylinders, instead the sand bags were piled on thick wooden planks. Heaps and heaps of mud had been placed over the bridge, and what once must have been a fairly smooth road, now seemed on the verge of caving in. On the other end of the bridge, a mud-path rose steeply at least twenty feet to meet a brick-road that led to the village. There was no rickshaw on the other side. The rest of the journey seemed to be on foot.

The driver began to take out their luggage. Aditi saw an old man sitting on an abandoned pillar, watching them curiously. Few children were playing by the river bank and a herd of cows and goats grazed in the shade of a dense bamboo thicket further up the river.

"Driver *sahib*," the old man called out in a hoarse voice. The children stopped their pranks and looked up. "Madam will walk all the way to village? And you will sit in your useless tempo and watch her?"

"The bridge is dangerous to cross, *baba*!" the driver shouted back. "It's all so heavy. Three people. Luggage." He looked at Manoj, probably asking him to reason out with the old man. The fact that the deal was to drop them only till there didn't seem a valid reason. "Vehicle will fall in the river!"

"Shame on you, driver *sahib*," retorted the old man. "Our guest is walking all through the village. Carrying her bags. You should rather let your tempo sink to the bottom of the river!"

The driver was in a dilemma. He again looked at Manoj, who just stared across the river and settled his belt. A motorcycle appeared making its way down the muddy slope from the brick-path on the other side. It stopped before the bridge and the man in the pillion got down. And at that instant,

the driver made up his mind: it was better to risk his life than let her, his guest, walk all the way to the village. He asked them to cross the bridge on foot, carrying as much luggage as they could. Aditi slung two bags over her shoulders and lifted a suitcase – and the old man shouted again, “Oye, you boy! Girl there! Stop meddling with the waters, you pigs and mules and useless creatures, and carry these bags to that side!”

The children didn’t waste a second. It was as if they had been called for a treat. Like in a competition, they raced towards Aditi and snatched every luggage she was carrying. The ones who reached a second later, got to unburden Manoj and the slowest ones lifted the boxes and ran across the bridge, carrying the luggage in a variety of comical positions. The rider of the motorcycle, who by now had come quite some way down the bridge, got down and let them pass. Aditi smiled at the old man, who folded his hands in return, and carefully made her way across the treacherous bridge. Manoj was behind her. Once the motorcycle had crossed, the auto-rickshaw driver started the engine, and muttering prayers to some deity, followed them. The old man watched them cross the bridge. Then, he returned to keeping an eye on his goats and cows.

Aditi bumped her head twice on the iron frame of the auto. The brick-road gently curved away from the river. The village began to unfold before her. The first house had a very big garden with wooden fencing through which grew wild cacti. She saw bright green leaves of onions sprouting in a line. Another plot with tiny green tomatoes hanging from their shrubs. Flowery leaves of cauliflower with the white vegetable just beginning to appear in the centre. The road smoothened out as they reached the main market. The bank was to her right. The building was old and unmaintained. A rusting signboard of “State Bank of India” was pinned above the ledge of a window. In front of the bank was a wide clearing, shadowed by the foliage of the trees that grew around; and in one corner was a wicker shade from which emanated a rapid puff-puff sound accompanied with black smoke. From that shade, came out a black wire that ended at a single bulb hanging on a bamboo pole. In the clearing, beside the road, was a *gumti*, a small cubicle built with wooden planks and placed on four poles. A man sat inside the cubicle with a wet red cloth spread

over a bundle of *paan*, or beetle leaves, his face hidden behind colourful packets *gutka* and mouth-fresheners hanging from above. In front of the *gumti*, a small band of men sipped tea or chewed on *paan* or chatted around a wooden plank placed over two columns of bricks stained with crimson spit. They all stopped whatever they were doing to look inside the auto-rickshaw. Aditi held her head high and let their gazes judge her.

The market was centred on a crossroad. The road ahead degraded into a narrow mud path that ran between shops and huts and disappeared into the dense mango trees behind. The plantation became denser as it crawled to the right, away from the market, towards the river. On the left, it ran parallel to the road, obscured by the irregular outline of the market.

The driver turned left. As the market thinned out into lone shops and patches of grounds littered with whatever the absent hawker sold, Aditi had a clear view of the forest for the first time. The road was built on a higher ground. The ground fell six feet into a wasteland torn with bushes and shrubs, in which stuck articles indicating the presence of human establishment. The mango trees stood silently at a distance. The trunks were gnarled and matured and were quite far apart, but the foliage was thick. They spread and mingled with each other, letting no sunlight reach the ground.

The auto-rickshaw turned right, and after a few hundred metres, right again. Huts and houses sprouted from the ground in random fashion, various smell of cooking wafting out. Children ran out to see the new visitor. Women peeked from windows. Cows mowed and buffaloes swished their tails. A white goat hopped onto the road and then swiftly ran back.

It was late afternoon, hot and humid, when Aditi stepped out of the rickshaw and looked at her new house. Its yellow walls were stained and greyed. A big patch of cement had fallen off above the main door. A skinny cream-coloured dog with big white patches was resting on the front veranda. He sat up the moment the auto-rickshaw stopped and watched the driver unload the luggage. She stayed outside as the men carried the luggage in. A cornfield was resting across a narrow mud path in front of her house. There were two windows – one opened into the veranda and the other overlooked the

field. On her right, where the path branched off the main brick-road, was a three-storey building with brightly coloured doors and windows that had been unskilfully erected amidst cow-sheds, huts and tin-roofed houses. She turned back and saw the forest in the backdrop of her house. For no reason, its presence darkened her spirit. It seemed ever so close...

Someone was watching her... by the window of the bedroom! The one that faced the cornfield. It was slightly apart. Aditi saw a figure standing there, shrouded in secrecy by the darkness in the room. For a moment she thought it could be just anything... maybe a piece of cloth hanging by the window...

But then, it turned and walked away.



END OF SAMPLE