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Bordoisila

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Aitas smell like death.

A twilight sky had been hung over Silagaon that noon, seven years ago. The rain had come much earlier though, around daybreak. By the look of it, it had come to stay a while. During the previous morning, villagers heard the first cry of a cloudburst. A dying sun had ensued ever since and with it came *Koka*'s last breath. A generational old grandfather clock in the foyer struck out twelve dongs when he had been carried away by a string of pristine mourners draped in crisp, white linen. The scent of burning incense had hung heavy in the air all morning. In those short four years of life, Juhi had known

her grandfather as the sick voice on the other end of her mother's phone.

"*Aita, Bordoisila, no?*" Juhi had asked her grandmother, pointing to the downpour as she sat in the safety of her lap. *Aita* nodded with a small smile. She had kept Juhi by her side all day for Juhi's mother had turned stony with grief. Through a window, they had watched the thunderstorm destroy everything that stood in her way. A sliver of lightning had flashed; setting the clouds ablaze as deafening clashes of thunder and wind ripped apart a sky full of ghosts. Shrieking and wide-eyed, Juhi shrank into her grandmother. To this day, she could recall the cascading smell of sandalwood.

"Don't be afraid, *Aijoni*." *Aita* had chuckled. "*Bordoisila* is no foe. She is only excited to announce that *Bohag* is here."

Bohag is the season of spring when Mother Earth basks under a bright, yellow sun to dry out rain from her hair. It is known. Juhi's father, Mr Bora was a man of duty. A day after the funeral, he had planned on returning to the city where his work, some argued his life had been waiting on him. *Bohag* had other plans, however. That season, the storms lasted a fortnight. He had decided to leave his wife and daughter behind to wait out the foul weather while he tore through wind and rain to get back home. Juhi would go on to cherish that spring. She soon took to believing that *Bordoisila* was a friendly spirit, bringing nothing but good fortune. *Aita* had spent each waking moment dotting on her. They would spend hours standing over ankle-deep ponds choking with *koi*, *kajoli* and *puthi*, among other fishes. *Aita* had shown her the proper way to use a *jakoi*, while Juhi stood behind ever distracted. She had been bewitched by these fascinating creatures writhing on the bamboo fishing scoop each time *Aita* resurfaced it. Later, they would squat under a blushing sky and concoct the catch. Juhi would watch *Aita* scale the shoal, nick their fat belly and char these silver fishes over a spitting

wood fire. The air had been filled with tiny orange flecks and a pungent aroma.

Seven years would go by before Juhi got to see her grandmother again. The occasional phone calls had turned nearly negligible with each passing year. During one usually silent dinner, Mrs Bora announced suddenly and unflinchingly that the family will be spending their *Bohag Bihu* in Silagoan this year. Mr Bora stood up so quickly, that the chair behind him fell with a thud. The competing heads of the household receded to the patio then, as if walls didn't have ears. Nola, their housemaid came soon after to ask Juhi if she wanted another piece of the apple cobbler. "Are Mom and Dad coming back?"

"I'm afraid it's going to be a while. Why don't you finish your bolognese and I'll teach you how to paint a mermaid today." Nola said with a cheery smile. "Is your tablet charged?"

That night Juhi couldn't sleep, partly because of excitement but mostly because of hushed commotion coming from her parents' room. She chased sleep with thoughts of running around in *Aita*'s backyard gathering jujube berries. The last time she was there, she had tossed handfuls of these sour fruit into the loose end of *Aita*'s *sador*. When the garment sank deep, *Aita* would dump the plunder into a brass dish, give it a salt chilli rub and say, "*Lo Aijoni*. Eat before your mother finds us."

Silagoan was twelve hours from the city and Mr Bora was vexed at having to drive. The Boras began travelling at the crack of dawn. Juhi watched ingeniously as skyscrapers melted into baby green fields of paddy swaying under a clear blue sky. As opposed to the city ground jutting concrete, she saw roots sprouting from the dark country soil. She had never seen so many trees in one place. Mrs Bora told her these were teaks running thick amidst grassy viridian carpets on either side of the road. Leaves, large as faces caught flitting sunrays

escaping the canopy and baked a shade deeper. To Juhi, it seemed as though these leaves from either side bent so far onto the road that a wall of foliage had been formed at the horizon. The more they chased it, the further it ran. During the long journey, Juhi fell in and out of sleep multiple times. In one instance, she woke up to the sun setting over ripples on either side of the immense ‘Xaxasro’ bridge. In a hushed tender voice, Mrs Bora was saying, “Mohanto, it’s *Bihu*.”

“There is no electricity, no connectivity; there isn’t even a proper bathroom.” Mr Bora refuted. “How do you expect me to work there?”

“You don’t have to work during a festival!” Mrs Bora’s voice went up a notch. “Do you not understand how important this is for me?”

“I do, Maya. That’s why I told you to bring your mother to the city. She doesn’t have anything left there.” Mr Bora said.

“You know she won’t leave the house, you know it’s not that simple. How many times have we asked?” Mrs Bora sighed. The pits under her eyes made her look older than her age.

“Then I have my hands tied.” Mr Bora wasn’t cold when he said, “One *Bihu* won’t make up for seven years.”

Mrs Bora swallowed whatever was going to fly out of her mouth for she heard Juhi stir in the backseat. “Juhi, sweetheart you’re up. Here, play a few games or listen to some music on your tablet. We’ll reach soon.”

They arrived at evenfall. In the pitch-black darkness around her, Juhi could hear crickets chirping. A single paraffin lamp hung from a hook hammered to the front doorframe. They walked through a small gate fashioned from cane. The gravel walkway had so much overgrowth, that there was barely any gravel left to step on. An overwhelming stench of grease hit them as soon as they entered. A few years back *Aita* had

broken her hip. Mr Bora had hired a nurse to take care of her. Hemoni, the nurse had a thin hard mouth nestled within a taut face. Her heavily plucked eyebrows were pulled into a frown as she informed them that *Aita* had fallen asleep. Before she took her leave for the *Bihu* holidays, she muttered, “Might as well have come for the funeral directly.”

Even under the modest glow of the oil lamp, Juhi could tell that her mother was avoiding her gaze. Mrs Bora ambled into the house with a deep breath and a large smile. The Boras took up the only other bedroom in the house and barely managed to escape the night. The room hadn’t been cleaned in ages. Cobwebs and dust coated every corner and an overwhelming smell of moth-laden fabric clung to the air. Mrs Bora laid out clean sheets on the creaky bed for that night. It had been years since Juhi slept with her parents.

To Juhi’s surprise, she did not wake up to *Aita*’s sweet embrace the next morning. Instead, she woke up to *Bordoisila*. Sulking, she trotted to the living room with curious anticipation. In the morning light, the single-storey house around her looked ghastlier. A dark roof stood tall over whitewashed gables. Though chipped at most places the plastered walls had strong timber frames holding it up. The floor was unwashed; one could barely see the terrazzo. There was an overcast of gloom all about her, something not quite like a spring morning. Juhi tried recalling if she had seen these framed pictures on the walls before. They were everywhere. Some had strange shapes of colours that had once been vivid, others had figurines twisted in ominous auras, and few even had comprehensible scenes of fruit bowls or tea cup sets posed against a velvet backdrop. This wasn’t the house she had been dreaming of. She had such vivid images in her mind. How could she have forgotten? Perhaps someone reconstructed it in bits for she could spot neither her favourite window nor the grandfather clock she sang along.

Mrs Bora was sitting on a fraying blue couch under the living room window. She was reading a newspaper while sipping tea. Juhi had never seen her mother that way, especially during the mornings. She was either yelling at Nola to hurry up with breakfast or giving an earful to the driver for getting her late to work. “Mom, where is *Aita*?”

Mrs Bora looked up briefly for a second, threw Juhi a big smile and pointed to the veranda. “What about Dad?”

“Gone home, *Aijoni*.”

Outside a weak rain lingered on. The veranda was enclosed by crosshatched grills and built lower than the rest of the house. Hence rain water could easily bounce off the net and flood it. Careful not to get her feet wet, Juhi stepped onto the clogged floor with a whispering slosh. Sat right in the centre with rainwater spraying over her feet, *Aita* stared unseeingly into the world outside. It took Juhi a moment to ascertain that indeed was her grandmother. She looked nothing like the raven-haired charmer Juhi knew and loved. Instead, she was bowing so far onto the stick under her chin; that it seemed like a herculean task to ever straighten her spine again. The fingers of her right hand were gouty and cracked; the left had gnarly veins meandering up like poison ivy.

“*Aita*.” Juhi called. *Aita* didn’t hear her of course. She called again, stepping closer; suddenly unbothered by the rain splashing on her own feet. Juhi sat beside her grandmother and gently placed a hand on her shoulder. “*Aita*?”

This time she blinked up at Juhi as if woken from a daze. Her greying eyes had confusion in them. Large green spots marked her once lovely face, now broken by a dozen crevices. Her skin hung so loose, it looked like she was melting off the bones. A stench, putrid almost had replaced the sweet scent of sandalwood. Juhi had never been so out of words before. For a while, she scrambled through her mind in search of something. Each time she built a plausible sentence and

uttered the word, *Aita*, she felt her stomach drop at the blankness in her grandmother's gaze. Without much to say, the pair sat silently and watched raindrops hit the sodden ground to disappear.

Most days it rained lightly and most days Juhi found *Aita* sitting scooped up in the veranda. When the rains halted, the ground was too wet to do anything on. Those days, *Aita* ventured out to a small patch of land in the front yard lined by broken barbed wires. Sprawling wildflowers rose knee-high. Shrubs of heavily blossoming hibiscus and pinwheel were scattered here and there. She stood in the middle of her minuscule wilderness and held her face to the sky, breathing. There was a strange calmness in her senility that unsettled Juhi quite a bit. Mrs Bora had taken up the task of cooking for the renewed family of three. Juhi had never seen her mother fix up a plate in the city, let alone cook over an earthen stove in a dingy, humid kitchen. The first time when the ladies sat down to lunch, Juhi was astonished by the spread. They ate on a shallow table with chipped varnish right there in the kitchen. The woven jute *moorahs* were difficult to sit on without straining the back. Steaming fluffy white rice was served in a steel vessel. Brass bowls held succulent duck curries cooked with potatoes, a sweet and sour marmalade of elephant apples and a greasy ensemble of pickled bamboo shoots. They finished with crocks of buffalo curd sweetened with jaggery. Everything tasted almost too strong for Juhi and she found herself unable to finish most of the strange-flavoured eaterys. To her immense surprise, Mrs Bora didn't chide her for the wastage.

In fact, she began to see very little of her mother altogether. Mrs Bora indulged in idle conversations with *Aita* most evenings. However, Juhi suspected *Aita* had no clue why or who was having these conversations with her. Many a time, Juhi sat in a corner of the room and watched the bizarre scene unfold as *Aita* would stand up and walk away between a

conversational pause leaving Mrs Bora baffled. Yet, she never gave up on the daily ritual. During the days she went on long walks around the village, returning drenched and giddy with fresh brinjals some days or powdery agati flowers the other. Then she would spend the other half of the day cooking elaborate meals that tasted like a subpar substitute of a distant memory. It didn't help that the kitchen was secluded from the main house. A raw structure with burnt clay tiles on the roof. It was connected to the main house by a pathway canopied with unkempt hay that hadn't been changed in years. By night she would roam about the dilapidated house, building it bit by bit. She had begun with installing oil lamps in every room. Toward the end, she had managed to replace all the fading drapes, tablecloths, sheet covers and cushions with fresh, new fabric. Oftentimes, fatigued and deluged she fell asleep in whichever room she had been working.

It was by the third night that Juhi broke out of the memory spell. She woke up in the middle of the night with wheals all over her legs for they were accidentally hanging outside the mosquito net. In the absolute darkness, she began to see strange shadows. Yet, she screamed only upon realizing that her mother wasn't by her side. She found Mrs Bora curled up to a crescent on the living room floor. Juhi withheld all liquids and partially most meals for a bit when she took a look at the washroom. Besides, the drinking water had a sharp metallic taste to it. When she took to drinking milk instead, she found a skin of fatty cream on top that made her nauseated instantly. She began to grow desperate for a bite of a burger or a slice of pizza. She requested her mother to bring her a few bags of chips one time. She instead received stale locally fried wafers pocketed in punctured plastics. One night an impacted fish bone plagued her, another night she had her first encounter with an army of frogs in the veranda. After that, she stopped going beyond the threshold of the main door when earlier she had tried exploring her memories a little. She had gone to the backyard in search of jujube berries by herself but

unfortunately couldn't go a few meters beyond the overgrown periphery. When Juhi tried venturing out of the house, she returned from the driveway fearing she'd lose her way. Worst of all was the humidity and the lack of electricity to feign it off. It was worse at night. She would often lie in her sweat, weeping in frustration as the stagnant room closed in on her.

Soon enough she began to remain curled up in bed all day wishing her tablet hadn't discharged. She longed to watch her favourite television show with Nola after dinner. Although she wasn't particularly fond of most of her schoolmates, she yearned to hear the hubbub of a classroom teaming with people. She even began to miss the sound of food processors buzzing on a Sunday morning and traffic noise taking over the city after office hours. The silence around her was chewing her up ever so slowly. She began to see less of her *Aita* as well. With spring mere days away, *Aita* had stopped sitting outside on the veranda. She remained in her room most days, lying so still one could declare her dead. The only time Juhi saw *Aita* was when she delivered her meals, left it next to her on the bed and walked out without a second of pause. Every day Juhi asked her mother when they would be going back. Every day Mrs Bora said just one thing, "Juhi, Ai but *Bohag* is here."

Spring was indeed here finally. On the first morning of *Bohag*, the village seemed to have woken from a deep sleep. Juhi heard chatter on the otherwise rainy streets as people came out of their houses draped in freshly woven *muga*. Many came to offer rice cakes stuffed with coconut flakes and sesame seeds. They took home plates full of the same that Mrs Bora spent hours making. Branches stooped under the weight of blossoming white *nahar*. Girls giggled around showcasing palms stained red with the juice of *jetuka* leaves and pink flowers of *kopou* in their buns. Everywhere, celebration became the order of the day. Mrs Bora was a part of the crowd, constantly running around to prepare for what she promised would be the best *bihu* Juhi had ever seen.

“I like the *Bihu* at home. I like it when all of Dad’s friends come over and I get to watch TV with the rest of the children.” Juhi said with an obvious displeasure, as they dined one night. In truth, she hated those gatherings where obnoxious children infiltrated her room, touched her things and talked during the movies. Above all she hated the way they had laughed at the drawings they discovered on her tablet one year. They had called it ‘strange’ and ‘funny’, “just like Juhi, wackadoodle Juhi!”

“Oh how grateful I am that I don’t have to see those faces!” The laugh Mrs Bora let out was throaty and quite unlike her. “Tomorrow, we’re going to watch the *Utsav*. There will be dance and singing performances. I think you’ll like it a great deal.”

Although Juhi’s answer was a meek nod, she was delighted to her very core.

That night when she went to deliver *Aita*’s food, she had a skip in her step. As usual, *Aita* was curled up in one corner of the bed. Under the soft glow of a lamp, her breathing was barely traceable. Placing the tray on a table next to her bed, Juhi sat beside her grandmother. Her eyes were partially closed and she was drooling from the corner of a yawning mouth. She didn’t seem to be bothered by the flies circling her. “*Aita*, I brought you some food.”

It took Juhi a few jolts to wake her up. *Aita* sat up with her head against the bedpost and grunted. Rubbing her eyes, she sighed loudly and crossed her legs. The only sounds in the room were that of mundane chewing and an arrhythmic wheeze. When *Aita* spilt a bite of curry on her *sador*, she sulked aloud. “There...” She said, her voice hoarse. The sudden crack in silence caught Juhi off guard. “There is a cloth on the chair. Bring.”

Juhi helped *Aita* wipe off the big yellow stain. “Turmeric stains never go.” *Aita* said sadly.

“You can change the *sador Aita*.” Juhi suggested with caution.

Aita nodded in between bites and pointed to a stack of rusty trunks under the window. Juhi walked across the drab room toward them. This room hadn’t been built to sleep in she realised. There was a wash basin in the left-hand corner. Old wooden planks, some arranged into square frames, others shaped into tall, exotic instruments were piled in another corner. Much to Juhi’s surprise the grandfather clock stood sentinel beside a broken shelf. There were large white rolls leaning against a damp wall. The entire room had a greasy smell to it, yes. However, this grease smelled more like the oil that came from seeds. With clammy hands, Juhi pulled open the draw bolts. She sighed in relief when nothing but the sight of goods unknown to her jumped up from the musty wooden box. It was divided into three sections with slices of timber. Vibrant silks and soft cottons were neatly stacked up on one side. Ornate boxes of varying shapes that undoubtedly held jewellery took up the middle space. The third held jars and pitchers of colours and oils Juhi had never seen before. The nutty smell that loomed over the room intensified. There were sheets of all kinds of papers, blocks of coloured chalks, strangely shaved pencils and hundreds of sticks with bristles on one end tied up according to sizes. Juhi may have seen a few of these items in pictures, perhaps those were paintbrushes or weapons who knew? This box was by far the most organised space in the house.

“What is that?” Juhi asked as she handed *Aita* her change of clothes. *Aita* had grown so gaunt; that her ribs could slice the air. A sudden pang of heaviness filled Juhi’s heart as she watched her grandmother struggle to dress. Sitting on the edge of the bed, overlooking the wooden box, *Aita* frowned, “Tsk, just my things, *ako*.”

“Can I see?”

“What is there to see?” She frowned. “No no, *aya* it will get messy again.”

Unable to hold herself, Juhi grabbed a couple of paintbrushes and asked what these were. With an annoyed shrug *Aita* said, “*Tulika*. To paint with.”

“Paint what?” Juhi inquired. *Aita* shook her head in exhaustion.

Stooping low, she shakily pulled out a carton. About hundreds of papers marked with creation sprawled out. Several minutes passed by in observation.

“You, you made these, *Aita*?” Juhi finally asked with bewilderment.

“Why, yes.” The old woman lifted a sheet to her face and grinned toothlessly. The sheet was splattered with brilliant colours in every shape known to man. She squinted into a circle made with her index finger and thumb. “This is what I see when I do this.”

They talked deep into the night. *Aita* overzealously showed her all the different sets of paints she had. There were tubs of dried acrylics, leaky tubes of oil in crimsons and cobalts, large sets of gouache pots and cakes of watercolour. There were large cubes of pastels and flat squares of charcoal. She had brushes of squirrel and horse hair, be it a size zero or twelve. There were spatulas of steel with engraved oaken handles. There were jars of primers and pitchers of linseed and turpentine. The palates she had were thickened with years of residual paint. Juhi felt like she was in a museum of sorts. In the end, *Aita* asked Juhi if she ever painted anything. Juhi tried telling her that she was indeed very interested in drawing but she failed to explain how one could paint with their fingers on an electric device. She made a note to show *Aita* the drawings on her tablet the next day.

“If you like, maybe you can draw something real tomorrow.” *Aita* suggested in all seriousness.

Juhi went to bed wondering if *Aita* knew who she was. She was determined to find out the following morning when she entered the studio where her grandmother had been sleeping for years.

The child in her froze when she saw that under the bright *bohag* sun of that morning, *Aita*’s breath was not at all traceable.

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Suzanne is a 23 year old medical student from Assam, currently studying in Jaipur. She spent most of her childhood in a residential school called ‘The Assam Valley School’. There, she first began writing a handful for school publications. She explores the themes of realism, surrealism and rawness that is unique to mankind. Most of her work is based on human connections, emotions and eccentricities. She enjoys writing about the truth, best told through genuine, flawed characters.

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