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The Honey Collector

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Supen Hembrom was dreaming of the tiger. The tide had gone down in the creek. The beast was rolling around in the silt, coating himself to form a protective armor. He went prowling into the mangroves and stood in front of the low-lying branches of the Goran, supported by its prop roots. His amber eyes had seen the hive of the forest bees. He respected them, because they were as wild in nature as him. They refused to be boxed. It was impossible to do so. They wandered through the mangroves as and when they desired. They collected nectar from the Sundari, Keora, Kankra and Khalsi flowers. The tiger ran backwards, then sprang up to break the hive with one

thrust of its massive paw, sprinting away again at full speed to hide in the dense undergrowth as thousands of bees buzzed out and swarmed through space! He waited patiently till the tumult died down and the bees had dispersed. He then squatted smugly on the forest floor licking the honey with his paws.

Lipsa was pummeling his back with her fists. His back as dark as the foliage of the trees at midnight. Wake up! Wake up! You have to go and meet the khoti malik today. I have fixed up the date for you.

Who told you to? Did I? I don't remember making such a thick-headed request.

You are the one who is thick headed! Mooning around with that monkey of yours.

The monkey has a name, Ruby.

From the moment he saw her, her face peering out at him uncannily through the leaves, he thought of her as Ruby. Her pink smooth face. Her pouting cheeks. She stepped out in front of him. She was not scared. She bared her teeth at him silently. She was showing him the respect of a superior. He gave her the mango he was eating. She looked at him and her eyes were melting.

Supen sat up on bed, his hair tousled, his memory full of the dream of the tiger. Dakshin Rai. The protector of the jungles. He had heard it whispered that Rai became ferocious against man after the outrage at Marichjhapi.

His grandfather had told him the tale, where police and party cadre had massacred the refugees living in and through the forests. This was an insult to the swamps, marshes and tidal creeks, an insult to the mangroves, to the river, to the birds flying above the river, and to the fish and animals swimming strongly underwater. He had gone with his grandfather to Kumirmari, seen the blank marble stone commemorating the

deaths. How many deaths? Official records said three to eight. Word of mouth said thousands. And thousands disappeared. Relocated somewhere or the other, Singbonga knew where. His grandfather further said that the tigers had of late, become like the forest guards – mean, crooked and evil. The rivers will soon flood our soil, he said. The trees will no longer hold the soil. But if the forest guards think they can save the Sundarbans by evicting us, they will never be successful. Supen agreed. Not even Dakshin Rai could drag him away from his home, where the land was always soaked in water; where the land disappeared during jowar and reappeared during bhata; where his dangerous adventures on the river and deep into the forest felt like a swirling whirlpool. If and when the island eroded, he would go down with it, into the swallowing sea.

Supen left without listening to Lipsa's repeated request that he should meet the khoti malik. He was gone in an instant. He was swifter than a leopard. Lipsa went back to sit in her little porch morosely. Should she become like her husband? Should she give up wanting to have a child? Even if she should, could she? She felt drained and tired though the morning had just begun. She would go out to the river after a while to catch fish, and then prepare it spicy and rich. But for who? Half the days he would have dinner with his stupid friend Asghar Sheikh. A taciturn fellow. At least in her presence. What did he and Supen talk about? Perhaps they didn't need to talk. They would just go wandering in the forests together, collecting honey or catching crabs or just simply wandering around, doing nothing in the wide world at all. Supen could never settle into anything and that suspicious friend of his encouraged him in that. He could have become a professional crab collector; he could have joined the band of moulis, such an expert as he was with the chak bees; He could have collected prawn seed for the farms; he could have become a member of the bee co-operative; he could have become this and he could have become that. But he did everything on a

whim, as and when he chose, earning money sometimes in heaps, sometimes nothing at all. And for everything that she had to say, he had a pat answer, tripping off the edge of his tongue glibly. Don't you want to continue your lineage? Lineage can go down the alleys of the forefathers for all I care. Would you really not like to feed a tiny child of yours, flesh of your flesh, blood of your blood? I can't even feed myself, let alone a tiny crab. But haven't you thought about me at all? I want to be a mother? At the time you proposed to me, you simply said you wanted to be my wife. What a stupendously, unimaginably selfish man.

Supen and Asghar had decided to enter deep into the forests. It was a hot day in April and the giant Himalayan bees had swarmed to the mangroves in droves. They would try to collect honey from the hive on a Khalsi tree. Supen had crafted a wooden boat and oars with his own hands. It gave him immense pleasure to do so. He and Asghar put this boat onto the river, and he started to row downstream, with the clouds beginning to form a slightly ominous canopy above their heads. The skies seemed to portend a kaalbaisakhi. Asghar said with a smile, the gusts will come soon, to bring down the mangoes and jackfruits today. But the question of turning back did not arise to either of them. Catch a strain, said Asghar. Supen hummed to himself for a few seconds, then released a resonant note in his baritone voice which went tripping upon the surface of the waters. The high tides had peaked and the gradual movement now was towards bhata. There was a strong undercurrent. Majhi, keep rowing on and on, in rivers without banks, my broken boat ... No, I don't want this song. Catch another one. I'll raise a paean to Kanai then. They began to laugh. Yes, do that! I'll go into a devotional frenzy. Your abba will kill you. You know he won't. He doesn't force me to do the Namaaz. *Nacho re mon pathe pathe*. Let me keep my mind dancing on paths and ways. Krishna love will flood my soul. All aches and pains a hasty

retreat. Just repeat the name, and raise your arms, and dance to your heart's content.

The two friends have anchored their boat. They are now wading through the marshes, and placing their feet in knee height mud. They can feel the soft loam on their legs. They clamber up onto firmer soil, and start making their way into the forests, splattered with seasonal wild flowers.

Asghar, what? Afraid?

Don't mock me every time.

Take the name of Bonbibi Asghar. All fear will rush away with the winds.

Oooh Bonbibi goh! Protect us Maaa! Don't let Dakshin Rai devour us. Ma goh! Ma!

Stop making this racket Asghar.

Both are startled by a chuckling sound that seems to come from very near them.

Then Supen says, you got what you deserved.

But what was that? It startled the wits out of me.

It was probably a baghrol. Hiding in the undergrowth.

Supen is a courageous man. But he feels something cold on his back, and in his guts, every time he plunges in so very profoundly into the mangroves. His blood starts to rush. His ears begin to tingle. He feels alert, awake, alive. He cannot express what he feels.

Sounds come in and merge from all around. The sounds of animals, of monkeys chattering, of birds tweeting and chirping, sometimes half audible grunts and growls in the distance. The friends try to identify each source. It is a game for them. They imagine themselves as intrepid warriors. They are arrogant and stubborn. They make fun of those moulis who walk slowly in a single file, beating drums, and carrying

lighted torches as they go, some even carrying tangi, bows and arrows. They are foolish enough to think that Maharaj will be deceived by their masks. Supen sometimes imagines himself face to face with Maharaj. He is intoxicated with excitement and fear. He sees the great big face of the tiger right in front of his eyes. Though that is unlikely to happen. The tiger will slink in so silently that even the leaves will fail to rustle, and he will then pounce upon you from behind. Supen's father had once encountered a tiger while sitting on the forest floor. The first thing he did was to rise up slowly to his full height so that Dakshin Rai could discern clearly that this was a human being. This was not his natural prey. The tiger rolled back his ears, and took up a crouching position wondering whether or not to attack. Father started backing away very slowly and by Bonbibi's grace, Rai decided not to attack. This was Supen's most loved story. Without Dakshin Rai, these mangroves would become a barren wasteland. Only man's greed would be visible then.

The friends are silent now, walking through the throbbing forests with throbbing hearts. It is almost as they have entered another realm altogether, far away from village politics, the taunts of elders. Far away from aggressive slogans. A great comfort seizes their souls, even while they keep a constant lookout for drag marks or pug marks. The trees are in full bloom. The Sundari flowers clustering pale pink, dangling like earrings on a delicate woman. The bombastic leaves and vibrant orange of the Kankra. The small snowy bunches of the Khalsi. Sometimes, Supen gets so fascinated with these flowers even though he has seen them a thousand times, that he gets his feet cut on spiked roots. He leaves tiny droplets of blood on the soil.

Now, finally, they have spotted a file of bhari poka, loaded and heavy with honey, flying in a straight line towards their destination. All they have to do is follow these bees who have flown in during the winter migration from the distant

Himalayas. When the monsoon clouds smear the skies, it will be time for them to depart. The bees lead them to a huge hive, which Supen can tell at a glance, is overflowing with its secret treasure. It is time for them to get to work. Asghar lights the sheaf of dried leaves they have brought with them to smoke away the bees. The smoke calms the bees like a drink of warm milk. It prevents them from panicking. It prevents them from feeling that they are being forcibly evicted! Supen likes to think that they are gently persuading the bees to leave temporarily.

Supen climbs up the tree and approaches the hive even as the bees fly away. He never covers his face with the gamcha. He has been stung a few times, but mostly he manages to avoid it. He takes out his tool and carefully identifies the combs which are filled with honey. He cuts them tenderly one by one. Easy does it. As the smoke twirls around him. He will never cut the combs with the tiny larvae, the brood, nor will he touch the comb of the queen bee, a working woman. He will leave sufficient honey behind in the hive, he will not drain it dry.

Later on, he and Asghar sit in their boats examining the honey combs, pristine white like the full moon. They will mash the comb and squeeze the honey out, filter it, store it in a sealed pot, and consume it when they want! Or if they make one or two more expeditions, they may sell the honey cheap to a man on the market.

Many days Supen works as labourer on the farming land of others. In some seasons, specially in the winter, he concentrates on trapping mud crabs. He gets by. He is a strange man. He has no desire for wealth. He has no envy for those who have wealth. His parents died when he was young leaving him to fend for himself. Whenever he prowls around the forest, he feels at peace with himself. The other men of the village look upon him with contempt for his complete lack of ambition. He does not even own a mobile phone.

Supen felt restless in his life with his wife Lipsa. He admitted to himself as he sat on the mud porch of his house that he had made a mistake in agreeing to marry her. She had seduced him one night appearing suddenly like a traditional Munda woman, dressed in two pieces of cloth, a hansuli, a waist band, a nose ring.... Her skin like polished ebony. They were like two sides of a turbulent river; they could not cross it to reach each other. If she had desired a familiar man, a comfortable nest, why had she chosen him? Had he ever hidden himself from her? He sat up straight. He could see his father-in- law making his way down the winding path by the pond. It was too late for him to escape. They would be locked again in that eternal conversation.

Supen, why did you not go to see the khoti malik that day? I had a job fixed for you.

I will never catch prawn fry.

Why? Because you are against the culture of prawns? Because you think that the future of the world is resting on your shoulders?

The same old, same old! How many times would the wheel be stuck in the rut? This blunt profit seeking man would sit on the string bed of his house cross legged, potbellied, making a slurping noise as he drank his tea.

Who do you think you are? Some hero of a Jatra pala? Why don't you join the theatre?

That would be better than destroying prawn eggs, better than letting salt water seep through the soil and spoil whatever is left of it to breed and grow.

Should that be your main concern? Leave it to the wise heads to determine that. When are you planning to start a family?

Oh! The same old, same old. Sometimes he felt so murderous, he could barely restrain himself from landing a punch. His entire morning lay in shreds.

Take your daughter away if you want. I have no plans to start a family.

That led to the normal collapse of the tower.

You scoundrel. Are you thinking of absolving yourself of your responsibility towards your wife? Not while I am alive. I will make it difficult for you to stay in these parts, if not impossible.

At such moments, Supen would feel himself to be like a trapped animal. Helpless. In a panic. Unable to breathe. Then he would see Lipsa standing morosely at the doorway and his heart would soften towards her. She too was another animal like him, snared into believing something, expecting something. That which he could not give her.

Whenever he felt disturbed, he would take out his boat and go to the river. Once he and Asghar were nearly drowning in the waters. The monsoon clouds were thundering across the sky, and the river was in revolt. He had managed, finally, to tame the boat. He remembered a moubaj flying high above their heads, straining with its long body and long neck through the darkness. It fed on the larvae of bees extracted from the honey combs. There was a man named Pranabesh, who roamed about these parts. He had been talking about the worms and the ants and the insects. How they all should not be destroyed by pesticides. He then started on the topic of Supen's beloved chak bees. Care had to be taken to ensure that the boxed bees did not endanger the wild bees in competition. Care had to be taken about the beetle bugs which came in with the imported Italian bees. The man made sense. Supen felt drawn towards him, his thin frame, his earnest face. He was not like those NGO's which descended from time to time, made a huge fuss and cry, made a lot of promises, and then disappeared like a predator that had completed its catch, and was leaving with its victim. No, the thin man was different. He did not live in the city. He stayed here among them. He was known as The

Mangrove Man. He planted seedlings with the help of a band of children. Supen wanted to talk to him about the crazy ideas he often had. What if there were no towers put in the water? What if there were less dams and barrages? What if there were underwater turbines to work naturally with the currents of streams and oceans? Would that not help to stop this eating away of the embankments, this deposition of silt, this roaring of the oceans? Supen would muse about all of these things. About the green pigeons, the seagulls and the cormorants. About the wild geese and the pied starling with its yellow beak. About the Matla River and the Datta river and the Rai Mangal river. About the typhoons, the Amphan and the Aila. About the displaced people of Ghoramara and other islands that were disappearing into the sea. About the Farakka Barrage and the Haldia Port. About the huge boulders that had been thrown to deepen the waters of the port. The ships he saw sailing through inland waterways on their journey to Bangladesh spilling oil as they went. He could sit for hours on end in his boat musing about all of these things. He decided that he would help the Mangrove Man in his activities.

And yes. Most of all he thought about the riverine dolphin. Every object and every sight in the Sundarbans were familiar to him. The Hetal, Keora, Goran and Dhundhul trees. Every variety of aerial root. The hard, tough and elastic timber of the Sundari, which he had used for his boat. He had seen the water monitors, the water buffaloes, the hog deer, the chuckling fishing cat. He had avoided stepping on the rock pythons and the king cobras. But he had never spotted the rare riverine dolphin frolicking in the waters. He had only heard of it, seen its pictures.

The domestic disturbance was gradually turning bitter and distasteful. Half the days there was nothing substantial to eat at home. They would just eat panta with some onions and chillis. Some afternoons they ate curried small fish. One afternoon matters came to a head. His father-in law and

brother-in-law were furious with him. Alright, so he had a problem joining the prawn farm. Why did he not join the moulis for organized honey collection? Why did he not join the professional crab catchers? Supen had no relevant answer to give. It was some bohemian spirit within him that prevented him perhaps. Some resistance against joining the race. But this is a matter of your survival, you good for nothing fellow. Do you plan to spend your entire wasted life just drifting along. You don't even deserve to be a father. Your son would have despised you, had he been born. You will die without an heir. Wastrel. Bastard. Son of a pig. Lipsa will come away with us. Enough is enough haraamjada.

Normally, Supen never paid any heed to such garbage. But this latest attack had gone beyond the pale. There was so much venom in it that it penetrated him, spread into his intestines, made him doubt himself. A smothering blanket doused the fires of passion that always burnt in him without need of fuel. He went to sit at a tea stall. A gang of sadhus in saffron coloured robes were sitting on the bench opposite him. They lowered their clay pots and looked at him with accusatory eyes. The radio was blaring out news of the dastardly attack on tourists in Kashmir. The Government held Pakistan responsible for it.

Hey, you wastrel, said one of the sadhus. Why are you here alone today? Where is that bosom friend of yours? That bastard mussalman?

Be careful of your words.

How dare you teach us how to speak. What is your worth? Do you know what the Muslims have done in Kashmir? Killed innocent civilians? Bunch of fanatics. All traces of them should be removed from this country. All mosques should be burnt down. All biryani joints should be demolished. They should be taught their proper place.

Supen decided to keep quiet. He could sense danger all around him.

Some goons belonging to the ruling party were loitering around. Normally they would have come to his rescue, but they were hostile towards him. In the past, they had sent out several feelers to him, inviting him to join the Party. They wanted him for his body, his muscles, his bravery, his skill in using the tangi. He would have been useful. But he kept refusing stubbornly. Like a mule. Let him and his Muslim friend be lynched. They would do nothing to prevent it.

The sadhus were continuing their aggressive conversation. The tea stall owner and other hangers on were participating in the conversation with increasing urgency.

We have tolerated a lot, we Hindus. We have had to remain subdued in our own land for centuries. They are dictating to us, what we should do. Last Basanti Puja, they asked us to switch off our mikes. They go berserk at any opportunity. Did you not hear what they did in Murshidabad over *Waqf* property? They looted and vandalized. And now, they have butchered tourists in Pehelgam.

Supen got up abruptly to leave. But the tea stall owner came forward and said viciously, why so fast? Look who's coming down the road.

It was Asghar. He had no idea about the attack in Kashmir. The news had just broken. Supen tried to signal him away, but it was too late. A mob mentality was already in place. Blind. Unknowing. Uncaring. It was the nondescript tea stall owner who took the first step. He picked up a stone from the road, took aim, and threw it directly at Asghar who was quite near, by this time. It hit him on the forehead and made him reel back in bewilderment. He was not able to comprehend what was happening to him and why. People suddenly appeared from various corners, and they were all running towards him, converging upon him and flinging abuses at him!

Saala! Son of a pig! Motherfucker! You think you can make our women cry and get away with it? Looters! Butchers!

They started to rain blows upon him. He was down on the ground and they were taking turns to kick him.

Supen sat paralyzed for a few moments. Then he sprang up, ran into the shop, seized a knife, and rushed full speed at the rampaging crowd.

Sabdhan! Disperse! Or I will plunge this knife into you, you bastards. I'll make you blind.

They fell back at his fury. Then one among them leapt forward and tried to wrest the knife from his hand. They were wrestling with each other on the ground.

Meanwhile the sadhus had been watching the spectacle with tense enjoyment. The Party goons who had been turning a blind eye to the proceedings realised that boundaries were being crossed. Anyone could die in the melee, and this could ignite full scale riots. The Party boss would not approve of that. She was known for protecting the Muslims who formed a large percentage of her vote bank. The leader came forward, and snatched the knife away from Supen's hand. Just get away from here! He hissed at them. Asghar and Supen, taking advantage of the respite, fled from the scene, panting hard and gasping for breath as they ran.

The drama was over. The violence had receded. Night was beginning to fall gradually. Asghar and Supen were walking in silence. Tears were streaming down Asghar's cheeks, and he kept wiping them away with the back of his hands. They were making their way to a nearby chemist's shop. The doctor was just about to shut his chamber. He tended to the cut on Asghar's forehead without a word. Neither was he hostile. Nor was he comforting. He was a man of experience. He could guess exactly what had taken place.

Receiving no comfort from anywhere, Supen takes Asghar to his boat. They set sail on the somber waters. The atmosphere is calm and the river is ebbing. But Supen's mind is wild and full of restlessness, like a typhoon. Everything seems unclear and blurred to him. All the contours of his life are slipping away and dissolving. Asghar is still in shock. The tears have dried, but tremors run through his body from time to time. His forehead is bandaged and his eyes are glazed. Supen keeps rowing for a long while, even though his arms are aching almost unbearably. Night has now fallen. A sickle shaped moon can be seen in the sky, silvery but pale, as though hidden behind a veil of water droplets. Supen has come a long long way away from home. He has not strayed this far before. The boat comes to a spot where a riverine from within the forest is meeting the larger stream. At the junction, Supen can see the mud whirling and bubbles on the surface. The boat is bobbing on the river.

And then, both Supen and Asghar sight it together. The rarest of the rare riverine dolphin. It will make its way down the entire length of the Ganges to the Himalayan foothills. It comes close to their boat. It is neither brown nor dark grey. It is a shade of pale blue. Its elongated, slender snout is gleaming faintly in the half-light. It frolics in and out of the water. They know that it cannot see. It is blind. But it makes sounds in bursts, the sounds bounce off the boat, off the wondering humans in the boat. The dolphin keeps circling the boat as though fascinated by the images it can glimpse in its mind's eye. Suddenly it leaps high into the air and then dives back into the water. Circling the boat once more, it now starts to swim away, and as it recedes it emits a strange eerie whistle that lingers for a moment in the air, before gradually fading away.

When Supen finally returned home, dawn was about to break. The small hut was still in shadows. His room was empty. Lipsa had gone, taking away with her a small bundle of clothes, a tin

box of trinkets, and a few utensils. The bed lay in one corner, bereft. Supen sat on the floor of the porch, as the sky turned pale. He thought of the first year of his marriage with Lipsa. How she fell upon him with desire. How she fed him curry and rice with her own hands. How he had carried her on his shoulders one day. How he had splashed water on her. But he could not be what she wanted him to be. He could not fulfil his responsibility towards her. He could not earn what any other man could earn. He had not learnt to discipline himself. He was a wastrel. A burden on society. He sat on sunk in thoughts till the sun had risen high and golden light streaked the mud.

When he reached the tea stall for a cup of tea and some food, the news had already spread in the village that Lipsa had left Supen. It was what he deserved. Not only was he a good for nothing, but he was a scoundrel as well. He had dared to raise a knife against a Hindu for that vagabond friend of his, Asghar. Tempers were still running high, but Supen knew that if he lay low for a few days, things would return to normal. At least, so it would appear. He took care to go to a stall the owner of which, Pintu, was sympathetic and affectionate towards him.

The whole day, Supen worked on another's land, helping to harvest Boro paddy. He sweated in the burning heat. When he sat down to have his meagre lunch, he suddenly felt immensely lonely, and kept remembering his grandfather.

It is evening now which will soon densen into night. Supen is sitting at his favorite spot on the banks of the river. After an entire day of blistering heat, there's a cool breeze blowing through his hair. The river is in spate now, and will soon come flooding into the land. There's an ache in his heart. He keeps thinking of Lipsa's drooping figure by the doorway. He has let her down. Yet, as he keeps sitting there, cross-legged and alone under the sky, the heavy burden on his heart starts to lift. In his mind's eye, he can see the solitary dolphin on its long journey to the Himalayan foothills during the monsoons.

He can hear the rare whistle it emitted that night for Asghar and him. He knows that he will miss Lipsa. But he also knows that he is now free.

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Jayanti is Associate Professor of English Literature at Sivanath Sastri College, Kolkata. Her novel “Yearning” was published by Writers Workshop and was nominated by the publishers for the Commonwealth Prize for first time authors. Her translation of Bani Basu’s Bengali novel, “The Enemy Within” was published by Orient Longman. She has a published novel, Until the Rains Come (Avenel); a collection of short stories (Leadstart), as well as stories published in The Quest, a journal of Indian literature and culture; Eco- Tales of India (Authors Press); Writers Editors Critics (WEC) international journal and Setu bilingual journal. Her articles on Underground Rap music in India have come out in prestigious journals such as the Journal of Indian Anthropological Studies.

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