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Wild JasmineParamita Satpathy

The forest was aflame.

It was the second half of May and the temperature hovered around forty-five degrees Celsius. The sky poured out molten heat. Like a thirst-tormented monster the sun sucked up life from every living cell, in man, animal or plant. There was nothing they could do but surrender meekly to merciless Nature.

The newly constructed road snaked around the mountain; the work was still on at some places. A few villages stretched out along the road-side. Small huts in a row reached into the forest. On their walls, made of dried-up branches and clay, rested low, sloping thatched roofs. A few had tin or asbestos roofs. Halfway down the looping road stood an asbestos-roofed concrete house with four or five rooms, which served as the Anganwadi (play-school) as well as primary school. It was also used sometimes in the evenings for literacy programmes for the elderly.

Most children had stopped coming and the primary school was closed for the summer. But where were the children who used to come to the Anganwadi? The heat must be keeping them away, Rina guessed. They should have been there at least for their mid-day meal. The cooking-gas had run out four or five days ago and no refills were to be had in the village. The erratic supply of electricity had broken down completely and no one could tell when it would be restored. Cooking over a wood fire in that heat would mean getting oneself roasted. The house turned into a furnace as heat came streaming down the asbestos roof. There was no respite either inside or outside the house. Rina kept moving in and out, splashing her face from time to time with the water stored in an earthen container.

The sound of a motorbike was heard outside. Who it could be, Rina wondered. Nobody was expected at that hour. It couldn't be her brother Tuku. He had gone out at day-break to attend some meeting, somewhere inside the forest. It was, he had said, an important meeting and workers from all corners of the state would be coming. Tuku would be late: it might be evening or even night by the time he returned. Rina kept the front door open on account of the heat. She walked out of the courtyard and tried to look out through the open door, stretching forward.

A motorcycle with two men astride it had pulled up outside the house. Their eyes strayed across the open door. Should Rina come out and ask them what they wanted? Perhaps they were new here and wanted to ask the name of the village or the place that the road led to; or maybe they wanted to know something about the construction sites. It was not unusual; many people came inquiring. But it was the timing that troubled Rina. Two strangers arriving during the scorching and deserted afternoon was not usual. Rabi Jani, the tribal domestic help at the Anganwadi, had not yet come. She had kept some *pakhala* (boiled rice soaked in water) for him in a bowl and covered it up. Rina

waited for the two men to leave. But they did not go; nor did they get off the bike. There was no one in the vicinity she could call in case she needed help. Rina was feeling ill at ease. It might be wiser to shut the door quickly.

“Can we get some water to drink?”

Rina heard one of them speak as she was about to close the door. She stopped abruptly and looked up at the riders. Two young men, in T-shirts and trousers, were looking at her expectantly. Both wore caps. Perhaps they were on their way to attend to some work but the heat and thirst had made them stop, Rina thought. They dismounted and after parking the bike moved a few steps towards her. She was a little frightened; should she slam the door in their faces? But they appeared visibly tormented by thirst and heat. They had probably travelled a long distance. They might be in genuine need of water.

“It is so hot here; our throats are parched. There is no shed nearby where we could take shelter for a while,” the man who had been driving the bike said, looking at Rina, and sat down on the verandah without waiting for her to say something. The other man stood on the road, looking ahead. She paused for a moment – the two men were not looking at her. She drew a breath of relief and went inside without a word. She returned in a minute carrying two metal tumblers filled with cool water from the earthen pitcher. The two men almost snatched the tumblers out of her hands and gulped the water down.

“Some more!”

Rina could read the urgency in the man’s voice even though neither of them looked at her directly. This time too she went back without answering, taking the empty glasses and came back after filling them with water. But this time, while returning the empty glasses the man who had been riding pillion gave her a plastic bottle.

“Can you please fill this bottle?” he said politely.

Rina could not refuse, but she was worried within. Who are these men? Did they know that she was all alone there? What if they followed her into the house?

But none of her misgivings came true. She filled the bottle and handed it back to the man.

“Many thanks,” the man who had been driving the bike said, smiling gratefully at her and started the engine. Rina went inside, closed the door with one quick movement and stood leaning against it. “Many thanks”, she muttered to herself and smiled. She was soaked in perspiration. It was unusual to sweat so much in that dry scorching heat.

Rabi Jani’s main task was to get firewood and two pitchers of drinking water for the Anganwadi. He also filled the earthen vessel in the courtyard with water for washing and cleaning. Besides, when the school was open and more water was needed for the children, he filled a few plastic buckets for their use. Rina had to humour him to get him to do all these chores. Rabi Jani was given a midday meal at the Anganwadi in

return for the work. But that day he had not shown up at all. Rina was left to herself in the lonely, blazing afternoon.

The next day —

It was late afternoon. Rina cycled to the market for some groceries, leaving Rabi Jani in charge of the house. There was no news of Tuku. He had said he would come back by evening, or at night if he was delayed. He had taken Rina's mobile phone with him. Of course, a mobile phone was not of much use in these parts: most of the time the signal was too weak or entirely dead. But Tuku had not returned at night. Rina waited for him until midnight. Night faded into morning but he did not return. Nor was there any sign of him at noon. Where was he? Rina was worried. Tuku had been wandering over the countryside, God knew where, for the last two or three months. He had opened an S.T.D. booth in the market down below but it remained closed on most days. Tuku did not seem to have any interest in the shop. Unmindfully, Rina rolled her bicycle down the winding road. The beep of a motorcycle horn behind her made her swerve to the left. The motorcycle stopped by her side. Rina looked at the rider. It was the man who had come to the Anganwadi yesterday asking for water. But he was alone now, his friend was not with him.

'Those two glasses of water saved our lives yesterday,' he said. 'I'm glad I got another chance to say thank you.'

Rina got off the bicycle and smiled at the man.

'Is it always this hot here?' the man said in a low voice, as if speaking to himself. Rina did not reply.

'Do you belong to this village?' he asked again, looking at Rina.

She shook her head. 'I work in the Anganwadi and stay there. My home is in a village near Kesinga,' she said casually.

'I've come here for the first time,' the man said. 'I've been moving from place to place in this heat for the last seven or eight days, supervising the road-construction.'

Rina did not react to this. 'My name is Ratan Singh. I am from Chandikhol. Do you know the place?'

Rina shook her head.

'Were you going somewhere in particular or just roaming around?'

'I was going to the market', she answered.

'I'm going there too' the man said. There was a note of eagerness in his voice.

Rina got on to her bicycle.

‘Will I get some water the next time I come to your Anganwadi?’ he asked, gazing intently at Rina. She did not say anything but a soft smile flickered across her face.

‘Well, thanks again’, he said and started the motorbike.

It was dark by the time Rina returned from the market. From a distance she saw Tuku sitting on the veranda.

‘Where’ve you been? There was no news of you,’ Rina said with anxiety in her voice.

‘I’ll tell you everything, *didi* Give me something to eat first. Is there any *pakhala* left?’

Rina stood the bicycle against the wall and hurried inside carrying the groceries. She came out soon with a bowl of *pakhala* and a plate of fried potatoes. She put the food before Tuku and sat by him peeling an onion.

‘What do these people think? Can they crush us under their feet? Reduce us to dust? They want to build their factories on our land and suck away our blood.’ Tuku muttered, looking into the darkness, as if thinking aloud. He had forgotten his sister sitting near him. His hand had stopped in the act of raising food to his mouth. His mind seemed to be elsewhere and he appeared to have been gripped by some deep, overwhelming passion.

‘Stop blabbering!’ Rina said. ‘You have been wandering about for the last two days. You haven’t even eaten in these two days. Finish your *pakhala* first.’

Her voice broke the spell.

‘We shall fight, *didi*. We’ll not let them move even a step as long as we live; we will fight to the last drop of blood in our bodies. And after that, *you*, *didi*, and all the tribal women and girls must take the lead.’ Tuku said, still looking into the darkness, as if he was making a prophecy.

Rina kept quiet. They sat there in silence for a few minutes. Tuku lifted the rice from the bowl to his mouth absent-mindedly. Rina looked at the bowl and went inside to get some more rice for him.

‘What are these boys up to?’ she wondered. Tuku did not say anything clearly. He just kept mumbling in broken sentences. They were conducting meetings in unknown villages, somewhere deep inside the forest. He told his sister just that much – nothing more, although she tried to pry more out of him. This time he had stayed away for two days without any information. Rina felt a shudder of fear. She let out a deep breath and came back carrying some more rice in a small bowl.

Rina had hoped that the heat would come down a little in the next two days but instead, the temperature went up. Tuku had gone away somewhere early in the morning. He had been in a great hurry. Rina had mashed some soaked *chooda* for him. But despite all

her persuasion Tuku went away without taking any food. The Anganwadi children had not shown up either. Probably no child will come today as well, Rina thought.

The sound of a motorbike was heard outside. Rina came out of the house. It was as if she had been waiting for someone. It was the same young man, Ratan Singh – but he was alone that day.

‘I’m really very thirsty today. Can I have two glasses of that refreshing water?’ he said, getting off the bike and moving towards the house.

A smile appeared on Rina’s face; she went into the house and came back carrying two glasses of water, one in each hand.

‘Do you have electricity here?’ Ratan Singh asked as he sat down on the veranda.

‘Yes, but we’ve had no power in the last four days. There is a table fan but it is of no use without electricity.’

‘There was no storm or rain recently -- then why the power failure?’ Ratan Singh asked looking at her.

‘Who knows? Perhaps the wires melted in this heat. It’s nothing new. The electricity goes away regularly for ten or fifteen days every month.’

‘There is no one here to talk to, not even down there in the market,’ Ratan Singh said as Rina picked up the empty glasses. ‘Do your parents live here? I think there is a school here as well?’

‘No, only my younger brother lives with me. There *is* a school but it is closed for the summer vacation,’ Rina answered.

‘Do the children come regularly? Is there a teacher?’

‘Only a few come. They used to come in larger numbers when mid-day meals were provided but now they come only when they feel like it. A teacher has been appointed but he’s just as irregular as the children.’

‘What about your brother? What does he do for a living? Is he educated?’

‘Not much, he passed Matriculation but we couldn’t afford to send him to school after that. He has opened an S.T.D booth in the market and is planning to stock provisions and a few other things.’ She tried to sound carefree but her voice was gloomy.

‘Well, I must leave now. Thank you.’ Ratan Singh walked back to the motorbike. He looked at Rina, smiled and started the bike. ‘I shall come tomorrow.’ Rina could not understand if it was a promise or a proposition. Her face reddened.

Next afternoon, Rina was feeling a bit restless. She walked to and from the front-yard of the house many times expecting Ratan Singh at any moment. Why he should want

to come, she asked herself. What would she say to him if he did come? An unidentifiable disquiet had taken possession of her. But Ratan Singh did not come. Noon passed. The sun blazed down. Rina rinsed her face and hands, spread a straw mat on the floor and lay down. Suddenly the sound of the motorcycle reached her ears. She got up hurriedly and rushed out.

“I’m not just thirsty today but hungry too. I could do with some tea,” Ratan Singh said softly to Rina and smiled.

A smile touched Rina’s lips and lit up her face.

“Isn’t your brother home? I thought I could meet him if I came in the late afternoon.” Ratan Singh said.

“No, he may be at his booth.”

“All right, I’ll wait here for the tea.” He sat down on the veranda.

“There’s no milk,” Rina’s said, her face flushed with embarrassment.

“Do you have tea leaves and sugar?” Ratan Singh asked. She nodded.

“Black tea will do.” He flicked a smile at her and Rina disappeared into the house.

There was no gas. She would have to use dry leaves to start a fire and prepare tea, Rina thought bitterly. But at last the tea was ready. Rina came out carrying a cup of tea and four biscuits on a plastic plate.

“It took you a long time!” he said.

“There’s no gas,” Rina smiled awkwardly and turned to go inside. “I’ll get a glass of water.”

“Come, sit here,” Ratan Singh said.

Rina put the glass down near him but did not sit down.

“It won’t be like this much longer in this village,” he said. “Life will change. You will be able to get gas easily and there won’t be power failures. There will be a bigger market and more shops. Better schools, may be a college as well, and a hospital and doctors. The look of this place will change totally.” Ratan Singh did not look straight at Rina while saying all this although he sat facing her.

Rina stood there silently listening to him.

“Do you know what we are doing here? We are constructing a road that will connect this mountain to the larger one behind – a real wide concrete road on which two large vehicles can move side by side comfortably, not like the narrow one you have now.” The note of assurance in his voice had remained unchanged.

“Aren’t they going to blast the mountain and dig mines there?” Rina returned accusingly.

“Well, not exactly. But whatever will be done will be for the good of everybody. All the people living in these villages will prosper from the project,” he said calmly.

“How will they be better off?”

“They will get jobs. Not just that – they will get cash, good clothes to wear. They will live like real human beings. They will become civilized.” Ratan Singh went on.

“What do you mean by ‘real human beings?’ ” Rina asked acidly. “They are as much human as those you call ‘civilized’. They feel pleasure and pain just the same way as the others; summer and winter have the same effect on them. The only difference is that they are poor. But they do not feel deprived in any way. Have they ever begged for your charity?” Rina grew excited.

“But you must admit that they have benefited from the government’s programmes. There are schools for their children, bore-wells to provide drinking water. Electricity has come to many villages. Medicines have become available. Can you deny it?” Ratan Singh asked.

“No, I admit there are some changes, but most of it is just eyewash. The less said about the government schools the better. As for healthcare, there is neither a doctor nor medicines in the village dispensary. The power supply is down more often than not.” Rina sounded bitter.

Rabi Jani arrived with buckets full of water hanging at each end of a bamboo pole balanced on his shoulder. He paused a little at the doorstep and glanced first at Ratan Singh and then at Rina. He went inside to keep the buckets and came out. Without saying anything to Rina, he walked away and soon disappeared in the dusk.

“Shall we go for a walk?” Ratan Singh asked Rina in a tender voice. “Will you show me round the village?”

Rina waited for a moment, turned and closed the door from outside and fastened it with a chain. She stepped into her slippers and came down the two steps onto the road. They walked along the track that passed by the left of the Anganwadi. There were no other houses in the neighbourhood. The huts in these hill-side villages were built one behind another in a row, at a little distance from each other. One village was at least ten or twelve kilo meters away from the next.

“Whatever you may say, life is hard for the people here. Don’t you think they deserve a few modern comforts?” Ratan’s tone was calm.

“But why should they have to give up their traditional ways for the sake of these modern comforts? Would *your* people be prepared to do it?” Rina’s words erupted suddenly, as though they had been kept suppressed somewhere inside her for a long, long time. “Can

you claim that the life you live is the best?" Rina went on. "These innocent people mind their own business; they never hurt anyone or try to grab another's share. In what way are they inferior?"

"You are becoming too serious; that was not what I meant," said Ratan. "Whatever the government is doing is for their good. They may not understand this now but they will surely realize it later. I agree that they have been living a life of their own, but trust me, no one intends them any harm." Ratan Singh pleaded.

They were both silent for a few moments. "Perhaps it would be a good idea to wash them clean, dress them up in expensive clothes and put them in cages, like animals in a zoo, so that the rich people from the city could come and gaze at them," Rina retorted sardonically.

"You really care about them, don't you?" Ratan Singh's voice was placating.

"I have been living among them for the last two years, babu. Believe me, you cannot find such peace anywhere else." Rina's voice was as calm as Ratan's.

'Don't call me babu – my name is Ratan.'

They walked on in silence. The sun had set. A film of darkness was beginning to spread across the sky. A soft cool breeze blew through the trees, relieving the heat.

'What a sweet smell! What is it?' Ratan Singh stopped and looked around to trace the source of the fragrance.

"Look at that tree on your left, it is a wild fig tree. What you are getting is the smell of its ripe fruits." Abruptly, Rina stopped. "Can you recognize this other smell?" She looked at Ratan Singh. "It is the fragrance of wild jasmine." She picked a bunch of soft white flowers from a shrub nearby and handed it to Ratan Singh.

"Wild jasmine". Ratan Singh's hand touched Rina's, holding the bunch of flowers. Neither said a word. The forest was so unusually quiet that even the sound of a leaf being blown away by the wind could have been heard. Rina held her head lowered.

"Why is it that all white flowers bloom only in the night?" she murmured, looking at the ground.

"All white flowers!" Ratan Singh said gently. He cupped her face in his hands and lifted it close to his own. Their lips met.

"I shall come tomorrow at this time. I am building a small two-roomed house for myself a little above the market, two or three kilometres away. The house that I have rented, in the market place, is too far away from the work site. When the new house is built I shall take you there."

They walked back along the path, hand in hand.

* * * * *

Rina was surprised to find Ratan Singh in front of her house so early that morning. They usually met in the evenings. Only last evening they had spent quite some time in each other's company in Ratan's newly constructed house. What could have been so urgent as to bring him here early in the morning?

Fortunately Tuku was away. He had left at about noon yesterday and not returned. She walked up to Ratan Singh. He sat astride his bike. He looked flustered; his hair was dishevelled and his eyes were red and swollen. An unknown fear seized her. What could have happened?

'Where is Tuku? Is he at home?' Ratan Singh asked awkwardly.

"I don't know; he could be in his booth in the market," she replied

"When did he go?" His voice sounded distant, as though he was a stranger.

"Early this morning" Rina replied, her voice quivering. "Why? What is the matter?"

"Someone murdered Pradip last night. His dead body was found lying in the market early this morning. He was stabbed in the stomach. The police are searching for the killer; he cannot get away."

Rina stood rooted to the ground. She had seen Pradip for the first time when he came to her house with Ratan Singh on his motorbike, asking for water. Later, she had met him a few more times at Ratan's new house. Who could have killed him?

"I must leave now," Ratan said. "We shall talk later." He started the motorcycle and rode away. Rina stood still on the verandah, leaning against the wall. Her mind was in turmoil. Who could possibly have murdered the man? Where had Tuku gone since yesterday? She had lied to Ratan. Had Tuku been responsible? No, never; her brother could go to any length, but murder... Rina knew how tender his heart was. Last year, the gentlemen who came to inspect the school had wanted to go rabbit-hunting. But Tuku had prevented him: "I don't like any kind of hunting!" he had declared firmly. Rina remembered how stubborn her brother was. Rina was afraid she would be dismissed from her job at the Anganwadi, but fortunately nothing had happened.

"Why are you meeting that contractor so often?" Tuku had asked her sometime back.

"No, we just see each other occasionally. There's nothing to it," Rina had replied evasively.

"Be careful, didi ; these are not good people. They have come here from the city with a purpose -- to blast the hills and rob the poor tribal people of their land and their homes. We should have nothing to do with them", Tuku said grimly.

Rina had no answer. What could she have said to her younger brother? As it was, he was away most of the time. She could not tell him that she was in love with Ratan Singh

that they had decided to get married. She couldn't tell him what she thought of Ratan – that he was not an evil character, as Tuku believed, but a compassionate man, full of sympathy for tribal people. She would talk to her brother one of those days and try to explain things to him, but with this sudden turn of events all her planning had gone haywire.

It was evening; Tuku did not come back. Rina waited for him with bated breath. Night came and departed. It was another day. There was no sign of Tuku – not that day, nor the next. Four days passed but Tuku did not return. On the fifth night there was a soft knock on the door. Rina was jolted out of sleep; her body was trembling in fear.

“Didi, open the door.” Tuku's voice came from the other side of the door. Rina jerked the door open. Tuku and three or four other boys stood outside.

“Is there something to eat?” he asked urgently.

Rina had not cooked. She was not able to think properly. She rushed into the kitchen, soaked some chooda in a bowl of water, strained out the water and, after adding some sugar to it, handed the bowl to Tuku and his friends. Then she slumped on the floor, worn out.

“Listen, didi, the police are after us. But we haven't killed that man. You must trust me, didi, some others murdered him and are trying to frame us.” Tuku was gasping for breath. Rina's gaze travelled to the pistol and knives which they had put down on the floor. She was startled, as if she had seen a snake.

“These are nothing didi, just for self-defence. We are wandering here and there, hiding ourselves from the police. We are compelled to keep these things, just in case. Do you have some money?” Tuku asked impatiently.

Rina hurried towards her tin box and took out all the money from it, including the small coins. She counted the money – five hundred fiftysix rupees in all -- and handed it over to her brother. Tuku snatched the money from her hand. He and the others went out through the backdoor and disappeared into the darkness. Rina felt her legs weakening and sat down at the very place where she had been standing. She sat huddled up through the rest of the night. When it was daylight she got up somehow and attended to the domestic chores with much effort. A few Anganwadi children had turned up; she gave them some singing practice. She thought she would cook for them but she felt so disturbed that she had to abandon the idea. She gave each of them a couple of biscuits and sent them back. Rabi Jani came in the afternoon. “Shall I get water?” he asked Rina.

“Have you seen Ratan Singh?” Rina asked him and he shook his head.

She secured the front door and came out onto the road soon after Rabi Jani left. She began walking in the direction of Ratan Singh's house, hoping that Ratan Singh would come riding his motorbike at any moment. But the road was completely deserted. She trudged on. By the time she reached Ratan Singh's house, about three kilometres away,

she was out of breath. It was quite late in the evening. To her disappointment, both the rooms were locked from the outside. She sat down for a while on the verandah to rest her legs. There was not a soul around, nor was there any chance of getting a little water to wet her parched throat. She half ran, half walked back to the Anganwadi. She spent a sleepless night, sick with worry. In the morning she decided that she must find Ratan Singh at any cost. If she did not find him in his house, she would go down to the market and look for him in his usual haunts. "I must, by any means, make him meet Tuku, explain everything and remove the suspicion and ill feeling they have for each other", she kept saying to herself all day, as if reciting a litany.

Rina moved in and out of the house gripped with anxiety, waiting for the sun to set. She did not have the patience to wait for dusk: she took out her bicycle, locked the door and rode away. It would take her some time to reach Ratan Singh's house, riding uphill along that winding road.

At a little distance from the house Rina hid her bicycle behind some wild bushes by the roadside and soft-footed down the road towards the back door of the house to avoid being seen by any passer-by. The back door was open. Rina could see a big car parked outside the house. Perhaps Ratan Singh had company. She usually came to this house only if Ratan Singh asked her to, because most of the time he was out, or with friends.

Rina hesitated a little. Should she go in? Most probably there were others in the house along with Ratan Singh. It would not be wise to go inside. Maybe she should call him out.

Still undecided, Rina moved towards the house, a step at a time. Instead of entering through the back door she took a turn to the left and stood below the window. Standing on tip-toe she stretched forward a little and tried to peep through the window. The sound of laughter floated out through the room. Rina waited a while hoping to meet the boy who cooked for Ratan.

"These tribal people are so simple that they will never suspect anything, even if someone cuts their feet away under them," Rina heard someone say. It was Ratan Singh's voice.

"But those boys are really smart. It was they who killed Pradip", someone else remarked.

"Don't worry, we'll get them soon. I have managed to trap their leader's sister and we will come to know of their whereabouts from her." It was Ratan Singh again.

Rina could not believe her ears; could this be Ratan Singh speaking?

"You are an expert at trapping girls!" a voice said admiringly. "Otherwise, life would be boring in a place like this. What is she like?"

"A real masala dish! Wait until you get a taste!" Ratan Singh said. A burst of vulgar, raucous laughter followed.

Rina turned to stone. Her head whirled. She was not able to decide whether she should go in and reveal her presence or return unnoticed.

“But aren’t you afraid of AIDS, brother? We need to take precautions.”

“Yes, you must be careful. Anyway, the road will be built in a few months and then we can all go home. Why bother?”

“But Pradip’s death must be avenged.”

Without turning, Rina moved back carefully, step by step. The jungle was so dangerously quiet that the sound of a foot treading on a dry leaf could have been heard.

There was no time to take the bicycle out of the place where she had hidden it. She ran blindly through the forest, trampling the wild bushes and undergrowth, getting bruised and scratched by the spiky creepers that were entangled with one another. She seemed to be running for her life, as though the men in the room were chasing her.

More surprise awaited her at the Anganwadi. The front door was open. A friend of Tuku’s was pacing about in front of the house; perhaps he kept vigil over the place. He stopped when he saw Rina. Without a word she half walked and half ran into the house. In a corner of the veranda sat Tuku and some of his friends. Rina did not wait to look at them properly, nor did she say anything to Tuku. She ran straight into her room.

The forty-watt bulb in her room gave out a very dim light because of the low voltage. Rina stood before the small mirror hanging on the wall. She was startled at the sight of her reflection.

“Do you know, didi? The fellow that murdered that contractor has been caught this afternoon. There is a rumour that the killer belonged to a rival group,” Tuku said standing at the door; there was eagerness and relief in his voice.

Rina turned and stood facing her brother. Tuku stopped short. Even in that dim light he could see the scratches on his sister’s face; he could see the thin line of blood that trickled down her cheek. She had not worn a dupatta over her dress. A portion of the left sleeve of her kameez was torn and hung awkwardly. Tuku stood still as a statue for an instant.

“Didi, what happened? Who has done this? Tell me!” The grimness in Tuku’s voice was frightening.

Rina stood woodenly holding her head down. Tears had begun to well up in her eyes.

“Didi, I am asking you something!” Tuku roared. His friends sitting on the veranda heard him and came there. Standing behind him they tried to peep through the door.

“It was he – that contractor babu and his friends”, Rina’s tone was calm and clear. She fixed her eyes on Tuku’s face. She did not blink even once while she said this although tears ran down her eyes.

“Where are they?”

“In his house.”

Rina shifted her gaze towards Tuku’s friends standing behind him.

Without uttering a word Tuku turned and stormed out of the room. His friends followed him. Moving with the speed of lightning they reached the other end of the veranda and the clash of metal on metal was heard. Rina tried to see – there were knives and other weapons in their hands that glittered in the dim light. Tuku and his six friends leaped away like wild animals and melted in the darkness in an instant.

Rina stood still at the threshold holding the door in both hands and kept looking into the darkness. Tears trickled down her eyes.

(Translated from Odia by Snehaprava Das)



BIO-NOTE

Paramita Satpathy Tripathy is an influential voice in Indian Literature. She writes prose fiction and poetry in Odia and nonfiction in Odia and English.

So far seven story collections, three novels, one collection of novellas and one poetry collection have been published to her credit in Odia. Her works have been extensively translated to other Indian languages and books have been published in English, Hindi, Bengali and Marathi languages. Few of her publications in translation are Intimate Pretence (Rupa&Co), A Boundless Moment (Sahitya Akademi), Door ke Pahad (Bhartiya Jnanpith), Chandan Ka Phool (Vani Prakashan), Paap aur Anya Kahaniyan (Rajkamal Prakashan), Prapti aar Anyanya Galpo (Kriti Karigar). Her recent novel Abhipret Kaal in Odia is a historical fiction set between 1920-47, the last phase of freedom struggle in Odisha.

Paramita's works while reflecting in their themes, tones and structure, the current state of Indian novels and stories also mark the new strides that women's fiction in the country seems to be taking. There is an evident expansion of empathy and a conscientious attempt to grasp the anxieties of a society in turmoil from the point of view of the marginalized, the lonely, the less loved and under-privileged. Thus, her works strive to integrate a progressive social vision with a woman's desire, pain and rage and an awareness of new formal possibilities.

Paramita has represented Indian literature in many literary forums across the country and abroad. Paramita received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 2016 for her book Prapti (A Boundless Moment). Besides she has received Odisha Sahitya Akademi Award, Bhartiya Bhasha Parishad Puraskar, Assam Sahitya Sabha Samman, Bhubaneswar book Fair Award and many others. She joined Indian Revenue Service in 1989 and is presently working as Commissioner of Income Tax in New Delhi.

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