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Threshold

Navaneeta
Lakhimpur, Assam.

Bhonikon raised her eyes. In the windswept flicker of the earthen lamp, her slanted eyes grew huge with the effort of listening. A thousand indecisions traversed through her till finally she croaked out, “Nothing”, brought her attention back to the more than mouthful rice she had gulped up in her hurry.

It had been raining intermittently since the past six days. Already the courtyard was greenish with velvety slime. Broken bricks have been strategically placed in order to provide foothold for the exceptional visitor. The puddles near the granary were red tinted with cow urine. A sudden drift made the ancient black kettle suddenly jerk into a faster rhythm above the fire place, making the room aglow all of a sudden as the fire escaped from under its pressure.

Mona lingered. She loves to linger. She has been a little annoyed with Bhonikon for being so snub with her since the past couple of days. She pitied Bhonikon because of her hard life – losing a mother at sixteen is no easy matter but then to assume responsibility of a rural household is not simply heartbreaking but rather backbreaking. And to keep on working on the farms on the face of certainty of the yearly flood, to keep on with life on the surety of hunger and poverty, commands respect if not understanding. Yet Mona feels she is not returned the respect. For Mona is the first girl in her class. Her poetry is published in the newspaper and she is only fifteen. People from all over the state write to her – praising her, hoping to be her friend. She could have gone anywhere with her parents this vacation and yet she chose to come to this village – Ranibari by the side of the Laipulia – just to be with Bhonikon, her cousin. This village that does not have electricity and everything that goes along with it. And yet Bhonikon is being brusque with her. Every time Mona asks, she is replied with a stock response – “my uncle is dying; what do you expect?” Yet Mona knows Bhonikon does not care at all for her uncle. After all, he is just a cousin of Bhonikon’s father!

Thunder growled and Mona suddenly realised that the rain has increased as has the wind. A distant wailing of a woman drifted on and off with the wind. Suddenly both girls became aware of the small puddle that was forming right by the side of the fireplace from the dribbling water falling from a leak in the thatched roof. Bhonikon pushed a mug with her feet towards the area without stopping to eat.

“That will take care of it. Now can you please eat a little faster!” she snapped.

Mona quietly started eating again.

“... if the rain continues this way, all the *kothia** will be destroyed. However much it rains tomorrow, I too will have to go to the field with father and the boys. It would have helped a lot if the reapers from Bahgaon could have come to work. But of course they would go to Jitu’s place because there they would be paid more. I will go and ask Horumai if she can spare Nogen and Mithai for the morning half. If they come, maybe we could save more than half of the *kothia* before it gets completely submerged in water. But... God forbid if the old fool decides to die today, I don’t know how we are going to manage. I wonder if... hmm, now that might be a good idea. Father might stay over there for the whole day and we young fellows might just make a token visit and then rush off to the field! Of course the village authorities would impose a heavy fine on us, oh you won’t understand, we are not supposed

to go to the fields when someone dies. How would I know why? That is how things are done. But then they we don't have any other option, do we? But what morbid thoughts are these!?! The poor man is not yet dead and I am already busy in making excuses to escape the mourning household. And to think that he is my kinsman! *He Bhogoban*, please don't let him die, please do cure him else I won't be free of guilt ever."

Suddenly a high pitched wail overcame the wind and rain and made itself heard. Bhonikon and Mona looked up at each other but the wail died away as soon as it had started. A shadow of relief passed over Bhonikon's face. She looked at Mona and said, "Thank God."

Muhiram had been a long time dying. It was spring when he first fell sick. Initially ignored, his illness suddenly took on a life and death seriousness. The entire summer was spent taking him to the hospital across the Brahmaputra – to and fro. First his family, then the extended family and now the entire village is waiting for his death. It is not that Muhi is unpopular. He is rather an insignificant fellow – not good enough to become the object of gossip, nor bad enough to raise rancour in people. In fact waiting for his death has riveted in him the attention of the entire village for the first time.

The sowing season is right around the corner. Now is the time when the kothia must be collected from the field, tied into neat heaps and kept ready for the sowing time. But the rain has come early, raising havoc among the unsuspecting farmers. And what a rain it has been! The water level has been rising consistently since the past fortnight. When fervent prayers did not stop the rain, the villagers decided to collect the kothia ahead of time, for fear that it might be spoiled. That Muhi should decide to postpone his death has irked the entire village. It is, to say the least, pretty inconsiderate to his family. At a busy time like this, when a family can use all spare hands, Muhi's dying has forced people to sit by his side. And not just one person, two-three able bodied men have to be constantly there – always ready to carry him out at that final moment because the soul cannot leave the body when one is inside their house. The man must be taken out to the open before he breathes his last.

In another time this would not have been a problem. If it seems that a person's last moment has come, he would be carried out with much keening and left out in the courtyard to await death, surrounded by his family and neighbours chanting god's name. But the rain has complicated everything in Muhi's case. Since yesterday, he has been taken out thrice anticipating his final breath, but each time he revived and had to be brought back, changed into dry clothes and wait again. Everyone is just tired with the entire affair, and although no one would admit even to themselves, they all want Muhi to die so as to get on with their lives.

Muhi and Bhonikon's father are cousins. Their homes some distance from each other's but still just a holler away. Bhonikon's worry springs from the fact that Muhi's death would imply compulsory fasting for three days in honour of the dead. And fast or no fast, the kothia has to be collected – a gruelling exercise that starts before sunrise and ends when daylight ceases. Also the contamination of death! The entire house had to be cleaned; all utensils and clothes had to be washed, including quilts and mattresses and in this weather that would mean they will be sleeping in hay and straw for a long, long time.

All of a sudden, Bhonikon tensed. Her eyes grew wide. Her whole body shivered once. There was a lull in nature, the relative quiet more disturbing than the thunder and lightning. Even before the wailing hit them fresh, Bhonikon knew. Mona looked up at her, excited yet timid. Hesitantly she said, "Is it... is it over then?" Bhonikon took a long time answering. Her mind flew over a web of details within the span of a few seconds. The distant keening and wailing,

increasing every moment, assailed the two young girls, enveloping them in a suffocating terror. After a wrenching moment, Bhonikon answered calmly looking Mona in the eyes, “No. But eat fast. It might be any moment now and we don’t want the ire of the dead on us.”

The girls continued eating. The mournful plaints grew stronger.

*kothia: seedlings