

THIRD EYE EDITION

A life less ordinary...I

Three years ago, on a sweltering June afternoon, an orphan girl, escorted by a distant male relative, appeared at my door. Julie Ekka, all of fourteen years, still carried noticeable traces of baby fat on her cheeks. Her dark, saucer-like eyes surveyed me with a mixture of fear and defiance. Her oily, shoulder-length hair was tightly braided in two plaits. She clutched all of her earthly possession in a plastic packet – two faded skirts, four bangles... What she had left behind in that remote village in the foothills of Bhutan was too enormous to contemplate – a father and a mother buried in the dark soil on the edge of a village, two brothers, beloved play-mates, carried away by sudden illnesses, a childhood that had known more shadows than sunshine, more clouds than rainbows.

Something in the quiet, dark child made me take her instantly under my wing, something of her vulnerability awoke the mother in me. However, it did not take me long to realize that this new girl, who had come to work as a maid in my home and gain a precarious toe-hold in this bustling metropolis, had a wild, untameable temperament, a free spirit that would not submit to authority. She belonged to the Santhal tribe, whose forefathers had come from the heart of India to pluck tea leaves in our tea gardens. She spoke in their native Sadri tongue, a strange admixture of several languages. She had the stamina of an ox, ran like a deer, and was as sudden in her laughter as with her tears. While my husband and I trained her in the household tasks, while I made determined efforts to smoothen her rough edges and impart the graces of a young lady of good breeding, she taught us about life. She taught us about life. She taught us that in life, there's nothing like a free lunch. When her loved ones had vanished to the great beyond, her paternal aunt who had reluctantly sheltered her with her own brood of children, persuaded her to earn her keep.

So, as a ten year old, she rose at the crack of dawn, wolfed down a dish of stale rice and joined the other villagers as they made their way deep inside the dense jungles to carry back logs of wood to be sold to timber merchants. Soon she could name every tree that they passed – bonsum, segun, titasopa, sal, gomari... she learned to stand still as a snake slithered across her path, to imitate the calls of birds, to keep away from beehives and hordes of chattering monkeys, to screech like a banshee at the sight of marauding leopards. Enormous trees swayed, groaned and crashed around her as skilled woodcutters, mainly Bodos, wielded their glinting axes...

Then, like the other villagers, she placed a cloth turban on her head, and helped by a youth, balanced a log upon it. For a few moments she staggered unsteadily, fighting to keep her balance and hold up the log with her small hands.

Then drawing a deep breath, she started her long arduous journey back to the village, through miles and miles of thick bushes and leaning, whispering trees. Every muscle of her body screamed in silent protest. Sweat beaded her puckered forehead. But she doggedly trotted behind the grown-ups, trying to prove she was as strong as them, feeling terrified of being left behind, proudly determined to hand over her weekly wages to her aunt and be ensured of hot meals, a roof over her head and the small luxuries that made life worthwhile for her... soap, hair-oil, safety-pins, talcum powder...

On the way the men and women broke out into lilting songs, swore at their destiny, flirted with each other, leaned awhile against the trunks of trees, egged each other on to hurry.

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Little Julie was always silent because the effort at carrying the logs drained all her energy. All she could do was pant heavily and trot at the tail end of the procession. She sheer enormity of the jungle, the boundless rolling spaces unnerved her.

That fear became very real when they were caught in a thunderstorm one day which took them quite by surprise. In the twinkling of an eye, the sun was obscured by a bank of dark angry clouds. Flashes of jagged lighting flashed over the hushed landscape. A wind sprang up like a ferocious beast, flattening the tall grass, rustling among the bushes, making the trees bend and creak. Then the rain beat a frenetic tattoo upon their heads, bearing faster and faster, a cold silver curtain of lashing water drew up around each of them, obscuring their view of each other. They scattered in panic, dropping their logs and scurrying for cover. It was dangerous to take shelter under the tree as lightning could strike at any moment and reduce them to ashes. The rain and the wind hurled ancient trees to the ground. The group ran towards the river. Men and women leaped to the side of the embankment and clung on desperately, hoping to escape the fury of the storm.

Julie Ekka, Basanti Singh and a youth named Chau were not so lucky. They wandered helplessly in the thickets as Chau slashed at the bushes with his khukri trying to forge a path to safety. The ground rumbled and shook below their feet, trees crashed all around them. Julie began to scream in pure, unalloyed terror. She lost her turban, her slippers. Her knees and elbows were bruised and bleeding as she fell again and again. Basanti and Chau gripped her between them and half-dragged, half-carried her in the gathering darkness. At last they reached the Kalodiya. The river had swollen in the space of a few hours and the current ran swiftly. On the far bank was their village. Would they ever reach it? They crawled on all fours, clambering onto the smooth, slippery boulders in single file, fighting to keep their balance. Little Julie's screamed died down as she grimly struggled to reach home. At last they were on the other bank. The familiar plantain copses, the cabbage patches and the straggly fences of their village came into view. An anxious crowd stood on the edge, holding aloft flickering lanterns. Her aunt gave a cry of relief and ran forward. Julie stumbled into her arms, weeping.

The two of them walked home. The dogs in the farm, Kalu and Bhote came bounding up to Julie, tugging at her rain drenched frock and wagging their tails.

That night, for the first time since her parents and brothers died, Julie felt she belonged to a family which cared for her. She snuggled up to her aunt and fell sleep, her heart at peace.

But for the little girl and her fellow villagers, a bigger storm lay awaiting to happen...

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