

A life less ordinary - II

Winter arrives early in the foothills of Bhutan. Soon the season of ghostly mists and sour oranges descended on Julie Ekka's village. The waters of the Kalodiya receded until they were a trickle among the smooth boulders. Late in the evening, after the men had returned with a deer or two from the forest, bonfires sprang up in the open spaces among the huts. Rice boiled in enormous vats. Venison roasted in the crackling flames. Someone brought out a drum, someone broke into a song, someone passed around a bowl of hari, the local brew, replete with food and wine, men, women and children danced under the velvet star-studded sky, forgetting for a while the long, tedious hours at the tea-garden, the farms and the forest, the life and death struggle for survival, the hunger in their bellies and the aches in their bodies, the despair that always dogged them like a faithful shadow. Little Julie too learnt to forget, to be happy. She flung her limbs in wild abandon and stuffed herself with food. At Christmas she knelt on the pew of the village church and her thin piping voice joined the sonorous prayer service. She never tired of gazing at the tranquil visage of Mary and the cherubic infant Jesu cradled on her lap. The kind priests handed out clothes and food to the villagers at Christmas and they faithfully turned up for the midnight mass. When the harvesting was over and the crops stored in the granary, Julie's aunt began to frown less and smile more often. Her brood of seven children and Julie often sallied forth to the weekly haat where they bargained with the sellers for everything from hogs to hair-clips.

This brief spell was too good to last. Out of the clear blue sky came a bolt of lightning that wiped out their laughter and sense of well-being. It started when the village youths began to get restive. All around their village the forests had been cleared, the logs carried off to the yards of the timber merchants. Stumps stood desolately where once had been towering trees with spreading branches. The income earned from felling and transporting logs was dying up. Desperation showed clearly on their faces. They murmured in low voices among themselves. Then their plan was ready.

One frosty January morning, a large posse of villagers set out for the hills. Julie Ekka was among them. By noon they were wending their way up the steep slopes, grabbing the protruding rocks and sturdy shrubs for support. They were nearly eighty of them, a mixed crowd of Bodos and Santhals carrying ropes, axes and bundles of rice. Having clambered up the steep incline of a hill, they came across a smooth asphalt road. But just before that there was a barbed wire fence blocking their way. Two of the men took out wire cutters from their cloth bags and set to work. The group fell silent. Soon there was a gap in the fence. One by one they crawled gingerly through the gap, Julie bringing up the rear. They did not take the road. They clambered up the slope, towards the dense canopy of trees that seemed to beckon them so invitingly. The boys let out whoops of glee. The women giggled with relief. Suddenly, a dozen grim faced men in blue uniforms materialized from behind the tree trunks. They cradled deadly guns in their hands and barked out orders in Dzongkha, the language of this mountain kingdom Bhutan. The villagers stopped still on their tracks, dropping their bundles to the ground. The women began to wail. Julie trembled and threw up her morning meal of stale rice on the grass.

It was noon when the villagers were arrested. At dusk, marshaled by the grim – faced policemen, they were still marching through forests, fields of potato, wheat and barley, past

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clumps of maize, crossing rope bridges and dzongs, the massive monastery fortresses where saffron clad Buddhist priests turned prayer wheels and lit lamps of yak butter. Prayer flags fluttered in the chilly breeze.

After an eternity they reached a small town. Stumbling with exhaustion, they entered their prison cell – a draughty, dimly-lit cell which was totally bare. Men, women and children squatted on the ground. Soon the cell was so jammed with people that there was no space to move.

The night deepened. The prisoners kept awake in hunger and fear. Would they be taken to the Dragon king? How long would they be held here? Who would know in the village that this fate had befallen them? Three days passed in this manner. Three days in which they remained awake, and shivered, and coughed, wept and prayed as the guards stood vigil over them. Julie's body was burning with fever and she babbed incoherently in a delirium, calling out to her aunt, her cousins and the infant Jesu. On the fifth day, a small band of villagers appeared before their prison cell, Julie's aunt among them. The prisoners shed tears of relief. Their wait was over. But things were not so easy. A large bail amount had to be arranged for their release. The villagers who had come to the rescue hurried away. In two days they sold their livestock, mortgaged tracts of farmland and reappeared with the bail amount.

Finally the prisoners filed out of their cell, their heads bowed, hokling each other's hands. They began their long trek back to the village. Julie had bought a pig with her own wages a few months ago. Her aunt had sold the pig to raise the bail amount.

Julie never went back to the forests again. Two years later, she boarded the bus to the city and came into our lives. She is with us still and never tires me stories of her childhood.