

# THIRD EYE EDITION

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## Tears and birdsong (Fiction)

At some unknown hour of the night, the girl melted away. There was a high brick wall all around the housing colony, girding the eight apartment blocks, shutting off with bricks and barbed wire the clubhouse, the society office, the badminton court and the *namghar*. So the girl must have slipped, like a faint, sad, wispy shadow, past the gate where the lone security guard sat, cheap liquor on his breath, snoring on his chair in the cubicle, the visitors register open before him on the table.

She must have seen the shuttered shops out on the road, the halogen streetlights with their sickly orange glow, the bushes thick with dust. The barks of street dogs somewhere near, and then, echoing from afar, the answering barks. To the north, along the new highway, the trucks were thundering past, now slowing with a squeal of brakes, now accelerating.

How frightened she must have been. An eleven-year-old in a pink frock two sizes larger, fastened at the back with a safety pin. Two fragile glass bangles encircled her thin left wrist. She carried nothing else. Nothing, that is, but the bluish, purple bruise on the tender flesh of her left thigh. The black tar on the road felt hard on her feet, the warm stickiness of blood. Then the night swallowed her up.

The darkness passed and dawn broke. A few came out in the early hours, when the cry of the *azaan* could be heard, and newspaper vendors cycled in through the gates. Many of the men and women who walked briskly along the neat lanes within the walled complex were past their prime. They had bought flats here, in this gated community, because the air was fresh and clean, there was open space and birdsong and the gentle hills to the east seemed so close. Together, they had planted saplings which were now shady, blossoming trees. Morning walks, informal meets at the clubhouse, Major Jogesh Barua and his army jokes, Chanchala Devi's tremulous outpourings in verse... There was fond pride about children working far away, in Bangalore and New Jersey, and framed pictures of grandchildren in the living rooms. Empty nest, they told each other, wryly, smiling. They were now free, and could do anything they liked. Only, there was nothing to do.

But it was not that they were all similar. For ten families which were respectable, thrifty, abiding by the rules of the building society, signing petitions, offering help to an ailing neighbour even in the middle of the night, there was one which did not fit in, kept to themselves, wary whenever their doorbell was rung. Each such family was like a small hole in a carefully stitched patchwork quilt, the thread unravelling. Flat B21, where the polite, bearded young man lived with his wife. He was in the construction business, he said. But they found out soon enough he was one of those who had laid down arms, who had once done things they talked about only in lowered tones. They imagined him often in a forest, waiting to kill. Then there was Bornali Garg, a divorcee living with her teenage son. It must have been her fault. She was beginning to wear deeper shades of lipstick, even as the boy got into more trouble at school. But everyone was unfailingly polite to those who did not fit

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in, who had secrets and could not belong or welcome them in without a troubled shadow flitting across their faces.

Nisha and Pronoy bought the fifth floor flat, one of the three bedroom, east facing ones and moved in one September afternoon. The facts emerged, discreet enquiries, the gossip of servants. Married for a year now, they had been staying with his parents on the other side of the city. All day, the packers and movers lifted leather sofas, the wrought iron bed, boxes of books, crockery, up the stairs. The woman gave orders, like a man. The Hazarikas saw her first on the landing, in jeans, her hair in a ponytail, talking on the phone, her hand on her hip. She looked right through them.

There was something new, disquieting, with the arrival of this couple. Cars driving in at late hours, carrying friends to their housewarming party. Shrill laughter at midnight.

"No *puja*, no *prasad*, but lots of whisky bottles," Anita Sarma's lips were thinly pressed. "The music was so loud. We couldn't sleep. We are decent people. What is this nonsense?"

Pronoy and Nisha brought with them the heat of youth, the restlessness of the city lying in wait beyond the brick wall girding the colony. She often stood on the balcony, in a terry robe, after her bath, coffee mug in hand. A sleek cat exquisite in her langour, her aloofness. Pronoy smiled at the neighbours, but only when Nisha was not with him. He looked the decent sort, bespectacled, with a low, pleasant voice. On Sundays, he washed the Esteem, rubbing and polishing it till it shone. He did not look unhappy that she had made him leave his home. That was how it was, now, the women nodded, knowing.

One by one, they all noticed the swelling under Nisha's clothes. Then came the luminous glow on her face, and the contours of her body became softer, rounded. Until, one day, she was so big that Pronoy had to help her up the steps, slowly, tenderly. The middle aged Garima, Abha and Anita, chatting after the *namghar* prayers, wondered how one could tempt fate by buying a baby cot and so many stuffed toys before the delivery. And was it not strange how nobody from her side or his visited?

When her water broke, twenty days ahead of the date, at one in the morning, he was white faced and trembling, ringing the Hazarika's doorbell. "We drove her to the nursing home for Pronoy's sake," Anita explained. "He's a good sort."

Little Nainita, or Noni, was born by caesarean section and came home a week later. A few of the women came to see her with gifts of baby clothes, Johnson baby powder, oil and shampoo, blankets. It was the decent thing to do, and now this young woman, all out of shape and her belly spliced, was no more a threat to them. She greeted them stiffly, relying on Pronoy to fill in the gaps in the small talk.

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Till then, they had not known there was another child, besides little Nainita, in that flat. It was Garima, with her powerful bifocal glasses, who saw the brown feet, toes splayed wide, behind the curtain that screened the balcony.

Moments later, Maina wandered in, blinking in the light, eyeing the three visitors with alarm. The faded blue frock was too large on her scrawny frame. A tiny stud on her nostril, eyes black as the night, her big ears sticking out of her shaven head.

"Go inside. I told you to wash the plates." Nisha's voice cracked like a whip.

"Got her two days back, seems retarded. Would you like tea? Coffee then? But you must... Aunty."

Maina's head had been shaved so that the lice would not spread to the baby's hair. They had made her bathe with Dettol. She was not to wear slippers in the house. Anita Hazarika got these facts from Maina herself, when Nisha took the baby to the doctor, or visited friends. Maina slept on the carpet, slapping mosquitos that fed on her blood all night. Mrs. Chaliha of the ground floor flat found the bald child munching a slice of mouldy bread from a waste bin. She felt disgusted and quickly closed her door.

Then two things happened at the same time. Little Noni was not too well. When she cried, her face turned blue. There was a wheezing, rattling sound when she breathed. She grew too tired to suck her mother's nipple. Pronoy was always driving to the doctor, tense, unsmiling, hands gripped on the steering wheel. The doctor suspected asthma. Nebulisers were prescribed. More tests, more precautions. At the *namghar*, they repeated what they had said before the baby's birth. Why buy teddy bears in advance and tempt fate?

As Noni struggled to breathe, life for Maina became harsher, more uncertain.

Gossiping servants, sly, observant elderly women who had too much time in their hands, all pooled in the details of what was slowly unravelling in the fifth floor flat, once filled with music, the clink of glasses, the heat of youth. All day, the television was on, but Nisha's voice rose above it, filled with rage as the bald little girl, trembling, dropped dishes, let the baby clothes fly away in the wind, left the fridge door open. Sometimes, Maina would be let out on some errand. Some man or woman always noted the fear in the enormous pools of sadness in her eyes, and the tiny smile she gave them, as if she believed they would do something.

Spring came. The green and trembling leaves spoke of new beginnings. Little Noni was better. The asthma was always worse in winter, said Pronoy to Major Barua. Now Maina walked around the campus with Noni in her arms, jiggling her up and down, kissing her cheeks, showing her the flying birds, the rosy clouds, children riding tricycles. She was a little mother now, pouring her love into the cooing, gurgling baby, holding Noni close to the two tiny mounds of her budding breasts.

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Later, the men shook their heads and refused to discuss it. It was too shameful. The women could not discuss anything else. But in those endless conversations eddying like water in a fetid pool, nothing new was learned, or ever revealed. The beautiful young wife with her confident body and the beginning of her new life had made all of them feel old, spent and faded. But now it was proved they were better women, far better than she would ever be. They could never dream of doing what Nisha did in one of her blind, consuming rages.

Maina was pushed out of the house, the door slammed behind her. It could have been the girl's chance to escape, to go back to wherever she came from. But she would not go. She was shrieking and hammering at the door, calling out to her *Baideo*. Annoyed, Mrs. Hazarika opened her door a few inches to peek out.

Maina was naked. The child's face was contorted with horror. She was like a little animal that, through an ancient knowledge in its blood, knows that the end is near. When she saw Mrs. Hazarika, she streaked past her, howling. For twenty, was it thirty minutes, the naked girl ran around crying, up the stairs, along corridors, down on the grassy open. One by one, people stood still, watching her, dumbfounded.

Jatin, the security guard, caught her just as she was running out of the campus. He wrapped her with his shirt and carried her to the fifth floor flat.

"I wanted to ask that woman why she did that to the poor girl," said Garima afterwards, "What could Maina have done that was so bad? Breaking a cup? Stealing food from the fridge? I think it is something else. That girl was growing up..."

Two days later, Maina was gone. Nobody saw her go. They were so relieved. Mrs. Hazarika could now enjoy television without the keening of a girl being beaten next door. It was a good place to stay, again. All of them, as if by common consent, avoided Nisha and her family. Nobody asked her why. She had no right to disturb them, to ruffle the serenity of their lives here, where the air was fresh and clean, and there was birdsong.