

Encounter

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How deep and sharp the beating is, be it from the heat or from the police. Like the screaming of a flushed bird, Rajjan's pain-filled voice pierced the air, "Oh Ma. . ."

Natthu's hand suddenly loosened so much on the little bundle he had made with the end of the dhoti tied against his waist that if that bundle had not been more or less part of his body, it would have surely slipped right down to the ground. Like the snap of a piece of bamboo cracking, Rajjan's scream did not last long, but for a long time Natthu felt a stripe spread through his ribs.

How deep and sharp the beating is, be it from the heat or from the police.

In June's mute heat, a sharp and dangerously high fever, Natthu had stopped not far from the back wall of his house. Made of unbaked clay, it was so filled with white shells and snails, it was as if they had taken root. In between them the narrow water lines had become so deep that the next monsoon would surely bring it all down. The sound of this wall falling might be just as stabbing and frightening as the sound Rajjan had just made. Natthu hesitated. Maybe he was

waiting for Rajjan's next scream, or he was giving himself time to let the first scream work its way through him. No second scream was heard. Like this wall flayed by the monsoon, perhaps he too fell from just one more blow, fell like a dark brown wall made of the pond's clay.

Natthu carefully grabbed the bundle at his waist again. It was a fair amount of arhar lentil pods. Boil these up pods and all and with the addition of only a little salt you could have a very tasty meal. When it came to food, for Natthu this season was just about the best. Not just anyone can appreciate what the world's most splendid food is, but Natthu knew for sure that after the seeds and the nectar-rich white mahua flowers hanging down between the tree's dried-out leaves and the ground, the most delicious food in the world was boiled arhar pods. Arhar was so uncivilized that without any water or fertilizer, without even any cultivator's attention at all, it would spring up on its own wherever it wanted, and it would remain there for so long it seemed it had always been there. Not only the men guarding a field but the animals set out in it to graze usually turned their backs on it. So it was no trouble at all to tear off about a pound of pods from a field in which the arhar was like a rustling, lifeless crowd of singed, dried-out men.

After Rajjanlal's hesitant scream everything fell silent. The only thing audible was the call of a bird about whom Natthu and everyone else in the village had heard a terrifying and repulsive story. After she gathers a lot of tasty mahua seeds it is almost always the case that she sings a great deal, and that singing calls to mind this story. They say that once an old woman spread out mahua seeds to dry

in the sun outside her house, and on her way out to gather wood she told her one and only grandson to guard them while she was gone. Drying out in the sun, the mahua seeds shrank. When the old woman returned, she thought her grandson had eaten a lot of them behind her back. She hit him with her small grinding stone. The boy died. The people explained to the old woman that the seeds hadn't been eaten behind her back, they had shrunk in the heat. Then the old woman turned into a bird, and every afternoon she cries out, "Utho puttu, pur, pur, pur ..."

They had taken Rajjan away at about eight o'clock in the morning. Among them was the deputy superintendent; the rest were police officers. Who knows what information they wanted out of him.

When they took him away, he was followed by a crowd of kids, no adults, and it seems the kids stayed there for quite a while. The path went from outside the village where the headman's harvested grain was piled up, behind the little one-room school, and through a little cemetery of crooked headstones until it came out on a little hill. Bushes covered by pollen from a dhak tree and long, dry grasses that produced spiderweb-like flowers covered this little mound.

Natthu had been among those who had seen the little contingent of police leading Rajjan in that direction followed by the kids. Who knows why he felt he shouldn't show himself there. Perhaps because of that ineffable intuition, he decided to take longer gathering the arhar and then not return home directly.

Having determined which way to walk home, he was nearing the village when he heard that sound, far in the distance and interrupted by pain. Yet he

knew it was Rajjan. Like a fish split open by a sharp piece of wood unseen on the bottom of the pond. At the same time Rajjan screamed, that bird began singing from somewhere among the withered, ungainly acacia trees, “Utho putt, pur, pur, pur . . .,” as if she were saying, “Get up, son, all the mahua is here.” And once she begins singing, she doesn’t stop for a long time, often for hours, her voice sharp and full of pain — “Utho putt, pur, pur, pur . . .”

At the same time Rajjan screamed, the crowd of kids ran away to the barely-standing shed called a school. The police might have shooed them away with threats. Among the kids was Rajjan’s own son. When they stopped near the school, the other kids looked at him. His eyes showed neither curiosity nor compassion. So they all looked around for something to do. Then Rajjan’s son suddenly looked weak and ill, as if his dark face were suddenly covered by a layer of ash. Slowly, he sat down on a pile of dried cow patties. The others did not need long at all to occupy themselves. On the highest branch of a tall, unhealthy mango tree hung a dried-out, unripe mango, the target of their dirt clods and stones.

Either that mango had been there a very long time or one mango had already fallen from there and this was its successor. The children threw their projectiles at it for a long time. In fact they didn’t even know if it had fallen or not and if it had fallen had it been eaten or not. What they did know was that many of their stones landed on the sheets of metal that served as the school’s roof, and that made quite a noise. After some time, from inside came the voice of Kishan babu, the one and only teacher, “Stop it, you little bastards!”

So they stopped and sought out other pursuits.

When a few more dirt clods landed, however, not his voice but the teacher himself came out — a very unexpected occurrence. Afraid, they all stopped what they were doing and stood where they were.

With a deep voice Kishan babu said, “Go away. . .” He did not go back inside. His eyes piercing the horizon which, with its heat and the dust, looked like a man suffering from jaundice, he looked in the direction of the sound of Rajjan’s screams. Now they sounded less like screams that came from the throat than deeper sounds that bubbled up directly out of his lungs.

Absolute silence surrounded the school. That it was a school few might be willing to believe. In that elongated shed of a room, with its dirt floor and metal roof, second, third, and fourth grades were all taught together. Each level was in its own corner of the room, while Kishan babu sat behind a desk in the remaining corner. There, not only was he the teacher, he was the postmaster too. After swearing at the kids and giving them something to write out, Kishan babu would fall asleep. Sometimes, with much irritation, he would have to wake up to sell a postcard or write out a letter for someone.

When he was woken up he would get extremely angry. But not for very long. And instead of becoming upset by that explosion of anger the person waking him up would merely smile. Kishan babu was a strange man. His particular characteristic was that he was known only in his role as the teacher or by the name of “Postoffice.” The title “Postmaster” simply wasn’t a natural fit, and because of his nature the villagers preferred calling him Postoffice. They had a

reason. A particularly humorous one. They believed that the fastest way to send information was not by letter, not even by telegram, but by telling it to Kishan babu. Therefore, he wasn't considered the postmaster but the postoffice itself.

But Kishan babu was not to be blamed here. His entire life he had probably never gone anywhere he could have had fun. As he got older he found a way to entertain himself that other people unfortunately often called slander.

In that small village this was the most available and most popular amusement. Merely one well-constructed and well-placed sentence could often provide days of constant entertainment. The next village over had nautanki. And the market town beyond that had a full-fledged cinema hall. But the entertainment they provided was limited. To keep the enjoyment going after seeing the film or the nautanki our villager would have to tell amazing lies in which he would often get caught. Once, for example, Pandit Radheshyam saw a film, and when he returned he said, "A really filthy film. A man and a woman do it in full view."

His neighbors became particularly interested. "They do it in full view?"

"Aré, it's so disgusting I don't even want to talk about it." And then the pundit even spat.

Their imaginations racing they asked, "But what happens?"

"Aré what doesn't happen. They're prostitutes, they'll do anything."

"You mean, with all their clothes off?"

"Oh, my, did you hear that? Did you hear what this dear idiot just said?"

So everybody believed that Pandit Radheshyam had seen on the cinema screen a rare activity engaged in only by the beautiful and wealthy.

The next day, without even planning ahead with each other, a number of men were absent from the village, and when they returned they cursed out Pandit Radheshyam even more than he had cursed the film because all they saw was, sure, the hero and heroine were in the process of taking their clothes off before getting into bed, but then all that was shown on the screen was their clothes, not the hero and heroine. When all their clothes had piled up, the villagers lost their breath with excitement. This was it. They were about to see those two naked people making love in bed, but no! The screen went blank, and the next thing they saw was people going to the heroine's father to complain.

Kishan babu could provide much better entertainment than that. He would say "Aré babu, have you heard? You haven't? Forget it then. What good would it do to tell you."

Kishan babu's listener would then become interested, but more so he'd become ashamed because then Kishan babu would say, "The whole village knows, how come you're so out of it? But I'm late for school."

Then Kishan babu would indeed head off for school, leaving his interlocutor dying with anxiety that he was going to be the only one left out of some very interesting affair. So, he would immediately become not only a petitioner but a flatterer as well. His wide, curious eyes looking intensely here and there, he would catch up with Kishan babu and say, "Postoffice babu, I swear you would not believe how I've gotten into this fix."

"So stay stuck, little boy! Me? I don't get involved in such mundane things. The whole village knows the story about Nandu's wife."

And then Kishan babu would walk away. Gradually, by the next day every man in the village became a kind of Kishan babu. He wanted to make sure that he would be the first one to divulge the affair of Nandu's wife. To do so, he embroidered the story with the full capacity of his imagination. Then everyone who had heard the story wanted to give the impression that he was its original source, so while passing it on to someone else he'd add his own fistful of salt and pepper. So the story grew and over many days took on various forms and entertained practically the entire village.

While this had the power to delight people's hearts, it was also the root of the village's troubles. Even if the affair was about Radhe's sister-in-law, it could affect the reputation of Raghunandan's wife; and when a fight then broke out, it was usually much more interesting. Even before the round of rumors went full circle it became known that Raghunandan had beaten up Mansa and Mansa had laid curses upon Nandu or Nandu had thrown bricks at Radhe. Such a fight didn't end quickly because if the conflict were to grow cold soon, that would be a blow to its entertainment value. When Nandu hit Radhe with a brick, then Radhe divulged Gopal's aunt's secret, and Mansa, having been beaten up by Raghunandan, pulled back the curtain on the Tingo's home. So the longer these conflicts could be kept alive the more the possibilities grew to enjoy the rasa of delight fully. So while on the one hand people would work actively to bring one conflict to a close, at the same time they would let something out that would renew a quarrel among four other men by nightfall.

While such games were played in that village with much care and interest,

they seemed to have a mysterious power whereby not only the village played these games but these games also played the village, like a yo-yo, the faster it would go down the faster it would come back up.

Despite all its wretchedness a village's daylight hours are not totally repulsive; in fact they always have some attractive force that pulls the villager in, be it a bundle of hemp thrown in the pond to ferment or a tobacco plant demanding water. Night, however, is a different story. Night in a village envelopes a palpable terror. As night falls fear hardens a man's body hair which snuggles up against him like a man-eating beast trying to smell him. So then a man passes the time sitting around a fire as in his prehistoric days or he shrinks into the caves of his unbaked clay hovels.

This difference between a village's day and its night corresponds to the two aspects of this entertaining game. One aspect was that it was interesting for the people, and the other was that it brought about disorder in the community. Without anyone realizing it or wanting it, the knots inherent in this game's second aspect became larger, more complicated and harder to unravel.

For quite some time now in the village of Nauban some tumors had begun to cause much pain and tension. No one knew when these tumors had metastasized and become terminal, but during last year's harsh cold season Nanha's ant-covered corpse caused quite a stir. And just as it was unreasonable for Nanha's corpse to be the source of such chaos, it was equally illogical for Rajjan and Natthu to be connected with the growth of these vicious tumors.

Someone said that what lay behind Nanha's being beat to death was a story

about Horilal's younger sister. Horilal did not say a word, but his younger brother pulverized Santu badly with his fighting stick because he thought it was Santu who had started that rumor.

Santu did not regain consciousness. Since Horilal's brother had attacked him at night, the villagers did not know who the attacker or attackers were. One "fact," though, quickly spread throughout the village. Someone said that Santu had been a dacoit, and since he was a dacoit, Madanlal's gang would certainly take revenge for his death.

It's possible that Kishan babu himself had started that rumor, but however it got started, the affair became even more complicated because Madanlal was Barsatiram's enemy. So there's no doubt that Madanlal and his men will attack lala Barsatiram.

After all that had taken place, Natthu and Rajjan began their part in the story. In fact, their being a part of that entire string of events was as natural as if it were their right. Without them, it simply would not have made sense.

Natthu and Rajjan were two of Nauban's more important characters. Almost everyone knew what particularly distinguished them, and that knowledge was just as much a part of the enjoyment of these games as were male-female relationships.

Both were informants. They were brothers from the same womb, and they hated each other. Rajjan spied for the dacoits, Natthu for the police. Or so people thought. Natthu, though, was cleverer than that. He did some informing for the dacoits too. After telling the police that the dacoits would be at a certain place at

a certain time, he would immediately inform the dacoits that the police knew all about their plans. Since both pieces of information were usually true, he was quite successful.

At first this kind of activity was frightening, especially for Natthu. Rajjan, too, was afraid at first. He knew that in this world an exciting whispering campaign was a dangerous way to break open secrets. Very quickly everyone in Nauban knew what any solitary individual was quietly doing and where. The first time Rajjan informed Madanlal that a lot of gold and jewelry was going to be on the road from a wedding in Mirpur, he became overwhelmed by fear on his way home. Soon he came to realize, though, that since he was known to be connected to the dacoit Madanlal, people were as afraid of him as he himself had been of Madanlal.

To some extent Natthu informed for the police to get under the skin of Rajjan. One day Natthu was coming back with some wild, fat, black seedpods whose upper hidden hairs can cause horrible itching. He was doing this merely to cause mischief. It was then that he happened to see Rajjan, who was in a state he had never witnessed before. Rajjan was very drunk, and the end of a large piece of candy made of brown sugar and lentils was sticking out of the shoulder cloth in which he had wrapped it. He had received earlier that day his first full pay. While earning that money hadn't been easy, Rajjan was still quite happy.

This string of events had started three days earlier. Rajjan was returning from a friend's wedding party. The waistcoat he wore over his kurta he had borrowed from Radhe, and he had thoroughly washed his kurta and dhoti.

He had a protective metal tap, like a horseshoe, attached to the heel of his shoes which accented every step with a fine sound. He put a topi on his head and a fighting stick in his hand. Walking along like that, he thought he cut quite an impressive figure. Night fell as he was walking back to Nauban. Moonlight filtered through the branches of the tall black trees on both sides of the road and gathered as large and small white spots scattered far ahead. As he walked over those spots of moonlight the rhythm of his steps brought a song to his voice.

His intoxicated mood of pleasure and contentment was pitilessly broken. Their faces covered, about a dozen men suddenly surrounded him and swore at him viciously, and one of them struck him hard in the lower back with his stick. More than the pain of that, though, it was the insult of it all that made him cry out.

They were dacoits. After he told them his high status in society they beat him up even more, and when they were finally satisfied with their performance, they told him to give them quietly everything he had.

All Rajjan had of any worth was one-and-a-half rupees. And some sweets.

Frustrated with such a little return for all their efforts, they beat him some more. Then one of them even said, “Oh, just kill the bastard and throw his body on the side of the road.”

Crying, Rajjan said, “And what will killing me get you, dada?”

“Abé, then who should we kill, eh?”

That question showed Rajjan a possible way out. He told them about Mannu Sahu, where he lived, and that in Mannu Sahu’s barn they would find all the jewelry that people had given Mannu as a loan deposit.

“Sala, if we don’t find anything there, we’ll hunt you down and cut you into little pieces,” they said as they beat him up one more time and left.

In Mannu Sahu’s barn they must have found enough to satisfy them because not long after that, two of them did indeed somehow or other hunt Rajjan down. Afraid, Rajjan steeled himself for another beating, if not death, when they offered him a job.

For every tip he gives them that brings a decent profit, they will give him twenty rupees, some local liquor and a princely meal.

Every resident of Nauban soon knew all about Rajjan’s luxurious lifestyle and the details of his new job. One day, unable to take it anymore, Natthu decided to tell the police all about it.

He made up an excuse to cover for the absence the long walk to the police station would require, but when he arrived there, he felt he had made a mistake. Deciding to go to the police station had been easy, but when he found himself actually in front of them, he lost his nerve. He felt as if he himself were Rajjan, and he was turning himself in. He happened to stand before the station’s deputy superintendent himself who had just finished eating and, after having probed his teeth for food particles, had just gotten ready to lie down on a rope cot underneath a tree for a little nap. As soon as he stood in front of him, Natthu felt like a criminal, and his throat became like cotton.

“Who are you, bé? What are you doing here?” snapped the superintendent while gathering little bits of greens from between his teeth and forcefully spitting them out.

Somehow or other Natthu was able to say, “Huzoor, I have come in your service.”

Inspecting him with sharp eyes, the superintendent yelled out to an officer who was just then sprinkling water on the ground, “Look at this guy, abé; take him over there. He’s a real bastardly piece of work.”

The officer too inspected him in exactly the same way. Then, grabbing him by the back of the arm he led him inside. Once inside, and before Natthu was able to utter a sound, the officer turned him around like a doll and, without showing any emotion at all, hit him hard in the middle of the chest as if he were practicing on a punching bag. While he hit him in the chest with one hand, with the other he slapped him in the face. Bent over a bit by the punch to his chest, the slap turned Natthu around, and he fell down back against the wall.

Not merely Rajjan and Natthu, every little man in Nauban knew that this was the language used whenever they began to speak with people who had any power. So after those first hits Natthu was able to gather himself together quickly enough to shout, “Huzoor, superintendent saheb, I’ve come to give you some very important information.”

The officer hesitated slightly before he gave Natthu a good kick in the ribs and asked, “The sala’s brought some information, has he. What information, eh?”

“Huzoor, the dacoit . . .”

“Dacoit? What dacoit?”

“Huzoor, the dacoit Hariram is going to commit robbery tomorrow.”

“Just listen to this!” Said the officer, as if speaking to the walls. “What do you

have, you measly bastard, that Hariram is going to steal from you. You're trying to fool us, trying to get some innocent man hung. Your . . ." and the officer hit him some more.

"But please listen to me, huzoor, and you can hang me later. Hariram isn't going to rob me, he's going to rob Kundan." Natthu had learned this from Rajjan.

This time the officer did not hit him; he hurled some obscene curses at him instead and pushed him out back to the superintendent.

His nap disturbed, the superintendent fretted, "What's the problem now?"

"The bastard says that tomorrow night Hariram's going to rob Kundan's house."

"Hit the sala real good and put him in the cell!" ordered the superintendent.

And that's what happened. Natthu was beaten a little more and put behind bars. The next night, though, the robbery did indeed take place. And it went bad. It happened that that night Kundan's brother-in-law was visiting. He was the clerk in the Khampur police station. He tried to warn the dacoits off with a little bragging about his own work in the police force. He even grabbed and knocked down one of Hariram's men. That, however, caused Hariram to take on the role of a dacoit in the movies. He stole everything he and his men could carry away, and on the way out he had the household's four men stand in a line and shot dead. Among them was Kundan's brother-in-law.

No sooner did the news of the robbery reach the police station than Natthu was let out. Now he had become the police's trusted informant.

And when it became known that one of the dead was a station clerk, the

police wasted no time in tracking Natthu down to find out what else he knew.

At this point the game took a turn that involved the lives of both Rajjan and Natthu. While it provided little profit, it was still able to accomplish a few things. The most important thing, however, was merely the excitement of being involved in something important.

When they began their spying activities Natthu and Rajjan were mutual enemies, but as they gradually developed their skills they became closer, to the extent that each one became the complement or the associate of the other. The information Natthu gave the police often came from Rajjan, and the information Rajjan gave the dacoits about the police came from Natthu.

With this automatic, machine-like style of spying not only were the spies happy but the police and the dacoits were happy as well. The work of the spies made the work of the police and of the dacoits that much easier. Both knew who, where, when and what was going to happen. The dacoits arrived, pulled off their robbery without any anxiety or worry, and left. Then the police came, commando-style, attacking those places from where the dacoits had already left. They sealed up the evidence, empty liquor bottles and half-smoked cigarettes, and returned to their station. Neither raid had even the whiff of failure about it.

Then it all fell apart. One night a cabinet minister's brother and his family were returning by car from hunting. Dacoits stopped the car, killed the man and took all the valuables they could find. When it became known who had been killed, not only the dacoits and the police, Natthu and Rajjan also knew that this would not be an easy matter to sort out.

Natthu wanted to hand over the arhar pods to his wife, and before the next thing happened he wanted to disappear, outside the village somewhere. He was just about to put his hand on the back door of his house when he realized someone was inside.

The police?

He composed himself for a while and then decided to try to look inside, which would not be easy. He knew that that door voiced its discontent at the slightest touch. He could hear the voices inside. They were odd somehow.

Finally, he looked very carefully through a crack in the door. Those were indeed police uniforms, but he was also certain he recognized Madanlal, the dacoit. But if the dacoits and the police wear the same uniforms, why did they need separate informants?

More time to think about that, however, was not available because when he saw what was happening on the cot by the wall Natthu suddenly lost all his color, and his mouth went dry.

Sitting on the floor, Madanlal and some of his men were gobbling down some food, while on the cot lay his wife naked, on her back, like a doll during the festival of the monsoon thrown down on a street corner, beaten with sticks and ripped apart.

He backed away from the door. The voices inside reverberated loudly inside his head. He bent down, left the arhar pods right there in the sun and went back.

This was no longer a game, it was real. Those people are here, and now they'll stay. Madanlal's entire gang. Certainly, if the police came and saw his

wife in that indecent state, they too would take advantage of her, but the police had to come.

Instead of the roundabout way, he headed straight for that little hill.

Rajjan's screams could be heard again, but just then Kishan babu had his students recite out loud the lesson about Mahatma Gandhi. He hadn't taught like that for a long time.

When Natthu came down the other side of the little hill in that feverish heat that made the land and sky tremble, the police saw him first in the blur of the summer's hot wind; he saw Rajjan later.

Naked in the sun, Rajjan was lying on the ground, and a police officer was plumbing the depth of his bowels with his fighting stick as if he were testing the depth of the water in a pond.

As soon as they saw Natthu they all froze. Natthu increased his walking speed, reached them, and without looking at any of them directly in the eyes, he whispered into an officer's ear, "Madanlal and his entire gang are hiding in my house. Get there quickly."

The superintendent yelled from afar, "What's that bastard doing here?"

The officer hastily went over to the superintendent and told him what Natthu had said. The superintendent sat quietly for a while, as if he were mentally preparing for a complicated assault. Then he quickly stood up. He yelled for his driver, and he said to his officers, "Throw this prisoner into the jeep. And that guy too. Be snappy!"

Any other time Natthu would not have appreciated such disrespect, but now,

after what he had seen, he did not hesitate to take a place in the back of the jeep, even without any weapon, in order to get back to his house as quickly as possible.

The officers threw Rajjan down in between the seats and quickly took their places. As soon as the superintendent got in front, the jeep took off.

“Go around, come out over there by the acacias.”

The jeep did indeed go around behind Nauban, but it did not turn back toward it; in fact, it went further away. Natthu noticed this, but he thought it might be the police’s way of trying to surround the dacoits.

Then the superintendent yelled, “Stop!”

The jeep stopped. Stabbing the toe of his shoe in Rajjan’s ribs he said, “Tell this one to get down. If he doesn’t, throw him off.”

Perhaps someone in his situation becomes that much stronger because with only a little prodding from the police officers Rajjan not only got down but after a little staggering he was even able to stand.

Then the superintendent barked at Natthu, “You get down too!” A little embarrassed by the scolding, Natthu also got down out of the jeep.

And no sooner did his feet touch the ground than the superintendent screamed at them “Run! Run away! Now!”

Natthu did not understand.

“Abé, are you two going to run away or not! Do I have to shoot you?”

At first Natthu backed up, then he turned and started running, but at a slow pace. Of course, he was unable to see what was going on, but he heard Rajjan’s voice, pitiful, as if he were begging, and before Natthu could turn his head around

to see, the sound of a bullet seemed to tear open his ears. And just as he was about to stop and turn around, he felt as if someone had given him a frightening jolt from behind, and a piece of flesh dangled out of his chest. He stumbled and fell down. Making a lot of noise, birds flew out of the trees. After falling, all he sensed was the total cessation of his pain.

The jeep back up and returned the way it had come. The two corpses lay right where they had fallen. Sometime later police officers threw out a rusty pistol onto the ground near them. A little later the birds hushed down again, but the call of that one sad bird could still be heard —“Utho puttu, pur, pur, pur . . .”