

The Hunt

By Anuradha Sharma Pujari

(Translated from the original Assamese by Arundhati Nath)

“Would you sit on the lawn, madam?” The Nepali *chowkidaar* (watchman) asked Priyanka, running up to her.

For several days, Priyanka hadn't walked through the narrow, zigzag path leading to the river. Usually, she would walk down from the wooden bungalow and sit on a bamboo chair beside the bougainvillea blossom in the huge green courtyard. This was the reason the *chowkidaar* was eager to get a chair for Priyanka when he saw her walking down the stairs of the bungalow.

“No! I'll go out,” Priyanka had responded in a feeble voice.

“All right, madam,” the *chowkidaar* had said, and slowly walked away.

Runa's letter seemed to have robbed her peace of mind. Priyanka and Mriganka have been living in the forest for five years. The forest had mesmerized her during the two years after her marriage to Mriganka. She would move around the forest with a pair of binoculars and a camera, fully absorbed in her thoughts. Occasionally, she would spot a peacock or a hornbill, apart from the usual parrots, wild hens, water fowls, black hooded orioles and blue throated barbets. She would get ecstatic with joy on such occasions.

Spring marked the arrival of different migratory birds to the nearby water bodies. ‘What are their names? Where have they come from?’ In the past, she would rush to Mriganka in the quest for such information. As the months rolled by, her ecstasy and eagerness gradually diminished.

She could meet her friends and family just once every year. After the annual visit to Guwahati, Priyanka remained sad and gloomy for several days. She felt she had returned to a place still untouched by the rays of civilization. No shopping malls to shop at and no restaurants to eat out. They had a VCR, but there were no video cassette libraries to watch new movies. Her friends were so happy, she thought, compared to her!

“*Namaste, memsahib* (Greetings, madam)!” It was Mangra.

Dressed in a small piece of loin cloth, Mangra had come carrying a fishing rod and a *khaloi* (a pot like bamboo vessel used for keeping live fish) on his shoulders. He had just had a dip in the river; water was dripping off his oiled, well-built body.

Priyanka had seen pictures of *adivasis* (*tribals*) in the house of her maternal uncle, in Mumbai. He was an anthropologist and loved explaining things to her. She could remember a photo of a Turkish youth from Cambodia hung on the wall of her uncle’s drawing room. The same pose...with the fishing rod, she thought.

Mangra was an *adivasi* from Odisha, but Priyanka couldn’t find any differences between him and the Turkish youth. Usually, she would ask him several questions; but she didn’t feel like talking today. She was frustrated with being in the midst of these semi-nude men. Mangra grew invisible as he walked ahead through the shoulder-long German grass; his oily, stout back faintly shimmered in the gleam of the fading evening sunrays.

“Don’t go deeper into the forest today, *memsahib*. Look! Baba and his herd have just walked past this way,” Rani said as she collected firewood for the kitchen. Rani was old; her daughter Mini looked after Priyanka’s three year old daughter, Boni.

Priyanka could see heaps of elephant dung before her. Elephants are highly respected in the forest; people would call them ‘Baba’ while offering their prayers. She didn’t go further but took the long, meandering path to the river downstream. She was surprised;

the river bank looked pure white like powdered snowflakes. The *kohua* flowers danced in the breeze and white, fluffy clouds floated in the sky. Hearing her approaching footsteps, a flock of lesser whistling ducks swarmed into the sky.

Autumn had arrived so quietly. She couldn't remember when she had last been to the river bank. Anyone could've been jealous of Priyanka; she had had the privilege of being in the midst of nature for years, and she had agreed until not so long ago... This was the reason she had instantly agreed to marry Mriganka.

She had first met Mriganka at her friend and cousin — Runa's wedding at Digboi. Initially, it was Priyanka who had got curious about Mriganka. In the marriage hall, all the unmarried men were clean shaven and wore neatly ironed garments. Mriganka was an exception. Handsome and well built, he didn't seem to care about his clothes or appearance at all. For Priyanka, this had caused an immediate liking towards him.

She had whisked her cousin, Rontu inside the house and asked him, "Hey, tell me, who's that boy?" Rontu was mischievous; he had said that he didn't know Mriganka. A little later, he had taken Priyanka near Mriganka and had said, "This is Priya...Priyanka, Runa's friend. Please chat for a while." Rontu had then disappeared.

Priyanka had been a naughty student during her hostel life in Delhi and Mumbai. However, she hadn't faced such a weird situation before. Perhaps a part of her heart had weakened on seeing him, she couldn't even speak.

"Why are you still standing? Here, have a seat," Mriganka had said in a friendly voice.

She had tried to answer as normally as she could.

"Do you stay here?"

"No."

"Where do you stay?"

“In the jungle!”

Saying so, Mriganka had burst into peals of laughter.

Priyanka felt a strange tinge of surprise.

“Why, are you surprised? I work there. There’s no way out! I’ve been living in the forest for the last three years,” Mriganka had said. “My friends do not ask me where I stay, they ask me in which forest I’m currently staying!” he had added gleefully. Priyanka, too, had laughed unstoppably. She had loved the genuineness of Mriganka’s character. He was the same inside-out. This had been the beginning of their love for each other, and soon they had got married.

Initially, Mriganka was pleased to find that Priyanka loved the jungle too. “I thought no girl would be willing to marry me. You’re a girl from a city. You’ve grown up in Guwahati and you’ve studied in metros. I was worried that you would find it impossible to live with me in this forest. Now, I can understand that the Almighty had created you only for me,” Mriganka had said six months after their wedding. The constant clatter of the river flowing in the backyard, the beauty of the peacocks and hornbills had enthralled Priyanka. The first time that she visited Guwahati after her wedding, within just a week she had grown impatient to go back to Mriganka, and had longed for the forest.

On seeing this, her friends had teased her. She had just said, “You won’t understand. I live in such a house, which you must have seen only in a picture.”

These memories were from years ago.

These days, Priyanka would say to Mriganka, “I’ve seen many forest rangers. Either they stay in the city or in a forest near one. We’re staying in such a dense, interior forest area that even the nearest shop is twenty kilometers away! You too can try to get out of here.”

“Priya, you knew even before we got married that we would live in the forest. I love working here; there’s no need to for me to get out of the forest. I’m not forcing you to stay here. You’re an educated woman. You can find a job in Guwahati and stay there. Many couples, today, stay in the same way,” Mriganka had suggested.

Priyanka didn’t like to bring up this topic again. She knew Mriganka wouldn’t change his mind. He loved all the trees, birds and animals like his own children. .

“Only forests can love you selflessly, Priya. We, humans are cruel and ungrateful to the forest,” Mriganka would often say.

Mriganka was an honest forest officer, and loved the forest deeply. Many unscrupulous, greedy and selfish people had been facing trouble in plundering the forest and its resources because of him. He was constantly in trouble with his dishonest superiors and so, was repeatedly being transferred from one dense forest to another. This made no difference to Mriganka. For him, every forest is the same.

Whenever Priyanka visited Guwahati, she would enthusiastically shop at Fancy Bazaar, eat lots of Chinese and continental food at restaurants and spend hours at the beauty parlour. Once, Mriganka had said to her, “No beauty parlour has the capacity to make you beautiful.”

“Why?” Priyanka had asked.

“Because your pedicure, manicure is done in the lush grass sprayed with dewdrops...in the waterfalls of the hills. Your facial is done by the ever-changing, seasonal rains of the forest. What about the blush of your cheeks? I’m that colour, which I can see in you day and night alike...”

“Be quiet! I can’t tolerate the vigour of your poetic creations,” Priyanka snapped. “I’ve become a ghost...a witch staying with you here. A ghost of the jungle! Do you understand?” She had said to Mriganka bluntly at his face.

The smile on Mriganka’s face had vanished at once. He had said in a heavy tone, “In Guwahati, you look like a stranger to me. I feel as If I’ve tied you up in a hot, sandy desert without letting you drink a drop of water. Look Priya, do not make any hateful comments about the forest in front of me in future.”

Priyanka would choose her words carefully after this conversation.

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“Who am I?” Two soft palms covered Priyanka’s eyelids from the back.

“What are you thinking while sitting all alone on the rocks, *memsahib*? It’s evening already; we were searching for you...” Rani, Boni and Mini came and stood near her. Priyanka stood up, caressing Boni up in her arms. She stood still for a while, put Boni back on the ground and then said, “Let’s go.”

The sun had already set; a few, faint rays could be seen in the sky. The distant hills looked like heaps of tar. The *kohua* flowers had turned bright orange. The river seemed to be at peace; an eventful day seemed to sink in it, with the hope of finding answers to some eternal mystery.

Boni was running ahead mimicking a deer, while Rani and Mini grew tired running after her. Though all arrangements had been made in Guwahati, Boni was born at the hands of the doctor in the forest, Madhusudhan Sarkar. Around the same time, Mriganka had been suffering from severe malaria and their plans to travel to Guwahati had been postponed by a few days. Preparations had already been made for their travel from Naambor to Jorhat via Golaghat; and Jorhat to Guwahati by a flight.

Priyanka had gone into labour twenty two days prior to her estimated date of delivery. While the doctor and nurse arrived, Priyanka had tried to endure the pain thinking that it might be false pain. Mriganka's face had gone dry with fear. He was sick but he had gone out to make arrangements to take her to Guwahati the very next day.

Suddenly, the cries of an infant had stunned them. Dr Sarkar's face shone with a smile mingled with happiness and success. "The Goddess of the forest has arrived, before her time," Dr Sarkar, who loved the forest dearly, had said with a friendly grin. Mriganka had haphazardly hugged the doctor. Fear, anxiety and the pride of first time fatherhood had resulted in a stream of tears rolling down Mriganka's cheeks. Dr Sarkar had patted Mriganka's back and said, "Everything in the forest happens in a natural way. You've protected the forest like a father; won't the forest show you a little gratitude in return?"

Later, Priyanka's mother had made sure the mother and infant had a proper check up at Guwahati, as she had had her own doubts as the baby was born in the forest. Boni had been named Bonani (derived from the word *bon* meaning plants or woods in Assamese) by the doctor. Mriganka had lovingly named her Boni Maa and Priyanka just called her Ni.

The day after Boni was born; Mriganka had brought a newborn baby deer with him. He had caressed the baby deer while feeding it milk from a feeding bottle.

"Men! The only animal in the world to fear!" he had said to Priyanka. "This must be a quote from Mr Lawrence," Priyanka had replied teasingly. Who, other than D H Lawrence, would say such a thing? When you were crying hysterically in labour pain yesterday, this deer's mother was crying in pain too. Bahadur had heard the sound of gun shots at the first check post, and had gone into the forest with his group. Two pregnant rhinos had been kept under security there. The poachers had aimed at the

rhinos, but had missed them. After a while, Bahadur's group had found this baby deer in a pool of blood. It hadn't been an hour since it was born and it wasn't even able to stand; the poachers had taken the mother deer with them."

Priyanka had fallen silent. That baby deer 'Munna' and Boni grew up together. Mriganka had said to Boni, "Boni Maa, Munna is your brother; he's just three hours younger to you."

Before their marriage, Priyanka had found a perennial stream of love flowing through Mriganka's heart. However, staying in the forest made her realize that Mriganka's heart was a deep sea of love and grace. Apart from Boni and Priyanka, the entire forest could seek shelter and bathe in that eternal sea of love.

But she couldn't be like Mriganka. She had her future in front of her and so did Boni. So, she couldn't be bound by the smell and fragrance of the wet grasses and wild flowers. Runa's letter reached her two days before and had propelled her to take a decision.

"Memsahib, I've taken Boni inside. Would you sit in the veranda? Should I bring in some tea?"

Priyanka was suddenly shoved into the present. She didn't realize when she had moved up to the veranda of their wooden bungalow. She had become oblivious after receiving Runa's letter.

"Go, bring some tea!" Priyanka managed to say and drove Rani and Mini away. She plonked into the big, cane swing in the veranda. The words from Runa's letter continuously emerged in front of her eyes.

"...You aren't like you were before. You hardly talk even when we meet. There are vacancies for the posts of nutritionists and dieticians here; I've applied. I'll send forms if you're interested in applying. The last date is a month away. What have you planned for

Boni? Haven't you thought about her education? We've bought admission forms from various schools for our daughter, Pinky. What a competitive age this is! You'll ruin your future by staying in the forest for so long. Think sensibly and deeply; we have just one life, which is so valuable. I've not seen another person who would spend one's life without any wishes or goals. Don't think about yourself; think seriously of Boni's future at the very least. If you come to Guwahati; Mriganka would be forced to come here too. I can help you with his transfer. I couldn't believe you are a woman who would sabotage her life because of her husband's wishes and fancies. Don't get angry...I'm just reminding you when there's still time..." Runa's husband, a Block Development Officer had recently been transferred to Guwahati. They're building their home there. She didn't show Runa's letter to Mriganka.

Before going to bed, Priyanka told Mriganka about the contents of Runa's letter and declared her decision: Boni and she would go and stay in Guwahati and she would work there. For the first six months, Boni would go to school from her grandmother's place.

"I've been thinking of this too. Boni can study for two years in this way. Come here in the holidays; we'll put her in a boarding school once she is eight," Mriganka easily said.

"Why? Why should we put her in a boarding school?" Priyanka snapped.

"I, too, don't like the idea of enrolling her at a boarding school...but there's no way we can educate her here," Mriganka said.

"Why can't you take a transfer? Can't you sacrifice even a wee bit for Boni and me?" she asked.

"This is not about sacrifice on my part, Priyanka. I can't take a transfer so easily. I do not flatter my superiors and do not offer them lavish gifts. You already know that since I don't entertain my superiors with tasty meals of rice with deer meat, they're not happy

with me and keep transferring me to these forests as punishment. However, this has been a reward for me in disguise because I love the forest very dearly from my childhood,” he explained.

“I know, your love for the forest cannot outshine your love for Boni or me. I haven’t made any requests in the past five years, but do not destroy your daughter’s future because of your obstinacy,” Priyanka retorted angrily.

“Priya, I had become an orphan very early and have studied at my maternal uncle’s mercy. Won’t I understand the emptiness created due to the absence of family support and love? Do you know how I had craved for a little love as a child? If you and Boni go away from me, won’t I become an orphan again...?” Saying so, Mriganka arose from the bed.

Priyanka gently stroked the sleeping Boni’s head and said, “I can understand everything. However, it is foolish to take decisions in a sway of emotions. You are thinking selfishly from your own point of view. A school is twenty kilometres away from this forest. Do you think we can send her there daily?”

Mriganka fell silent. He could understand that the allure of his wife and children have taken him away from reality. He had nothing to say further.

The next day when he came for lunch, Mriganka said, “We’ll go to Guwahati the day after tomorrow. Admission forms for several good schools are being distributed. Pack enough clothes for six months; you can buy other essential items there.”

Priyanka didn’t imagine that they would move so soon. A sense of pain engulfed her when reality dawned on her that they were actually moving.

“Here is your tea, *memsahib!*” It was Rani. She offered a piping, hot cup of tea with two biscuits. Clutching onto the cup of tea, Priyanka moved from one side of the veranda to

the other. There were rows of potted plants on each side, blooming with wild flowers she had collected from the forest. Anyone who visited their bungalow was impressed with the care that went into the beauty behind it. Once, her Mumbai based, maternal uncle's family had stayed with them for a week. While leaving, her uncle had remarked, "Priya, you are very lucky. A beautiful home amidst nature is possible only in our dreams; you've got it in reality. You've got a loving, honest husband. Do you know what I feel about Boni? She seems to be a new piece of Wordsworth's poetry. ...Do take good care of your home and family..."

Mriganka wasn't at home most of the time for the last two days. Earlier, he would come home at least four times to look at Boni or get a glimpse of and speak to Priyanka. She could completely understand his pride. But, she had to take this difficult decision. There are times in life, when we need to discipline our hearts. She was wondering how she should convey this decision to Boni. Would she cry and throw a tantrum? Boni has been intimate with the forest since she was born. Would she be able to live without her father? She would sit and sulk within a few days of staying at her grandparents' home in Guwahati. How would she live without this house, leaving her father and this forest behind?

Just then, Boni entered the room and chuckled while sitting on her mother's lap. The black and white spotted rabbit and deer scurried in after Boni. These two creatures never left Boni. Priyanka felt this was an opportunity to give Boni a whiff of her decision.

"Ni, my darling!" Priyanka said, with some doubts still in her mind.

"Yes, Maa!"

"You'll be four years old in two months. You would go to school then, won't you?"

"Yes, of course, I'll go!"

“How will you go? There are no schools here.”

“Why? There’s a school which Mini goes to...”

“No dear! You won’t be a great person if you study there. You have to be good.”

“But, Mini is good...won’t she be a great person?”

Priyanka tried to change the topic. “There’s a beautiful school near grandma’s home in Guwahati. We’ll send you to school with a new bag, water bottle, Tiffin boxes filled with chocolates and designed with lovely stickers...Will you go?”

“What type of stickers would there be on my bag and water bottle?”

“Your favourite stickers, my dear! Beautiful cats, dogs, rabbits, deer...everything...”

“I don’t like those. They can’t be better than Munna, Raja and Tultul...”

What fascinating things were there in Guwahati which would be dearer to Boni than her beloved rabbits and deer, Munna, Raja and Tultul? Priyanka thought hard. Boni left her lap and went off to play with the deer.

Suddenly, Priya grew angry. What is the necessity of destroying her family’s future by giving weight to unreal emotions? Mriganka and Boni are the same. Boni has taken all of her father’s features — she talks and behaves just like him.

A sentence from Runa’s letter flashed across her inner eye. “...Life is just one, invaluable...” Yes, an invaluable life can’t be wasted by looking at the hills, the sky or the wild flowers and listening to the sounds of wild animals. She had dreams too. They would have a house in Guwahati...a car of the latest model. She was qualified...she would have a good job...Boni would do well academically and go abroad for higher studies. These weren’t her selfish, personal dreams. Mriganka, Boni and her — these were good wishes for all of them. She could not let Mriganka and Boni’s emotions and fun come in the way of her dreams. She called Boni in a stern tone. “Listen, Boni! We’ll

stay in Guwahati. Papa would drop us there. You will study in Guwahati; we'll come here during the holidays. You have to be a good girl. I'm telling you now itself: do not cry or throw a tantrum when we are ready to go or when Papa returns after dropping us there. Do you understand?"

Boni didn't think that her mother would make such a stern comment. The little one stared blankly at her mother, trying to understand the situation. Priyanka looked away. The baby deer touched Boni on the head because she wasn't playing with him. Boni slowly moved indoors after a while. Priyanka's eyes filled with tears; she held on to the veranda's railings and kept staring at the darkness outside. The sound of cicadas filled the air. She was not sure how late Mriganka would be. Someone at the nearby Nepali *basti* (ghetto) would be heard playing a flute any time of the day. The sound of the flute floated in to her ears; she wanted to shout and say, "Stop! Don't play the flute now!"

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It was ten in the night when Mriganka's jeep reached the courtyard. As he sat for dinner, he told Priyanka how he had been busy all day and couldn't come to see her. She could feel as if he was running away from her. Boni came out of bed and stood near them.

"What happened, Boni Maa? You didn't go to bed?" Mriganka brought Boni closer to him.

"I'll sleep with you."

"Why do you say this today?"

Boni quietly hid herself behind her father and slowly said, "Papa, Maa said we will not be able to stay together anymore..." Mriganka looked at Priyanka while she hung her head.

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Boni clasped Mriganka tightly and hid her little body in his arms. She went to sleep clutching on to his neck. Priyanka lay on the bed in silence. The quietness of the night was broken by Boni.

“Papa, will you tell me a story?”

“I don’t know any stories, Boni Maa. Your mom knows stories.”

“No, you will tell me. A few days back, when some bad people had killed an elephant; his friends were screaming and they blocked the road for two days...tell me that one.”

“Where did you hear all this, Boni Maa?”

“Why? I was playing nearby when you were speaking to Maa that day.”

“O’ Boni Maa, we weren’t able to go that way for a few days. The herd of elephants had become violent.”

“Why did they kill the elephant?”

“Tusks of elephants are very valuable. So are the horns of rhinos. Poachers illegally kill these animals and become rich by selling the horns and tusks.”

“What’s the meaning of valuable, Papa?”

“Valuable means costly. The meaning of value differs from one thing to the other. For me, the lives of these animals are very valuable, but these have no value for the poachers. Only the horns and tusks are valuable for them.”

“Why do the animals block the roads when a fellow animal is killed?”

“Boni Maa, all breeds of animals have feelings of mutual love, kindness and compassion amongst them. There wouldn’t be a reason to live if this love didn’t exist. Humans are the best of all creations. They have brains and thoughts. So, there are rules and laws for humans. But these animals have none. They have nothing to fight against humans. So, they scream...shout out loud. They block the roads. They encircle their dead friend and

sympathize. Deer cry too. The mate weeps and grieves like a human being. Snakes and humans would try to take revenge. You'll be surprised to hear this: once a friend of mine hunted a fox by mistake. The entire night, the troop of foxes encircled the dead fox and howled aloud. My friend was scared to enter the jungle the next day...he had himself told me about this. It's natural for the mighty to enjoy preying upon the weak. Animals do not have guns, so they scream to protest against injustice..."

"Papa, did you hunt any animals?"

"I had once killed a paddy bird with a catapult just to check if my aim was right. The bird's mate was hovering over the poor bird writhing in pain. He tried to attack us too. I couldn't forget that scene; I've never killed anything ever since. It is easy to take a life, but very difficult to grant life. Do we have the right to take a life if we can't give life? Even wild animals do not kill unnecessarily. When a lion isn't hungry, he doesn't kill a deer even if he sees one grazing nearby. That is why the lion is the king of the jungle...do you understand, Boni Maa?"

"The lion too doesn't break the rules of the jungle. The same forest is inhabited by tigers and rats alike," Mriganka explained.

"What kind of things are you telling her? She just wanted to listen to a story. Do you speak about philosophical things like life and death to a little kid like her? You're strange!" Priyanka couldn't keep silent.

"Sorry, sorry! Boni Maa, go to sleep. As I've already told you, I don't know any stories...no one told me any when I was young..."

"Goodnight, Papa! But, I understood the meaning of valuable."

"What did you understand, darling?"

Papa, you are the most valuable thing for me...” Mriganka hugged Boni tight in his arms. His eyes grew moist. Priyanka drew closer to him and caressed his face. She could feel the moisture near his eyes. Priyanka had no words of consolation. Sometimes, even words and language cannot express emotions...

Priyanka was stunned on hearing the news. She stood with her eyes wide open and she couldn't speak. The day before was spent meeting family members in Guwahati. A few hours earlier, Mriganka had gone out to buy a few admission forms for Boni. Only Boni looked serious then. It was natural for her to feel sad on leaving behind her favourite rabbits and deer.

Priyanka lit a lamp in the prayer room, wishing that Boni would get admitted to a good school. She had just sat on a chair in the veranda when Kanu uncle's hooligan-like son Montu ran up haphazardly, parking his motorbike nearby. He stopped on seeing Priyanka and then, rubbing his earlobes, ran inside. He called, “*Mahideu, mahideu...*” (refers to the word aunt).

Priyanka followed him into the house and saw him and her mother rushing towards her. She was about to ask Montu what the matter was; when her mother said, “This is dreadful news, Priya. Mriganka has been hospitalized. Perhaps, he isn't alive...” Saying so, her mother covered her face in her *chadar* (one end of her dress, specifically a sari or mekhela chadar) and wept inconsolably.

Priyanka stood stunned, transfixed to the ground. Did she come to Guwahati only in anticipation of such a piece of news? Her eyes swelled in disbelief. She got hold of Montu's collar and shouted, “What happened? Tell me the truth!”

Montu tried to get her hands off his collar and replied, “Yes, *baideu* (sister)...this is true. I’ve seen it myself.

“But... how?”

“Actually, *bhindeu* (brother-in-law) wasn’t the target. He had just sat on his bike after purchasing some sweets. A car with black window shields stopped nearby. Suddenly, there was a shower of bullets. There were cracks in the windows of the car. They fled quickly...the driver was good enough. The body of the car was damaged too...”

“Tell me about Mriganka!” Priyanka screamed.

“Initially, no one thought that the bullets had hit someone. The people who had run helter-skelter on hearing the gunshots were relieved on seeing the car leave. They could see a man resting his head on the handlebars of a bike, and were confirmed that he was shot at. Thankfully, I had gone to see the situation there with some friends. People don’t know *bhindeu*. I recognized him. The bullet went straight through the gap between his ear and neck. The police took the dead body away...”

“Don’t call him a dead body, Montu,” Priyanka said amidst loud sobs.

Boni had been standing near a door, listening to the conversation. Her grandmother pulled her closer and cried aloud while hugging her tight. Boni kept looking at her grandmother’s face, but she did not cry...

It has been a week since Mriganka died. Neighbours and relatives were visiting them. Everyone was consoling Priyanka. “The situation isn’t good these days. We can’t say what will happen to whom tomorrow. We too don’t know what will happen to us today!”

Late in the evening, Priyanka opened up a form for Boni's admission to a school. Tomorrow would be the last date to submit it. The police had retrieved two admission forms from Mriganka's body with a few other items.

Priyanka sobbed while trying to fill out the column for father's name. Boni came up and stood silently near her.

"Maa, let's go to sleep. Don't cry."

Priyanka took Boni in her lap and rested on the small bed on the floor.

She could remember the familiar bed with the light rose tinted bed sheet. Boni used to be in the centre with Mriganka and Priyanka on the fringes of the huge bed. They had built a home and family with so much hope and love! Each day was filled with new hopes and dreams. Mriganka loved the forest just as he loved his family. He loved his work and always fought against injustice with honesty.

"Maa..." Boni called out.

"Yes my dear."

"Why do people kill each other?"

"Go to sleep, darling..."

"When people kill other people, don't they block the roads? Don't they scream and get angry like the elephants?"

"Why are you asking these questions, dear? The news of Papa's death has been written about in the newspaper."

"Eeh, just that? They just wrote Papa's name once. I've heard people reading the news...Why aren't we animals, Maa?"

"Why, darling?" Priyanka could feel as if Boni had suddenly grown up.

“If we had been animals, everyone would have screamed for Papa, the roads would have been blocked, and the people who had killed Papa would have been searched out and...”

“Hush, Boni! We shouldn’t think of such things. You should be like Papa. Learn to love people...”

“Maa, did poachers shoot Papa?”

Priyanka kept quiet. What would she say? Weren’t they poachers, who snatched the hopes, peace and dreams out of so many families like hers? Seeing her mother quiet, Boni asked again, “Maa, was Papa very valuable for the people who shot him?”

“My dear, please go to sleep. Didn’t Papa tell you that he had killed a paddy bird once? People too kill each other, just like that...”

“But Papa said that even a lion doesn’t hunt a deer, if it is not hungry...Why do people kill without reason, Maa?”

“That is why I’m asking you to be like Papa. You’ll take me back to Papa’s forest. We will never leave the forest and come here...go to sleep now dear.”

-----THE END

About the Author: *Anuradha Sharma Pujari (born 1964) has been called "one of the most popular Assamese writers of this generation," and her work described as traversing "the varied textures of human conflict" and covering the tension between the society and the individual including explorations of femininity and "the gaps that exist between people in a relationship." She has published several novels, short story collections and nonfiction anthologies, including Kaanchan, Hriday Ek Bigyapon, Xon Horinor Sekur, Diary, Boxontor Gaan, Jalachabi and Mereng. She is a veteran journalist and is the editor of the weekly news paper Sadin and monthly literary magazine, Satsori.*

About the Translator: Arundhati Nath is a freelance feature writer with bylines in *The Guardian*, *BBC Wildlife*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Mint Lounge*, *Child magazine* and several others. She's an ex-banker and writes full time from her residence in Guwahati. Occasionally, she dips into children's fiction and poetry in English, Hindi and Assamese. Her work can be read on her website, <http://arundhatinath.com/>
