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R. SREEJITH VARMA

The Girl Named Bhumi

I

Driving the 2015 black Wagon R down the rusty iron bridge that straddled the frothy waters of the Pandola river, Mohan said without any preface, “If this is a girl, let’s name her Bhumi.”¹ Mohan and Sudha were returning from seeing the gynecologist his work friend had suggested. Sudha didn’t venture a response, but just smiled quietly. The evening sun was already dying. She watched it slip into a pall of swarthy clouds, giving the air an early chill and the silence between them an uncomfortable edge.

“What if this is a boy?”

Mohan looked at Sudha for a moment as he drove the car into the garage, turned the engine off, and stepped out. He leaned back to reach into the back seat and took out her medicine from a yellow cloth bag. “No, Sudha. This is a girl. I’m pretty sure about that. Let’s call her Bhumi.” When he spoke again, Sudha searched his beady eyes to know if he was pleading. She didn’t think so. “Let’s call the baby Prakriti.² Or Gaia, the name of the Greek Earth goddess.” Sudha threw in her two cents, all the while knowing how petulant her husband could be. “No, no. Our daughter should be named Bhumi.” Mohan was getting testy and it annoyed her mildly. She wanted to change the topic. She had always known Mohan to be opinionated. Their five long years of dating that led up to a simple wedding at the goddess temple near Mohan’s ancestral house in Malabar had given her enough evidence of that. However, as he was getting older, he seemed compulsively pig-headed. She suddenly wondered if Mohan had always planned on naming his daughter Bhumi, perhaps even before they got married. Perhaps it was impossible to know what was on your spouse’s mind, even after living with him for decades, she thought, as she climbed the steps leading up to their living room.

It was no secret how fond Mohan was of the earth and everything green. At the elementary school where he worked as an English teacher, he had launched a nature club and organized monthly events. Two years ago, when he planned a trip to Silent Valley National Park,³ Sudha went with him. At the threshold of the forest, Sudha had stood stock-still for a moment, like an ancient hermit who had just found her ashram again. The forest’s deep silence was broken only

¹ *Bhumi* is the Malayalam (as well as Sanskrit) term for the Earth.

² *Prakriti* in both Malayalam and Sanskrit refers to Nature.

³ Silent Valley national park houses an ancient evergreen forest and is located in Palakkad district, in the south Indian state of Kerala. The river Kunthi flows through it.

by the choppy waters of the river Kunthi from which Mohan and Sudha drank a few respectful drops, in cupped palms, as if it were sacred theertha water from an ancient temple. As Sudha stood there watching the lion-tailed macaques hopping from one tree to the next and the different kinds of birds and deer just being their breezy selves, she had felt choked with a new kind of joy she had never experienced before. That joy had remained with her ever since.

Mohan was watching Sudha's changing expressions. "What has come over you? If you don't like that name, tell me another good one. We'll fix that for our daughter." His voice sounded wobbly, as if someone shook him when he spoke. She felt sorry for him. She waited for a moment and then said in a quiet voice, "It is OK, Mohan. Let's go with Bhumi. I like it."

II

When Bhumi first started school, Mohan was apprehensive that other children in her class would pick on her because of her unusual name. Thankfully, that didn't happen. Since her name was unusual, nobody forgot it once they met her. Bhumi's playfulness and perennially smiling face had a transformative effect on Mohan. He cracked jokes at random and no longer lifted his lean eyebrows in annoyance over every inconsequential thing. Sudha felt she had underestimated the influence of kids on adults. On weekend evenings, Mohan, Sudha, and Bhumi walked down to the Pandola river that ran opposite Bhumi's school and watched sunsets from its bank. There was a small patch of forest on the other side of the river, where peahens and peacocks often emerged just to amble across the riverbed or to drink water in the evenings. Their sightings had become increasingly rare ever since sand trucks and miners had occupied the area. Mohan had heard there were also spotted deer in the forest, but he had never seen them. He looked at Sudha, who was staring at the signboard that read, "Trespassers will be prosecuted," which had been put up at the forest entrance.

Bhumi liked to sit on Mohan's lap with her feet dangling and creating ripples in the lukewarm water of the river as she watched the sun go down the horizon in a slow movement. Mohan never allowed Bhumi to go swimming in the river. "The river is full of potholes left by sand mining. No swimming," he had warned her. Sudha had noticed how breathless he appeared when he said that. But Mohan just evaded her eyes and stared at the crimson sky slowly losing its color. The dying gleam of light had turned the sand beneath their feet burnished bronze.

As she sat in silence, staring at the fading cherry-like star, Sudha wondered about the subjective nature of environmental experience. Wouldn't every female being experience nature in diverse, subjective ways? How did her little daughter connect to nature? Sudha looked intently at Mohan and at their daughter, who was quietly laughing on his lap.

Mohan and Sudha would get up and start for home only when the sand miners' trucks rolled in under the cover of the falling night. As they started walking back, upon witnessing that aggravating sight once again, Sudha remembered the newspaper headline that she had read the other day. "According to a study, 11% of houses in Kerala are unoccupied. Why do these people

leave their houses vacant after building them with sand that they mindlessly mined from riverbeds?" Sudha asked Mohan.

"Sudha, do you know that the root word of 'eco' in 'ecology' and 'economy' is *Oikos*, which means 'household'? Just as people build houses only to leave them unoccupied, they simply forget about their larger house," Mohan said.

"I read that the impact of the recent flood in Kerala got worse due to exploitative sand mining activities," Sudha said with an expression of exasperation.

"That's right, Sudha. What we mostly see in Kerala is not just extraction, it is extractivism. The sand mafia is plundering gravel for profit. I have read that there is a ratio between the width of the river and the amount of sand that the river can replenish, if extracted. Much of sand mining in Kerala is done by flouting all such scientific guidelines," Mohan said.

Sudha suddenly remembered what Bhumi asked Mohan a few months ago as she pointed at the workers mining sand from the river, "Daddy, who are these people? What are they doing?" Bhumi's sudden question had, in fact, flustered Mohan. Should he tell her that those men were killing the river by inches? Or that, by mindlessly extracting sand that had been deposited on the ground over thousands of years, they were violating all permissible limits of greed? And what else? Mohan had looked at Sudha quizzically. She just lowered her gaze and stared at the lone fish swimming in the tired waters below.

"Haven't you read about vampires who come out in the dark to suck the blood of humans? Some vampires suck the blood of nature, like these people," Mohan finally told Bhumi, who had been looking at him for an answer.

Since she realized how perturbed Mohan was getting after every trip, Sudha once asked him if they should stop their weekend walks to the riverside altogether. "I am also worried, Mohan. But we can't fight the sand mafia." Sudha tried comforting him by pressing gently on his shoulders. Mohan suddenly felt asphyxiated as he remembered again the helplessness of the typical middle-class Indian.

"Mohan, are you okay?" Sudha asked worriedly. He didn't say anything. He felt his tongue going numb. "Wa-ter," he said with an effort. Sudha opened her cloth bag and poured water from a bottle into his mouth. "You are running a temperature," she said, after quickly withdrawing her palm from his forehead as if she had been burned by the ever-increasing temperatures of the Indian summer. "I'll be all right," Mohan said, walking with an unsteady gait through the darkening night. He smiled at Bhumi who was staring at him, understandably concerned. He knew that Bhumi was looking forward to the painting competition at her school the next day. "You should take leave tomorrow. I'll take Bhumi to school," Sudha said as if reading his mind. He didn't give any response but crossed the house's threshold and the front yard in long strides, eager to lie down on the living room couch.

III

Bhumi was going to school for the first time without Mohan. Sudha noticed a pall of disappointment hanging over her small brown eyes. "Daddy is ill, you know," Sudha said as she put crayons and pencils in Bhumi's bag. Some Tamil film was blaring from the TV. "What is he doing, mommy?" Sudha noticed what was going on only when Bhumi asked this, pointing at the TV. A chap in a beige shirt and blue lungi was threatening a crowd with a knife placed on his neck. Bhumi's eyes were glued to the screen as if she were watching a suspenseful magic show. "Why did you put this channel on?" Sudha grabbed the remote from her and turned the TV off. Though she wondered if a young child like Bhumi would be interested in films like these, she reminded herself of how Bhumi had always acted precociously.

"Come back with a prize," Mohan called out to Bhumi while still lying in his bed. Bhumi smiled and nodded as she hung her bag around her shoulder.

"What picture are you going to draw in the competition?" Sudha asked Bhumi as she walked her daughter across the rusty iron bridge over the Pandola river. "Of the river, of the sun," said Bhumi as if the question was irrelevant.

As they crossed the front gate, Sudha stopped Bhumi, who had already started running to her classroom, and said, "I'll come in the evening. Don't step outside the gate!" Bhumi nodded to signal a "no" and sprinted to her class. Sudha climbed down the steps of the school courtyard while carelessly glancing at the sand trucks lined up on the riverbank like a giant python resting after a hearty meal.

IV

When Sudha went to pick her up, Bhumi was all smiles. Sudha noticed a small golden trophy clenched in Bhumi's right hand. "Did you draw the picture of the river?" Sudha asked her, after softly patting Bhumi's cheeks in appreciation. "Yes, didn't I tell you in the morning? They gave me this trophy just ten minutes ago," Bhumi said, still beaming. Sudha opened Bhumi's school bag and looked at her drawing. The sun was slowly coming up. Half a dozen trucks were lingering on the gaunt sand-body of the riverbed as if conspiring to run off with all the sand from all the rivers in the world. The reddish-brown bodies of the trucks looked like faint smudges of congealed blood on the paper. Sudha pored over the crisscrossed wheel tracks on the gravel that seemed to make a complex puzzle she could never make sense of. She hadn't expected that Bhumi would add sand trucks to the picture.

The school front yard was crowded with parents and a few media people. Mohan's friend, who worked with a local newspaper, came up to Sudha and greeted her. "*Mol* got the first prize, didn't she?" he asked, as he patted Bhumi's left shoulder affectionately. Sudha smiled in response. "I need *mol*'s photo to publish in tomorrow's paper," he said again. "Why not? Let's go outside the gate. You will get better light. Also, you will get the river in the background." Sudha's suggestion was agreeable to the photographer.

The three of them passed through the gate and went outside the school compound. The sun had turned blood-red and Sudha noticed the ruddy light reflecting off the wavy waterline. A few sand trucks and workers were hanging out on the bank. The workers in stained shirts and lungis looked overworked and tired, and some of them were visibly drunk. Sudha turned her face away as the stink of cheap bootleg booze hit her.

Just when she was about to comment to the photographer about the unbridled sand extraction, it happened. A shrill cry was heard and, for a moment, Sudha feared something had happened to Bhumi. But the child was playing with a pebble she had found lying on the ground. The low yelping sound was coming from behind one of the trucks that was backing up. Sudha and Bhumi went running. It was a fawn that must have come down to drink water from the river. The truck's left back tire was right on its tiny yellow neck. Thick streams of blood spilled from under the tire and formed obscure patterns on the sand. Sudha looked around for its mama deer, but couldn't find her. She must have run off to the woods in panic. "Vampire men," Sudha heard Bhumi muttering from behind her. She swiftly covered Bhumi's mouth with her palm and took a couple of steps back. A huddle of workers was forming around the spot. Somebody called out to the driver to move the truck forward. The photographer was busy clicking photos. Sudha clenched Bhumi's hand and started sprinting back to the school. "Vampires, vampires," Bhumi was still chanting, pointing back at the serpentine form of trucks fully loaded and ready to roll again.

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