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Anecdote

There was a wandering woman. She used to live in the mountains. No, not the Instagram-y, commercialized, luxurious resort hill stations. But the rugged mountains with bewitching trees touching the sky, chilly wind cutting to the bones, and unnamed shadows lurking in hindsight.

She was alone but not lonely. She used to talk. To herself, to God, to leaves, to stones, basically, anything that had shape, weight, and was in the range of human eye visibility. She talked to matter. As if the matter mattered.

She uttered incomprehensible words, sometimes she laughed, sometimes she stared and mumbled, sometimes she closed her eyes and shouted curses, sometimes she lit a Deepak and prayed.

But she voiced. And that was all that mattered.

She didn't know how to stay quiet. She reacted to everybody and everything that had a sound. She used to scream at the chilly wind; she used to hum with a flowing river, giggle with the rustling leaves, and dance with the willow branches. She was responsive. And the forest loved that about her.

The forest gave her everything she needed. Enough to eat, to dress, to excrete, to clean up. She had everything she needed. But one day, as Eve was doomed in the Eden garden, the woman also got cursed.

She came across an act of love.

A squirrel was desperately trying to save its mate from dying. The despairing, helpless look in the eyes of the squirrel cursed the woman, for now, she wished. She wished for the forest to save the squirrel. The forest was shocked. That one thing happened they frantically didn't want. But since the beloved has asked for something, so the forest

complied. The bolster that squashed the little squirrel rolled to the other side, a splash of rain washed the wound, and the medicinal nectar of Brahma flower bestowed itself on the injury. The dead squirrel breathed again.

The woman couldn't contain her amazement. She was enthralled and got greedy, something that the forest had anticipated. The woman desperately started crying for a mate. But how could the forest fulfill this wish? So, she took away the one thing the forest loved the most- her response. Now, she didn't swing with the wind, cry in the river, eat the delicious fruits, run with the deers, nothing. She just laid on a bolster by the pond, making songs in her head and drawing patterns on the sand. The forest, saddened by her actions, couldn't fathom the silence. So they did what they swore never to do. They opened up.

The venomous vines that once lined its boundaries dissolved into mush. The deeply entwined wooden branches were sucked back into the roots. The predators who hunted nearby retreated to their caves. The forest was now susceptible to new possibilities, and obviously, invasions. Everybody, grave about this decision, was sulking except for the woman. She has found a voice. And now it wasn't a hoarse cry like before. It was honey-sweet. It was beautiful. They say she drank from the holy river to smoothen her vocal cords. She scrubbed her skin until the coarse surface became porcelain. She washed her hair with soft bamboo water, oiled it, combed it with rose thorns, and then made an intricate bun strewn with jasmine. She tainted her lips red with pomegranate juice. And slapped herself until her cheeks blushed and eyes watered. Then kohled her eyes with moist ashes of burnt tree bark. She embellished herself with fragrant flower garlands and wore clothing made out of the animal hide. She didn't know why she was doing it; maybe it was her animalistic instinct telling her she needed to mate. But she knew one thing, she was waiting for somebody.

And somebody did come.

He was hunting for deers in the deep forest, but instead, he found her. She was lying on a bolster, fresh as a daisy, humming her self-made melody. He was mesmerized the moment he saw her. Her eyes also met with his; she smiled. He stayed with her for a month. She

showed him around. They used to frolic in the forest without a care in the world. She thought of him as a God. And he thought of her as an Angel.

But little did the Angel knew; her God hid his weapons the moment before she saw him.

However, the wise forest knew everything, for the sword cut through their roots, and the blood-stained arrows were screaming murder of their deers. The forest tried to give hints to the woman. The river has overflown for days, the wind chillier than usual, the yellowish leaves falling in the middle of the spring, all 'ungodly' signs were there. But she disregarded them as something 'natural.'

The day finally arrived, happiest for the couple, treacherous for the forest. The huntsman proposed. The woman, tearful, said yes. The huntsman tore through the forest unabashedly. He killed cows and goats for a feast; he cut trees after trees to build a house; he subjugated the river with dams and canals to facilitate his lazy ass.

The woman, aware of all treachery, remained silent.

Once again, she lost her voice.

Once again, she wanted something.

For the forest to go back to the way it was.

But the forest couldn't fulfill her wishes anymore. For it was killed and silenced.

They say, after that day, she was nowhere to be seen. She ran away, barefoot, in urgency, to another forest. But she wasn't accepted anywhere. She sang and sang but to no avail. No forest sheltered her anymore.

The river last saw her.

She was walking parallel to waves, screaming her name-

"Panchali.