

# Ghughuti

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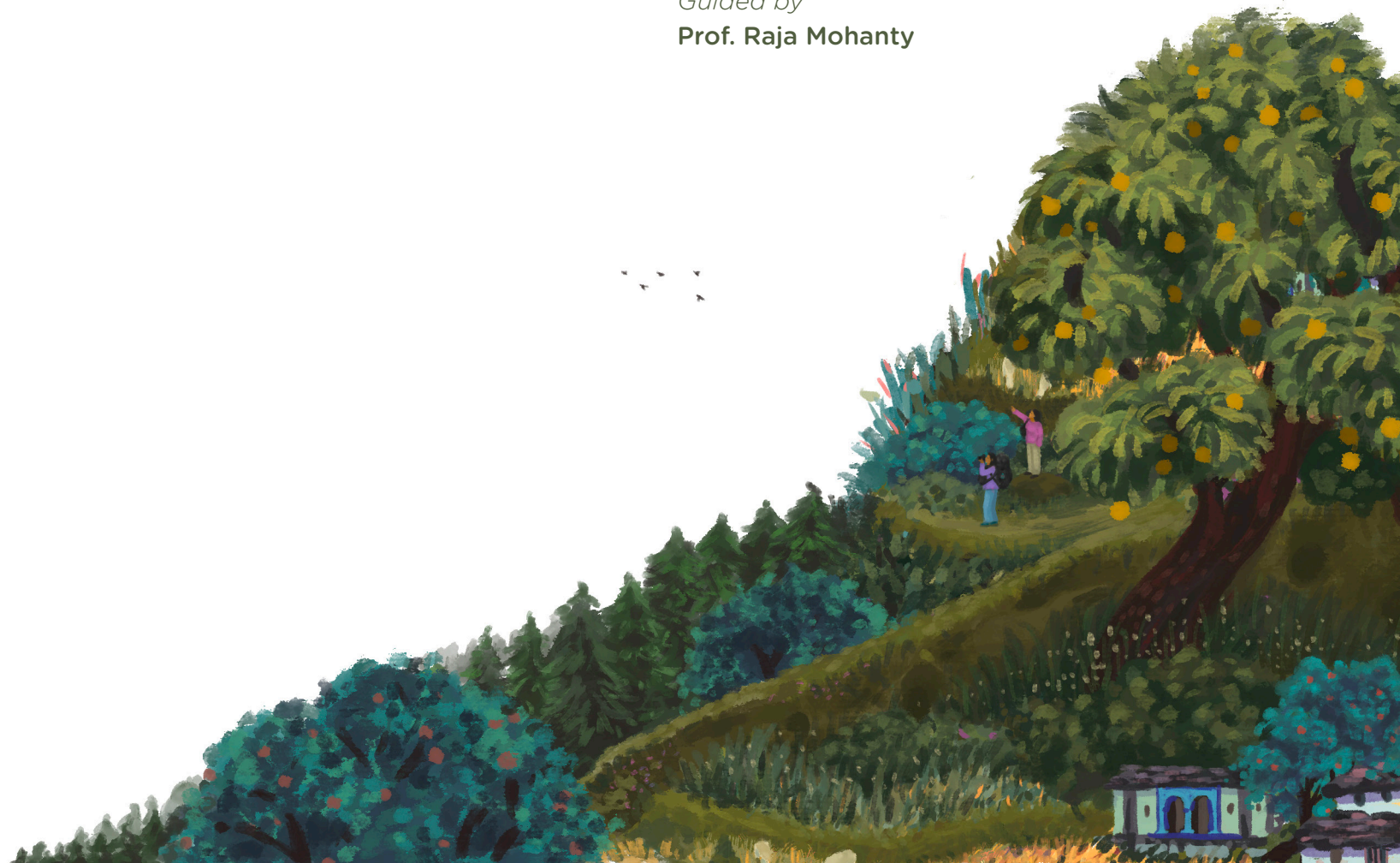




# Ghughuti

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*To that voice in our heart silenced by our everyday hustles  
and a lost piece of self that once brought us joy.*

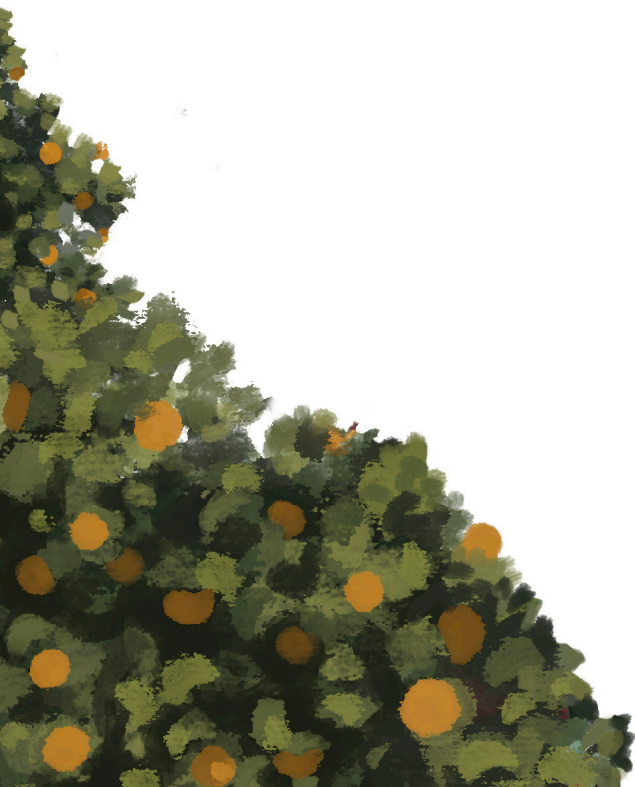
*To growing and learning together  
and finding that piece back again.*



# Contents



<i>Homecoming</i>	1 - 5
<i>Memoirs</i>	6 - 9
<i>Lost and Found</i>	10 - 13
<i>Long-Awaited</i>	14 - 21
<i>Ghughuti</i>	20 - 27
<i>To Grow</i>	28 - 33
<i>A Present</i>	34 - 37





## Homecoming

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“There’s hardly a man in sight”, I said to Vicky.

“Arrey, It’s always like this here, except during *Kauthik*. That’s the only time when most of the children come to visit this old mother,” replied Vicky, helping us with our luggage.

That was true. Maa too visited Chamali only when *Kauthik* unfolded in its full glory once a year. Almost everyone who had moved to cities would come back to make offerings to the Goddess and relish the fair. There were hawkers selling bangles, toys, slingshots, and cheap binoculars, constantly telling curious kids not to touch or break anything. There were games with prizes such as packs of branded noodles or biscuits that were hard to find on the mountains. Throw the ring onto the object to acquire it and go home with the original ‘Lux’ instead of the locally popular ‘Lax’. To the locals, brands did not matter yet they were well aware they made a difference to us.

I was always intrigued by the cultural gaiety but hardly ever felt like a true participant compared to those who had tended to these mountains with their sweat and blood over the years. This feeling would grow even more when I would struggle to understand what was being said during the rituals and when I couldn’t sing along Garhwali songs while everyone sang and danced. We were merely blue moons that paid a visit once in a while.

Towards the end of the fair, the musicians would play Garhwali folk songs



on big, thick, silver plates, *masak baja* and *dhol damau*. The whole gathering brimmed with energy and created a giant circle of the traditional *Pandu* dance around them. The old, the young, men and women, everyone would dance in sync to the beat. Their coordination could have an outsider believe it was rehearsed. In a way it was; enculturated from one generation to the next.

*Kauthik* was a great time for local businesses in the nearby mountains. Hawkers from villages around Chamali came and set up their shops for a big crowd of potential customers, a rare opportunity in the sparsely populated mountains of Garhwal. Maa told me it wasn't always the case, in the recent decade, thousands of people had migrated to the cities in search of a better life and many villages were left deserted.

The air would be filled with the sugary smell of jalebis mixed with cardamom and saffron. The jalebis were small, orange, and stacked enough to be mistaken as a pile of marigold flowers if one would look at them from a considerable distance. The *jalebiwala* always had the longest queue of all; of those who wanted to get a taste and those who flocked around to watch him squeeze out the batter into the bubbling oil knitting circular patterns. I loved to watch jalebis take form. There was a peculiar sense of satisfaction in watching him move his hand in circles and manifest that movement into the most orange and crispy jalebis. It gave me that instant gratification you get when you see something complete its cycle, much like those time-lapse videos of a sunrise and clouds passing through the sky, flowers blooming from buds or a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis. In a chaos of constant hustle, where would I find a chrysalis anyway? And even if I did, would I have enough time to stop and witness that magical moment?

It's hard to stop and look around. You've got to keep running like a horse with blinders; running your own race oblivious to everything else. Taking a pause and looking around would mean you'll be left behind. Slow and steady wins the race was reduced to a story we were told as children but were repeatedly taught to strive and push ahead of everyone instead. Push ahead, and keep pushing like gears in a machine. I'll start working once I go back and this might be my last visit to Chamali for a considerably long time.

Maa and Vicky walked ahead of me, chatting and checking on me once in a while. I carried a rucksack and a backpack and could easily pass as a turtle sandwiched between two shells. Maa would have carried the smaller bag but I knew if I asked her, she would probably say something like, "When I was half the age you are now, I could carry double the weight and trek twice as

fast. I carried you around in my womb now, didn't I? And you can't even carry two bags?"

I could hear her say it in my head and even picture her lips twitch every time she paused mid-sentence. It is funny to see how tirelessly she was trekking the mountain, much in contrast to her usual panting after climbing one flight of steps back home. The tense waves that creased her forehead were finally at rest, so was her worry to make sure she provided for us in every way she could. Ever since I was born I had seen her tirelessly juggle between her job as a teacher and manage every little thing around the house.

Chamali was a retreat in the mountains, away from our usual speedy and excessive lifestyle. I would try to imagine herds of people carving out steps onto these humongous mountains for settlement centuries ago; it seemed way beyond something human hands could accomplish. Many steps had now grown wild, teeming with Pine trees, Oaks, Deodars and Burans; some parts were still yellow with mustard farms, all swaying to the symphony of the wind. I could hear the soft swooshing sound of the breeze passing through one ear and out through the other. The breeze smelled of fruits that were ripe enough to be bitten into, hanging on trees in abundance for every passer-by.

It was quiet but not silent. The twitter of the birds went back and forth, sending messages to each other. The bird song was thickly layered with the tweets of parrots, sparrows, woodpeckers, koels, and many others I didn't know the names of. All were submerged in their own conversations joining into the wave of chirruping. Unaware of what messages they might be sending to each other I admired how wonderful birds sound, unlike a room full of chattering people, talking over one another with lesser intentions to listen than to be heard.

The gurgling of the stream at the foot of the mountain faded into the gentle whispers of the breeze as we trekked higher. Everything I could hear seemed orchestrated, overpowering the clutter that incessantly lingered inside my head of the impatient honking, relentless voices intending to sell and competitive minds wanting to buy.

"Nidhi! Look! Quick! Don't make a sound!" Maa called out. She was pointing at a tree.

"You're the one making all the sound right now! Look at what?" I asked her, trying to decipher what she was pointing at.

“Shh, look closer,” she said in a much softer tone of voice, pulling me closer and pointing in the same direction. I squinted my eyes and finally saw it.

It was a bird sitting on a branch of a tree, flaunting all possible shades of brown and spotted with some. It camouflaged with the branch it perched on and I could only spot it because it looked around with sudden, jerky head movements, much like pigeons do. Multiple layers of feathers that dressed its form, frisked along the wind.

“Arrey, Ghughuti,” murmured Vicky.

It was the first time I had seen one. I’d grown up listening to my mother recite,

“Ghughuti, tu kya khaandi?  
Doodh Bhati!  
Kal dechho?  
Aa jitbue la!  
Kakun dechho?  
Nanhi Thalun!  
Kan khe chho?  
Gulgulgulgulgulgulgulgul!”

(Ghughuti, what do you eat?  
Milk and rice  
Who gave it?  
Jethi bua gave  
In what?  
In a small plate.  
How did you eat it?  
Gulgulgulgulgulgulgulgul!”)

And with that last line, she would hold me up in the air and pretending to be an airplane I would stretch my arms out. But now that I think about it, I’d have liked to be a Ghughuti instead.

“Ghughuti is a rare sight nowadays,” said Vicky.

I hurriedly unzipped my camera bag and pulled out my camera that very instant, but the moment I looked up, it was gone. I hoped I’d have looked at it for longer, to see where it had flown.

Faded memories transformed into vivid ones. As a child I would keep a small

bowl of rice, on the ledge of our balcony, hoping a Ghughuti would come and eat the doodh bhaat and my thirst to know whether ‘gulugulugulugulu’ was really the sound it made would be quenched, but it never came.

I remember asking my mother, why that was so, and in a voice lower than usual, perhaps tired of longing, she would answer, “Ghughutis don’t like cities. They like to fly over the mountains.”







## Memoirs

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Faint sounds of annoyed baby goats and yapping puppies joined nature's orchestra and I could tell we were almost there. Flora and houses with wooden pillars sandwiched the meandering stepped trails. The houses were plastered with mud, painted in bright blues, pinks, and yellows. Foliage grew out of the cracks in the muddy walls and stacks of flaked stones created short sturdy walls on either side of the pathway. Every time I walked past a garden, a loud buzzing of bees filled the air with vibrations as they hovered from flower to flower, leaf to leaf, appearing and disappearing.

There were broken fragments of large pillars of wood and flat stones that once stood as a tall house for centuries, heaped next to the new one constructed out of bricks and concrete that had now taken its place. Broken pieces of hard mud were piled up and still held onto color. Those who had migrated to the cities and were doing well had rebuilt their ancestral houses into more urban styled ones, with glass windows and white walls that could hear their laughter only once in a year.

Many houses were abandoned and had disintegrated. Some had no doors or windows, roofs; long tumbled down and many were missing walls. They appeared like ancient ruins, weathered and aged, having witnessed centuries of change and rest, surrounded by an air of stories that were born out of them and still lingered between the broken walls.

“Oh! This is Jagirathi Nani’s house, she didn’t have any kids of her own. She was really old when her husband passed away and everyone in the village took turns to care for her...she used to tell us stories of...” Maa started recollecting all that she remembered of those who lived in these dwellings. It felt like I was in a museum and my mother was my guide.

“No no, Gopal mama lived there,” Vicky interrupted.  
“Oh no. That was after she passed away, Gopal was born years after that...,” Maa told him.

While Maa and Vicky continued to trace back the history of Chamali and shared what they knew of the place, I couldn’t help but marvel at how these houses looked like breathing organisms.

One could look right into them. Their insides; lush and untamed, floored with wild grass and flowers, climbers and creepers growing from everywhere to everywhere and little greens peeping out of crevices. Trees grew right through some of them, leaving a netted pattern on the grassy floors when the sunlight filtered through their crown.

I wondered what the houses would’ve been like when they were a home to people. But even now, in their absence, they did not seem abandoned after all. Birds nested there, squirrels, bees, butterflies, and monkeys were frequent visitors. Vicky told me sometimes puppies, chickens, and baby goats could be seen roaming inside and children came here to find perfect hiding spots while they played hide and seek.

“.....and...and this is where Pooran nana used to live, he used to play the *masakbaja*. He practiced every evening and we would run to his house to hear him play,” Maa continued with her stories while her eyes twinkled as she looked from one house to another. She seemed like someone I had not known, decades younger and breathless with excitement.

“Look, the Burans flowers are finally in full bloom,” Vicky said, filled with excitement. He kept the luggage aside and began to climb the tree to pluck some bright red flowers. “*Sharbat* today! *sharbat* today”, he sang as he inspected the flowers, making the best picks. “Have you ever tried a fresh Burans sharbat didi? This is our Coca Cola”. He took out a small flimsy cloth bag from his pocket and stuffed all the flowers he had picked inside it.

“They look perfect for a drink. I haven’t had Burans sharbat for ages. Give me the bag, I’ll hold it, you hold the luggage”, Maa told Vicky.

The adjustments were made and we continued to trek.

“...this is *Morpankhi*, *Kandali* you already know...ayee be careful not to touch it, you’ll end up itching for hours.” Maa resumed making sure she told me everything she knew.

Our annual visits for the *Kauthik* were quite different from this one, we never had enough time to walk around since it was a busy affair. It required days of preparations and was packed with constant socializing between families and friends who met once a year.

“*Kandali* can also be cooked if you reap it when it’s small enough,” Vicky told me.

“You seem to know a lot huh? Tell me what that is...” I asked him pointing at a random tree ahead of us.

“Why wouldn’t I? It’s my home. That’s a *Kaphal* tree, you won’t find a lot of these here, they’re mostly found in the wild forests. But Chamali has two or three of them,” he said pointing in different directions showing me where the others were.

“It bears fruit during summers. The entire branch gets filled with juicy red berries. Oh I cannot wait for summer!” he babbled smacking his tongue.

I had hardly ever made an effort to identify the trees that stood right outside our house in Delhi. For a long time, I couldn’t tell between spinach and mustard leaves but it was never a hindrance, all I had to do was go to the grocery store, ask for whatever I needed and buy as much as I wanted. Everything in the city was always available.

Maa’s stories about Chamali were enough for me to imagine how it must’ve been when she was a little girl. She moved to the city when Nana found a job in Delhi. She was six years old. But every year before she got married, she would spend a part of her summer in Chamali.

Everyday she would tell me stories about her life before marriage and everytime she ran out of the untold, she would retell all of them, over and over again. Perhaps reliving her memories was the only way to escape into the life she loved and had always wanted.







## Lost and Found

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*“Eh bue! (Oh mother!) Thoona!”*

The voice came somewhere from above. I looked up and there was a woman who looked old enough to have a sixty-five-year-old offer her their seat on a bus. She was standing on the edge of a branch of a Bhiul tree that seemed at least seventeen feet tall. The tree was right on the edge from where an escarpment falling the length of an adult giraffe began.

Maa once told me she was called Thoona as a child because of the sound her anklets made when she walked. *‘Thun thun thun thun’* is how she described the sound. The name seemed alien to me. It did not sound like it belonged to her. Maa and Nupur did. Thoona was someone I did not know.

“Such a long time! How are you doing? Still in Delhi?” she yelled. The branch she stood on bounced up and down as she chopped down the flimsy stems with leaves and threw them onto the ground to be picked up later.

“I’m good, how have you been?” Maa yelled back, prompting me to greet her. *“Namaste Nani!”* I wished her out aloud.

*“Eh bue! You’ve grown! Blessings, blessings! Wait let me come down,”* she

said as she finished chopping down some more leaves, and began to descend the tree effortlessly. If it were a survival-based reality TV show, this could be a task for the contestants. I was surprised to see how complacently she pulled off the entire act despite the saree.

“Kusum will be delighted to see you. How come at this time of the year though, anything special?” she inquired, gathering leaves and branches she had chopped in a pile. She then walked to the cow and the sheep grazing nearby. “Bhiul leaves are great for a lactating cow. Bhoori gave birth to a beautiful calf two weeks back, come down and see it tomorrow morn—when are you planning to leave?” she asked stroking Bhoori’s Stomach.

“They’ve just arrived, and you’re already asking them when they’ll leave?” Vicky jumped in the conversation. She gave him a soft slap on his cheek, “You tell me about your result first. You better be working harder than your mother.”

“Arrey Jethi! I know I know,” He said impatiently making it evident he had heard her say so a hundred times before. “I topped,” he told her in a voice that was missing that sense of pride that one would have while sharing an achievement such as this.

“That’s wonderful Vicky,” I congratulated him. “This naughty one is the only one in his class, obviously he will top, the good thing is that he passed”, said Nani giving him a soft slap on his cheek yet again.

“The only one?” I asked him, shocked. “Yes. There were two of us, but his family moved to the city so I’m the center of attention for all the teachers now,” he replied.

“If I can study from eight teachers alone, I can definitely take down the tiger, ta ta ta ta, don’t worry Jethi, I will protect Bhoori’s calf!” he sang, swinging his arm in the air holding an imaginary sword.

Nani twisted his ear and reminded him how he should not say things like these. “If it comes in front of you for real, you won’t even have time to piss your pants,” she retorted.

“It’s becoming deserted by the day, it must be coming down more often now,” Mom inquired, digging her hands in the wavy black fur of one of the sheep. To my surprise the sheep did not get startled and enjoyed the petting instead, rubbing its head against Maa’s hand.

Nani told us there had been three incidents within two months. A tiger had dragged away two grazing baby goats right from outside the cowshed from one of the houses on the upper steps. “Tigers ate the goats! And you’re the only one in class with eight teachers?” I asked, confused about what shocked me more.

“Yes. Eight. One for each subject. I’m the only one in 6th grade and—Oye! oye! he’s here! he’s here!” Vicky stopped in the middle of his sentence and yelled at the top of his voice in open air, pointing towards a boy hiding behind the same tree Nani had descended from.

“You were here all this while? Couldn’t give me a hand huh?” She scolded the boy. He put a finger on his mouth signaling her and Vicky to keep quiet but they completely ignored his desperate, silent appeal and continued yelling, “Aye! he’s here near the Bhiul tree! He’s right here!” Vicky continued to yell. “I could’ve finished working in half the time only if you’d have lent me a hand,” Nani snapped at the boy.

All of a sudden, three kids popped out of nowhere, spotted him, and called out, “*Dhappa!*” pointing their fingers right at him. “You got me caught last time, remember?”, Vicky teased the boy who had now started running after his catchers. “Cheater! You’re all cheaters!” the boy ran after them with a lime he picked on the way trying to get a perfect aim before he could launch it on one of them. Everyone broke into laughter watching them as they disappeared into the distance.

Vicky helped Nani gather the leaves into a pile while Maa and I took this opportunity to pet Bhoori and the sheep. She picked up the pile, which was double her size and put it on her head, called out to Bhoori and the sheep, and began to trek down, keeping the herd together. The pile bounced up and down everytime one of her feet touched the ground as she walked downwards.

“Tell Kusum, I’ll deliver the milk tomorrow morning,” She called out on her way. “Will do,” I answered back.

“The game of hide and seek has never been confined to the players here,” said Thoona with an unfeigned smile that undoubtedly emanated from nostalgia.







## Long-Awaited

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“Oh you’re here! *Eh bue*, so long!” she yelled from the garden. She wiped her hands onto her apron and began to walk towards us hurriedly. Her face looked much older than I remembered from around three years ago creased with new wrinkles. Her back had relatively straightened out and she appeared slightly taller. Her eyelids had become heavier and droopier and her lips looked like parched fields. Her enthusiasm though had not changed a bit.

“Naniiii!” I cried out as Maa and I reached out to invite her for a hug. “Ahh Nupur, you’ve started looking a little old huh, *Eh Bue*! Nidhi, finally got time!”, she said, taking me in her arms unable to wrap them around because of my bag belly. “Oh please stop! It’s just a few grey hair,” Maa replied, pushing a strand of grey hair behind her ear. “Arrey Nani, I’ve just been occupied with studies and work, it’s my last semester,” I told her.

“Yes yes, studies are important but take a break once in a while or you’ll lose sight of what’s beyond,” she said as she gently pushed my shoulder leading me inside the house and helping me shed off my turtle shells. I let out a loud sigh of relief as my shoulders got released from the burden. Those were some heavy bags and even if they weren’t, all the trekking and the sun had weighed them down twice their weight.

“You know, when I was your age, I could carry thrice the weight and trek

thrice as fast.” said Nani and I could hear Maa chuckle.

I think there exists an unsaid rule among parents to tell their young ones stories of how they worked harder when they were their age. Many times, their stories seemed so overstated and dramatized, they gave the impression of being made up. Maa often told me stories about how hard and yet peaceful life was at Chamali and many times I would absorb her stories as narratives that were woven to make me appreciate the comforts of life that I often took for granted. They were words I valued but found hard to relate to. Those words had now started to make meaning.

I went to the kitchen to fetch water. The space under the kitchen slab was full of vegetables that were still matted with mud. Under the sink, there were two containers, one bigger than the other. The first one, full of vegetable peels and the other of onion peels and other kitchen waste. There was an electric heater and a gas stove kept at a considerable distance from each other. Gas cylinders were a tough thing to be delivered uphill, Nani made sure she used it judiciously. She would use the electric heater for most of the cooking and made use of the gas stove only when there was no electricity. Glass jars of pickles glistened as they reflected the sunlight rushing in through the kitchen window. There was a small red tub filled with water and a handful of raw mangoes floated on the surface. On the floor, in one corner were bottles filled with water. I gulped down half a bottle and poured some in two glasses for Maa and Vicky.

“You know, she used to trek from the stream up till here with three pots of water multiple times a day,” Maa told me, taking the glass of water from my hand.

“...and your mother was always too eager to help so she came with me with a tiny pot as well. It wasn’t a considerable amount of help though,” Nani teased Maa, taking the bag from Vicky’s hands and putting it on one of the two single beds aligned next to the walls on either side of the room. She then took the glass of water from my hand and handed it to Vicky.

“Don’t say that now, it was enough water for the chickens to drink wasn’t it?” Maa retorted.

“Calm down, I’m just pulling your leg,” Nani said cheerfully. “It’s a blessing to live here without having to go through that,” she said, unpacking the bags.

“I think they’ve forgotten to do much after the water and electricity,” Vicky said as he drank the water sip by sip. “I’ll go to the city and become a big officer and after I do, I’ll fix all the problems so I can live here.”

Nani smiled and ruffled his hair. “Sure you will, but for that you’ll have to-”

“...work harder than my mother,” Vicky finished her sentence. The room filled up with chuckles.

Nani had started to arrange our unpacked clothes in one of the cupboards which was mostly vacant besides a few packs of branded detergents, noodles and some essentials Mama used to get every time he came to visit. “Vicky when you become a big officer, make sure you make a road up till here too. I’m too old to be trekking up and down,” she mumbled.

“All those years in the city have made you rusty, you should come with me when I take the cattle for grazing in the mornings. But why would you listen to me, kids don’t know anything right”, Vicky taunted her. Maa nodded in approval.

“Don’t start off with this again now, I told you I’ll start soon right,” Nani said irritably. “Whenever you’re ready,” he said, walking inside the kitchen. He kept the glass in the kitchen sink and started to rush outside. “Ayeee Vikki! Wait!”, Nani yelled after him, “Come here. Always in a hurry to run away huh!” She went to the kitchen, picked out a large pumpkin and handed it to him. “Here, give it to your mother,” she told him.

He thumped the shell of the pumpkin which made a hollow sound, “This one’s really good, thank you!” He rushed to his slippers that were kept outside, put his feet into one, tumbled a little as he wore the other and ran off holding the pumpkin over his head.

“His friends must be waiting for him to play”, Nani giggled.

The house was no more adorned by intricate woodwork that fascinated us as kids. Out of all the memories I had of the ancestral house, living in it was not one. Maa told me it had started chipping off years after everyone moved out. Whenever we came to visit, we would stay with one of the villagers. Once Nani decided she would permanently shift here post thirty-five years of living in Delhi, we knew the house had to be reconstructed, so it was. It was built with bricks and painted white like some of the others but with wooden windows. An old black and white photo of the family with my six-year-old mother still hung on the wall.



By the time maa and I freshened up, it was almost lunchtime. Nani prepared to make *dal* and *bhaat* while Maa assisted her. “Make the *hari bhurji*, haven’t had it since ages,” Maa pleaded.

Nani broke into a smile and started to prepare for the *bhurji* as well. I was assigned the task of making fresh green chutney and getting vegetables from the garden. “Get some tomatoes too, the small and red ones, don’t break the green ones, the plant is a little fragile, be careful,” Nani called after me as I stepped out. She had spread grains of *dal* on a big plate and was picking out spoiled, shriveled grains, tiny rocks, and stems before she could wash and boil it.

I stepped outside, and there it was, a small patch of land, brimming with vegetables, wildflowers, trees laden with limes and others waiting for the next season to bear fruit. The land was segmented to bear a variety of vegetables. There were small plants such as okra and tomatoes. Radish, potatoes, and onions peeped out of the soil, leafy beds of fenugreek, and cholaï looked like a canopy and big pumpkins seemed perfect to be turned into magical horse-drawn carriage coaches. Goat dung was scattered all over the field like small black marbles. It was hard to believe Nani had done it all by herself. The patch of land used to overflow with nothing but wild grass, wildflowers and *kandali* up until a few years back.

I pulled out the radish that had grown out the tallest and walked through the network of extremely narrow paths which seemed carefully laid out to move around, to prevent stepping onto the plants. There were depressions of Nani’s footsteps in the soil that went to and fro. The overpowering fragrance of mint floated in the atmosphere and led me to where it grew. As I walked around looking for all I was asked to fetch, I could see the little bees and butterflies at work. Nani wasn’t doing it all by herself after-all. Buying vegetables from the store was always a transaction but at this moment, I was reaping the rewards of Nani’s labor, patience, and time. It was hard for me to imagine myself raising a kitchen garden such as this.

It made me question my abilities of persistence and patience. But time was something I felt my lifestyle lacked the most. Growing up, I was always told, time should not be wasted. It should always be used to do productive things. Productive were things that led you on top of the merit list, fetched you the highest paying jobs, gave you positions of power or massive fame and everything that did not align with these was more often than not called a waste of time. Maa was someone who had always encouraged me to do things that made me happy and perhaps wanted to live her unfulfilled aspirations through me.

“I got everything,” I announced entering the kitchen. Nani was stirring *dal* in a saucepan and Maa stood beside her leaning onto the slab, chattering and playing around with a twig of coriander.

“You start making the chutney, and pass me my phone please, it’s on the fridge,” Nani told me. She then asked Maa to wash all the vegetables I’d gotten from the garden. I handed the phone to Nani and she began to browse through it. Maa continued to talk as she rinsed the soil off the vegetables. “Use the *sil batta* for mincing the chutney and make the paste slightly chunky,” Maa instructed.

We had a *sil batta* back at home. Every time chutney was to be made, Maa would clean the heavy stone, sit on the floor and grind all the ingredients till they were a thick paste. I realized how laborious it was when she taught me how to use it. I always wondered why she chose to do it the hard way and whenever I asked if we could use a grinder she would say, “It won’t have the same texture and taste, your Nani always made it this way.”

“Oh no no, leave that, just use the mixer grinder,” protested Nani as she kept browsing through her phone. I looked at both of them, confused who to listen to.

Maa cleared out the vegetables that concealed the *sil batta* and dragged it out. “...when I was a kid, Nani always made chutney using this and it tasted absolutely divine...” she reminisced. “That’s because there was no other option, mixer grinder is much easier and quicker, just use that for now, we’ll use the *sil batta* in the coming days,” Nani interrupted, “and put all the peels in that container without the onion peels, Anandi’s cow delivered a calf, she needs to eat healthily.” It was funny to see Nani dismiss Maa’s request the way Maa used to brush off mine many times.

“Oh yes, Bhoori, we met her on the way,” I told her, “Oh and I almost forgot, Anandi Nani asked me to tell you she’ll get the milk tomorrow,” I told her, relieved I had managed to deliver the message before tomorrow morning.

“Oh good, the bottle gourd must’ve dried up perfectly by now,” she murmured, still browsing on her phone till she finally stopped and a song began to play.

The melody of a flute accompanied by the percussion of the *hudka* followed by the lyrics “*Pushpa Chhori Paudi Khaal ki, Ladgi chhe tu bade kamal ki.*” (Oh Pushpa, from the village of Paudi, you look great...)

The three of us prepared the food silently while the song filled up the entire house. Nani hummed and swung along. Maa's eyebrows rose in surprise and lips curved into a subtle smile.

A few moments later, she joined in and started to swing along. It was a part of her that had been hidden under the veil of responsibilities of raising the family she held herself completely accountable for. For the longest time, she had focussed on being the best mother and had perhaps lost touch with many things that gave her happiness. And as it dawned upon me, a servile fear of losing myself in a world of productivity and responsibility haunted me. However much I admired her, loved her, and was grateful that she had always been there for us, I did not want to be solely defined by relationships. Whenever she told me stories of her life before marriage, it seemed as though she spoke of a person she had once known but in this moment she seemed to have reunited with that part of her.

Nani began to season the *dal*; one and a half tablespoons of salt, one tablespoon of paprika and coriander powder each and a teaspoon of turmeric powder. Her wrinkled hand firmly gripped onto the spoon as she tossed the spices without a pause one after the other. She never gave a second thought to proportions while she seasoned and yet the food was always perfect without fail. Maa often encouraged me to cook, especially things that I liked. She would make me stand beside her in the kitchen and I would watch her work her magic. "You should know how to feed yourself substantially when you move out," she would say, much in contrast to many others who always harped upon how I should learn to cook for my future husband and a way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

The food was served and we all sat down to eat. A tempering of asafoetida, cumin seeds, dry red chilli and garlic formed a thin, clear layer of ghee on the *dal* and its fragrance hovered in the air. The food was packed with flavors and textures that could only be made possible by the unbeatable duo of Nani and Maa. "The food is so good Nani," I said with a mouthful.

"When you cook for more than fifty years, it would be a shame if it didn't turn out that way wouldn't it? It's nice to have company for lunch," Nani said looking at all three plates that reflected a union of three generations. She dug her fingers into the mound of hot rice and a cloud of steam trapped inside made an escape like a genie released from a bottle.

"You should visit us sometimes and stay for a couple of days," Maa insisted, devouring each bite as though she had waited to have one all her life. "A couple of days? That's too much to spend there. I keep falling sick. And

the air, *chhiii!* I am not willing to smell the stench of diesel in the life I have left," she ranted, "I've had more than enough of that." "I know it's bad, that cannot be denied, but once in a while won't bring you too much harm," Maa insisted yet again.

"Of course it will, I was eating more medicines than food, ask Madan, he'll tell you," she claimed as she took another bite, "especially after that noisy garment factory was set up right outside, Half the day went in blocking the noise and the other half trying to fix the headache," she grumbled.

"He told me. I'd like to keep visiting but it's hard to make time for travel," said Maa, rolling a lump of rice between her fingers for longer than it was necessary while her gaze was fixated on the food on her plate. "Nidhi, the chutney is missing a little salt."

"It's hard to make time if you start believing you can't. I'll get some from the kitchen," I said, soon realising how ironic it was for me to say it to Maa. "Let it be, it tastes good anyway," she said.

"That's because it's straight out of the garden. God knows what kind of vegetables have started to flood the markets. I'd forgotten what real food tastes like until I got back and started growing," said Nani.

"I've eaten that all my life Nani, and I think I'm doing okay," I said after a moment's reflection. "Most of your generation can't even name half the vegetables in the market, let alone being aware of what's going inside your stomach," she replied. "I'll give you a sack full of vegetables on your way back. Eat good for sometime at least," she said "And while you're here, you can help Nani with the garden," Maa asserted as she wiped off the last grain of rice from her plate.

The much-awaited meal was enjoyed and the three of us went to sit in the small courtyard in front of the house. The courtyard doubled as a trampoline with tiny birds hopping around all over it. One flew right inside the house through the door and the other chased it. The chase continued until one finally came out of a window followed by the other that chased it. While we sat and bathed in the sun, Nani broke the leftover chapati into little pieces and sprinkled it in one corner of the courtyard. Tiny birds clustered around and pecked at the crumbs. Some ate in a group while some took their shares to corners and ate alone. A bird clutched a relatively large shred in her beak and flew up to her nest built on the ledge of Nani's terrace. Her young ones, shrieked from hunger waiting for their mother to feed them.







## Ghughuti

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Everyday, we would sit in the courtyard talking for hours. Sitting there, one could witness both, the sunrise and the sunset. The sky was open and endless. The fluffy white clouds looked like a fleet of ships sailing through the azure sky which had started to change color every passing minute. More than anything it looked like a painting in progress. The longer I watched, the more the abstract forms began to clasp onto a meaning. Clouds began to appear like beings; a diving man, a giant running elephant, a leaping frog among many others, as they moved slowly and steadily towards the farthest of mountains. The Himalayan range could be seen peeking out of the dense haze that dressed the sundry layers of mountains.

My mind was at rest and it did not try to wander into the past or the future; into the missed opportunities or the awaiting competition. It was not distracted by the sound of a notification or the reminder of a deadline. It was in the sky, on one of the clouds, floating at a snail's pace towards nowhere.

I had not felt like this in a long time and naturally, I wanted to bottle up this feeling forever. I wanted to stay. But what would I do if I stayed here? How could I find a new life in a place which was already on the verge of abandonment? And more so how could I step out of the life that constantly revolved around family, friends, work, and ways of life I had developed in the past years of living in a city?

An internal investigation of these questions began to take form in my mind. What would I need to live here? As I held that thought, many things that had been invisible to my eye due to their consistent availability, started to appear as privileges. No wonder so many migrated to the cities when they got a chance.

My chain of thought broke with the sound of Ma's voice. "I wish I could just stay here. Nidhi you can go back to Delhi on your own, I'll be here," Maa said jokingly but I could tell there was some truth and a strong desire concealed in her words.

"So stay, what is stopping you?" I answered mindlessly, still lost in the pace of the placid clouds, trying to catch my train of thought. She let out a small chuckle that seemed to stem out of both helplessness and amusement.

"It's easy for you to say so. There's no way the three of you can manage by yourself. You can't even wake up on time. And what about the school, I cannot just quit teaching right?" She said. "We're all grown up now, you should take a break if you really feel like it," I told her. I knew she had forgotten any other way of being than to care for us. She had grown to accept life as it was but more often than not, she would mention how she never had enough time to nurture her own interests.

"I spent decades thinking the same way. That's how women's lives have been, shaped by those around them. Your great grandmother once said to me that women should be like water and mould themselves according to the expectations of her family," said Nani.

"And you spent all your life believing it?" I asked.

"Yes, up till a few years before I moved here," she said, "I didn't have any dreams, I knew I'd have to get married and raise a family. I got married at a young age and that is how it was in those times. I loved to be here but had to move to the city because of your Nana's job. But I never felt like I'd have rather done anything else. I don't know if that was so because I was truly content or because I wasn't aware of any other possibility," she looked up at the sky and squinted her eyes to trace the movement of a bird's silhouette that flew above the clouds.

"I liked taking care of my family, but once they were settled, they did not need me to do that for them, and that was the only way I spent my time; the only thing I knew how to do.

When I decided to come here, everyone told me Chamali wasn't the same anymore and it'll will only make my life difficult since I was an old woman, but for the first time, I really had a dream and I decided to have a life that I always wanted without having to think of anyone else," her eyes continued to trace the bird's movement which occasionally got derailed with the force of the wind.

Maa looked at Nani in silence, as though she had seen her for the first time. "It is a beautiful feeling, to have control over your choices. I'm finally getting to know myself. Too bad I waited for so long. Your mother, on the other hand, had interests which she seems to have forgotten about," she said now shifting her gaze at Maa.

"That ship has sailed. I don't think it matters anymore. My dream onlydream is to have my children pursue theirs," said Maa.

I was taught not to settle for less by someone who always had. All the times she gave us her undivided attention and support replayed rapidly at the back of my mind. "You can still find some time in your day and begin to explore what you like Maa," I said.

"A lot changes when you have a family," she replied.

"Maybe you will raise a different kind of family. One where women understand their own interests matter," said Nani with a subtle smile.

"I don't even want to get married Nani, I already have a family," I told her.

"You will have to someday," she replied.

"Maa, you just spoke about how good you feel about finally having control over your life," Maa reminded Nani.

"Yes. So I did. Times are changing," Nani said after a moment's reflection. "They are." I concurred as we both looked at the bird which was now flying higher and appeared smaller.

The courtyard was blooming with the birdsong. There were red-breasted and slaty blue flycatchers, yellow browed tits and sparrows, tweeting and frolicking all around it. They did not seem to get startled or scared to come near us and hopped around carefree. Suddenly, a Ghughuti landed and began to drink water from a terracotta bowl Nani had kept for the birds

"It is hard to live in boxes when the mountains are your home," said Nani.



Without taking my eyes off the Ghughuti, I produced my phone from my pocket and took a photograph. I had finally managed to capture her.

“I wish we could see more birds in the city. Maa, remember our neighbors once had parrots?” I recalled, my eyes, fixed onto the magnificent speckled wings of Ghughuti.

“It was terr—,” Maa began but was interrupted by Nani midway. “If they really wanted birds they should’ve planted trees instead of keeping them in cages. Tell your neighbors I said so,” she said sounding brittle.

“Don’t be annoyed now. They set them free eventually. Nidhi, take a picture of us, we’ll send it to the family group on whatsapp,” Maa said. Nani removed the cap she was wearing on her head and ran her fingers through her hair, “Make sure the mountains are in the frame.”

“Alright, alright, now stay still, one...two...three...and...done!”

“Aye, mother and daughter are getting a photograph together,” a woman, a little older than Nani, entered through the small gate that led into the courtyard. “Thoonna? Is this your daughter?” She came close and examined my face as she cupped it between her hands. “This time of the year?” She asked. “It’s her home, she can come anytime she wants” Nani replied and gestured towards a bamboo stool sitting vacant next to her.

The woman sat on the stool and opened a small cloth bag she had carried along. It was full of *hisole*; small, orange berries that appeared like a tiny bunch of grapes.

“Well, of course, it is so good to see you after so many years,” she said, offering everyone the treat.

“How is Sunaina?” Maa asked.

“Spoke to her a week back, she’s doing good, Bhanu is in kindergarten now, he showed me his remote control plane on video call, what a bundle of joy,” she said in a soft voice full of affection. “Mobile phones are such a blessing. It’s so easy to see and talk to each other nowadays” Nani commented.

Nani and her friend began to weave a thread of conversation, Maa gave me a nudge and whispered in my ear saying she wanted to get out of there. She stood up and led me to the backyard where a tall, strong tree stood bending sideways.

“This is my *vraکش mitra* (tree friend). When I was four, I used to climb right up. A vine of cucumbers ran right to the top along the trunk to that branch,” she said pointing at a branch that was no longer wrapped by the cucumber vine. Your Mama and I would sit there and pick out the cucumbers even before they were ripe. Nani would get really mad at us but we just couldn’t wait for them to grow all the way,” she giggled.

No wonder she liked cucumbers so much. They were always a part of our meal back home, every day without fail. Maa began to make an attempt to climb the tree which was clearly going to be unsuccessful.

“Help me get on,” she ordered. I told her it was not a great idea since she wasn’t the four-year-old little girl anymore. She took no notice and continued to make the climb. I finally had to give up and decided to lend her a hand. She slowly began to climb up the tree as I tried to push her up from the bottom.

“Come on use some strength now, you had a proper lunch didn’t you,” Maa yelled looking down at me. She seemed too eager to get up there. I continued to push her as much as I could.

“What are you girls doing, Nupur! you’ll fall, spare the little girl”, Nani called out. I could hear Nani and her friend laughing out of their wits.

“I’m not doing it for the first time!” Maa yelled back.

“Maa you’ve gained weight,” I told her breathing heavily.

“Shravan Kumar carried both his parents on his shoulders and you’re not even pushing with all your strength,” she mocked, “Come on now, I’m almost there.”

I lifted her with the last bit of energy I had left till she finally managed to sit on the trunk from where it forked into two thick branches.

We looked at each other panting heavily and collapsed into a long stretch of laughter. I watched her as she sat there, looking around and through the crown of the tree. She ran her fingers on the coarse texture of the aged branch. While she enjoyed the scenery from up there and hummed her favorite songs looking younger than ever, I wondered how I was going to help her get down. She swung her feet and looked down at me with a subtle grin. I instantly photographed that little curve before it could fly away.





## To Grow

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It was dawn. The sky changed colors every minute yet again. The dim blues had started showing traces of crimson. The vapor from the stream had started to rise and appeared like a river of dense, milky white clouds. Maa and I stood on the terrace admiring the play of nature, my eyes opened up wide in absolute awe. We were way above the cloud river and it felt like we lived in the sky. Not too far away, a naked tree flaunted a flock of red and blue-headed parrots, that proved to be more gorgeous substitutes to leaves as they flew from one branch to the other. I could look down at Nani working in the garden, moving around the green maze checking up on all the plants one by one.

The mist began to dissipate and the sun began to rise, a subtle wave of saffron gradually consumed everything that came along its way. The mountains glistened and everything that blocked the light cast shadows that danced as the sun rose higher and higher. I could see Anandi Nani amble towards our house holding a steel container that oscillated as she walked. We went downstairs and greeted her. She handed the milk container to Maa and went straight to the garden where Nani worked. I went along.

“Here, look at these,” said Nani pointing towards damaged plants that looked like they had struggled to stay rooted despite someone’s desperate attempts of pulling them out.



“*Aye bue*, monkeys again. They’ve started getting on my nerves,” Nani grumbled.

“Monkeys?” I inquired.

“Yes, they aren’t scared anymore, farms and people, both have lessened considerably over time,” she answered.

Mom joined us in the garden after a while, “When we were kids, we were assigned duties to check on the farms and shoo the animals away.”

“They’re chopping down forests, what else can we expect,” Nani mumbled.

“By this time of the year, the wheat used to be this tall,” Anandi Nani said tapping her hand on her waist.

“Why don’t you plant wheat again?” I inquired.

“We can’t do it by ourselves anymore, we’re old. The young don’t want to farm,” She replied.

“And we’ve lost most of the seeds,” Nani added, “which reminds me…” She plucked a dried bottle gourd from the vine which had many ripe ones as well, and handed it to Anandi Nani.

“I hope these seeds grow well,” she said. She kept it aside and began to lend Nani a hand. The four of us took up the task of replanting and fixing the damage the monkeys had done.

“Nidhi, to grow well, you must always share your best seeds with those who grow around you, the pollen is carried around, you see,” she told me as she tilled the soil with her fingers.

Anandi Nani and Nani got immersed in their usual conversations. There was rarely a secret in nature that baffled them. They knew the names of all the wildflowers, plants, birds, and insects. They knew how much sun cabbages needed in comparison to brinjals. They knew what herbs cured diseases, and could tell the age of a goat or a cow. By the look of the moon, the sunset, or the birds, they could tell how the weather might be the next day and it was not just them who were so wise; everyone who lived there knew as much. They had not learned from the internet or books, but

in the field, the forest, and banks of the stream. Their teachers had been these very birds, soil, and the sun.

“It’s not a one day job. You have to be committed to nurture and care everyday,” said Anandi Nani.

“Be it a plant, or your own self,” Nani added looking at Maa who avoided making an eye contact.

I had not tilled the soil for too long and yet my fingers had started to hurt. Despite covering a considerably small piece of land, I felt quite drained. The invisibility of the existence and value of labor that produced what was readily available to me was lifting off.

“Enjoying?” Maa jested.

“Learning,” I replied.

“We need an extra shovel, Nidhi can you run to Anandi Nani’s house and get one?” Nani asked.

Thankfully, Maa had given me quite a tour of Chamali, enough for me to know everyone’s whereabouts. I walked down till I spotted her house; mud-coated blue walls, wooden pillars, and a roof of flaked stones layered to create a slope. Bhoori grazed in the courtyard while her calf sucked on her udder. I spotted the shovel that was kept next to one of the pillars Anandi Nani mentioned and proceeded to get back.

On the way back, my eyes fell on a tree laden with ripe Malta. The hanging Maltas had weighed down the branches making them all the more accessible. I rushed and stood under it, as I looked up, it seemed like it was raining Malta in abundance and many were hidden within the depths of the dense foliage. I picked four, one for each of us and started to run back home.

■ ■ ■



“Oh, these are so ripe,” Maa gave a beaming smile.

I handed the shovel to Nani and she asked me where I had gotten the Malta from. When I told her I got them from a tree that stood across Anandi Nani’s house, she asked me again to confirm it was the same one she thought it was.

“Yes, was I not supposed to?” I asked hoping I had not stolen someone else’s fruits.

“It belongs to anyone who wants fruit,” Nani laughed, “It is funny you picked these from there because it was planted by your great grandmother.”

“That is another one of my *vraksh mitras* I have really fond memories of,” Maa told me.

The knowledge intrigued me. That’s what the beauty of Chamali was; it was a combined effort of all those who had lived and continued to live here. The thought that it might become like one of the other ghost villages of Garhwal hit me. It would disappear with the last of women who had kept it alive.

“Nani, aren’t you upset that Chamali might not last for long?” I asked her, burying a seed in the pit I had dug.

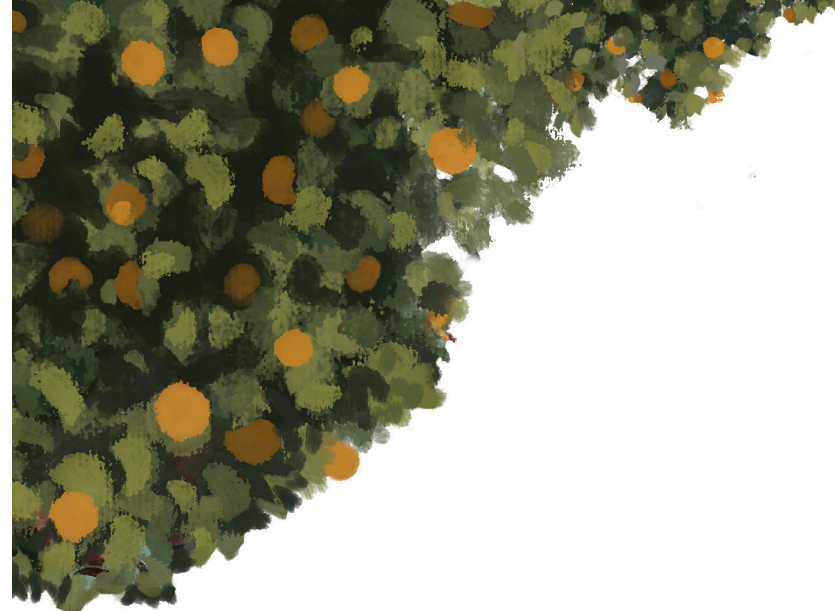
Maa and Anandi Nani sat on a corner chatting and devouring the citric delight while I continued to work with Nani.

“Our biggest mistake is that when we think of life, the first and the only thing that occupies our mind is our own race. We forget this world is not our property and we keep trying to rule it,” she said burying another seed into the ground.

Chamali will always grow. Did you see those abandoned houses?”

“I did,” I told her.

“Did they look abandoned to you?” She asked.





## A Present

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The greens gradually transfigured into greys. The stench of diesel had made its way into the air, the twitter of the birds that bounced to and fro was replaced by cars that constantly honked at each other. Everyone rushed to reach where they were set out for avoiding anything that could cause the slightest of delay.

A supervisor yelled at the laborers asking them to work faster as they carried bricks stacked onto their heads in the scorching sun.

The traffic had not moved an inch owing to a gentleman who wouldn't move his car because someone had honked at him thrice.

On the roadside, a woman clad in expensive brands, standing beside her expensive car bargained with the vegetable vendor asking him why he was selling his tomatoes for the price of rubies. Her teenage son from the car snapped that tomatoes tasted disgusting.

The jam began to clear and a car overtook us from the left. I rolled up the window and took a deep breath.

“I’m sure there’s a lot of work waiting for me at home, I wonder how your father and your brother have maintained the house all this time,” said Maa, sounding slightly worried. I shut my eyes and thought about our last night at Chamali hoping I had successfully managed to bottle up that tranquility to be produced in this moment.

The night was rich with the sound of rustling trees and stridulating crickets. The air smelled sweet and cold, and everything was coated with the silvery blue of the moonlight. The lights of the faraway houses twinkled like stars against the mountains that were engulfed by the blackness of the night.

The three of us sat on the terrace, watching the star-studded sky.

“Don’t you feel lonely?” Maa asked Nani.

“I miss seeing everyone sometimes but I’ve never enjoyed myself this much. I’m really loving it...and thank god for the technology, what are phones for anyway,” she answered without a second thought.

The car came to a halt, and so did my trip down the memory lane. We were back home.

My brother came downstairs to help us carry the luggage and the many things Nani had presented us with; a sack of homegrown vegetables, a jar of pickle, and another one full of her special ginger, garlic, and mint flavored salt.

As soon as we entered the house, Maa began to crib about how nothing was in place and there was no point in explaining things to the set of father and son because they always forget to follow her instructions.

All of a sudden, I remembered the envelope Nani handed me right before we left. Every time I visited, she would give me an envelope that carried money. The amount of money grew as I did. Maa always told me it was bad manners to check how much money someone had gifted in front of them so I always waited till we got back home.

I took out the envelope from my bag and as I held it between my fingers, I felt tiny rocks. Curious as a cat, I ripped it open and looked inside.

Seeds! Seeds from Chamali!

■ ■ ■

Thoona had started to disappear by the day. Often I would try to make her remember, being the one to tell her stories of how she used to be this time, but gradually I could see her getting consumed in the same cycle that somehow constantly skipped the notion of self-care. She still held herself fully accountable for making sure all our needs were met. However, some days she would surprise me and herself by spending time doing things she enjoyed. Some days she would practise singing, play her favourite computer games, skip cooking meals or cook especially for herself; others, she would call her old friends, read books she never had the time to, let the furniture be imperfectly aligned and the curtains creased. Some days she would transcend from being confined to a mother, a wife, and a teacher to someone who valued caring for herself as much as she did for others. And as some days progressed, she started to come to me with visionary ideas.

“I think there should be a youtube channel with cartoons for kids dubbed in Garhwali,” she said as we sat on the balcony watching the hustle of the city.

“I’d have been better at Garhwali if that were the case,” I said.

The seeds had grown into a leafy plant and continued to rise by the day. One of the days, I noticed a chrysalis clinging onto its stem. Since then, Maa and I spent some of our time in the balcony everyday gazing at it, hoping we would get to witness the magical moment when it cracks open.

“Can I take the plant with me when I move out?” I asked Maa.

“Let it grow here, take the seeds,” she said as she continued to devour her *doodh* and *bhaat*.





