

## WHEN THE TREES HOLD THEIR BREATH

The jungle swallows sound.

It does not just silence sound—it gorges itself on it, whole; a gluttonous thing of sodden earth and strangling crawlers. It does not dampen—it devours, drinks sound like marrow from bone, so even her breath is taken before it quite forms.

The cicadas have fallen mute. The wind has abandoned its post. Even the trees seem to lean inward, breathless, listening.

Watchful, waiting.

Her bare feet press into the clag, thick as old blood, heavy with leeches and the slow fester of a world forever feeding on itself. The earth clings, greedy, serpentine up her ankles like grasping palms.

The air is thick, viscous with the scent of damp bark and bruised palmyrah skin, their sweetness turned to something overripe, almost fermented. Beneath it coils something razor-edged—something oxidized, metallic, the relish of rusted iron on a bitten tongue. It lingers at the back of her throat, turning over like another swallowed scream.

Aathi makes a sound, small and fragile—half-whimper, half-gasp—his pulse flutters ignorantly, birdlike, trapped in a ribcage too delicate to hold such fright. She tightens her grip around his wrist, a silent tether, a command.

*"Niruththadha!"* she hisses, her voice barely more than the scrape of breath against teeth.

Move. Now.

The shredded edge of her pavadai flares behind her, a torn war flag caught in the wind, streaked with mud, heavy with sweat, trailing like the remnants of something already lost.

“Some stains never go. No matter how hard you scrub”, Amma had once said, a voice that hums in her skull.

She lets her mind wander to amma, bent over the ammi kal, fingers reddened, grinding soap into a turmeric stain that had bled across the fabric like a crushed mantharai flower. The scent of Sunlight soap and spice curled into the air, thick with effort, with something heavier than scrubbing.

Amma’s hands—cracked from grinding coconut against stone, kneading dough, from years of pulling too much weight—had worked the fabric raw, but the yellow only faded, never left.

### **Some stains never go.**

Now, she holds onto that moment, turns it over in her mind like an old pottu rubbed thin between fingers. The memory of Amma’s exasperation—honed but laced with something unuttered—feels like a holy mary prayer chain that has been tampered with, but the sinner’s prayer left unsaid.

Now, the fabric clings to her like a second skin, drenched and pasting around her legs like the monsoon-flooded vines that swallowed the old well behind Appa’s house.

She swipes a trembling hand across her forehead, searching for something—*amma*. The cool smear of sandalwood paste, drawn in slow, careful circles by Amma’s thumb, a whispered benediction left to dry against her skin. It isn’t there. It will never be there again.

But she pretends.

Pretends the gods are still watching. Pretends the earth has not split open beneath her feet. Pretends she has not already fallen through the crack.

Her breath shudders loose, a fraying thread. Somewhere behind her, a voice cleaves through the thick air—pitiless, urgent, hungry.

She doesn't turn.

The night thrums, heavy and breathless, with the scent of crushed saamanthipoo, their petals smeared into the mud like remnants of an abandoned ritual. Somewhere, a kovil bell tolls—low, cavernous, indifferent. It does not flinch at the world snarling beneath it.

Kavitha exhales, the sound brittle, a breath stretched too thin. Her feet burn, stripped raw by earth that does not yield, but she does not cease. One step. Then another. The rhythm drums beneath her veins, as familiar as the scrape of Amma's ammikal, as steady as fingers pressing dough into soft, obedient circles.

But nothing is soft now. Nothing bends without breaking.

The world has split at its seams, jagged and yawning, and all she can do is stay in motion through the wreckage.

They run.

Aathi stumbles again, a serrated falter, his knees nearly buckling. Kavitha yanks him upright before the earth can take him, before the jungle ooze can swallow him whole. His breath is ragged, torn at the edges, but he does not cry. Not anymore. She doesn't know when he stopped.

Maybe when the first bombs fell.

Maybe when the sky was set alight.

Maybe when they left Amma behind in the red dust and smoke, her voice was just another thing devoured by the jungle.

Once, before the war, the jungle had been hers. Not a place, but a belonging—woven into her skin like the smell of Amma's spiced rice and coconut oil, like the ghost of rice flour dust on her fingertips from mornings spent pressing kolam patterns into the earth.

It was in the way she knew which roots would knot her ankles, which leaves would stain her fists, which trees caterwauled the loudest when the wind stirred through their branches.

Her father had called it the cradle of gods, a land older than names, where spirits curled in the crooks of banyan limbs and the air carried the weight of stories too ancient to know of aloud.

Amma's stories had been gentler—told in the glow of a kerosene lamp, wrapped in the scent of frying mustard seeds. She spoke of elephants who never forgot kindness, of trees that could hold grief in their roots, of rivers that knew the way home even when people did not.

Kavitha remembers the maps spread beneath her father's calloused hands, his fingers tracing fault lines not drawn in ink, but in grief. **Elephant Pass. Displacement. Erasure.** He spoke of the war carving up the land, not just for people, but for the creatures he had dedicated his life trying to protect.

*"One day, there will be no elephants left,"* he had murmured, voice distant, as if he could already hear the silence they would leave behind. There was a sadness in his voice that she had not understood at the time.

She had been too young. Too busy sneaking out to feed the orphaned elephant calf, Minnal, named for the lightning streak that marked his ear. He had been hers, in the way stray things always belong to those who love them hardest - his wrinkled trunk seeking her palms, his wide, liquid eyes brimming with an unspoken trust. She remembers the weight of him pressing into her side, heavy but never crushing, solid in a world where everything else was shifting.

Back then, she thought the jungle would always be hers. She ran wild through the undergrowth, bare feet skimming over gnarled roots, her laughter tangled in the rustling canopy.

The war had been a distant thing, a ghost confined to the crackling of the radio, whispered between half-empty plates and restless silences.

She had not known it would come for them. That it would bleed into the rivers, scorch the skies, hollow out the land until even the trees stood as skeletons of themselves.

The last time she saw Minnal was the morning the soldiers came.

She had pressed her forehead against his, whispering, "*Stay here. Don't follow.*" He had blinked, slow and solemn, as if he understood. As if he already knew what she didn't—that this was goodbye.

Then, as the first explosion split the sky, he turned and vanished into the trees.

Now, the jungle is no cradle. It is a carcass, stripped and sun-bleached, its ribs jutting from the earth in the form of splintered trunks and severed roots. It is an open wound, raw and weeping, its trees stripped bare like ribs picked clean.

And yet—somewhere in this ruin, does Minnal still wander? Or has he, too, been devoured by the silence? The thought festers, sinking deep beneath her skin, lodging in the rasping spaces between breath and bone.

If she listens—truly listens, past the static hiss of cicadas, the drone of insects and the distant exhale of gunfire—she almost hears it. A low, keening call, stretched thin through the trees.

Or maybe it is nothing. Maybe it is only ghosts.

A flicker. A rustle too meticulous.

She halts so suddenly that Aathi stumbles into her, his fingers scrabbling at her wrist.

Silence clamps down, plump and swollen with waiting.

Then—

A gunshot.

The jungle swallows it like a dying thing, choking it down into mud, into roots, into the bark of trees that have borne too much despondency. And then, as if exhaling—

A whisper.

Not of men, but of memory. It slithers between the leaves, curls around her throat, settles heavy on her tongue. The metallic clink of Amma's thali against her collarbone, the hush of Ashtothara Satha Kalasabishegam pooling at the nape of her neck like oil, the sticky-sweet weight of paal soru clinging to her chin. The acrid curl of camphor smoke. The scrape of Appa's calloused fingers, pressing hers into the damp morning earth, guiding her over kolam lines traced in borrowed dawn. The soft insistence of Aathi's milk teeth against her knuckles, the way he had gripped her pinky the first time he stood—tiny, trembling, triumphant.

It rushes back, a cyclone, an avalanche, a monsoon of things lost, things stolen, things ripped up from her grasp before she even knew how to hold them.

Aathi flinches, a sharp inhale—

She clamps a hand over his mouth, dragging him down into the damp undergrowth, into the mulch and the rot, where even the earth is too afraid to wheeze.

The echo of the shot lingers, a tremor in the air.

Footsteps.

Boots pressing into the mud.

Searching.

A crack. A twig snaps—a sound that fractures the air, too close.

Her fingers clamp around Aathi, the frantic rhythm of his pulse a drumbeat against her ribs. The air thickens, a foul stew of disturbed earth, the acrid tang of sweat gathering beneath her collarbone, and something darker, something ancient—something watching just beyond the veil of the trees.

A shape flickers in the shadows, not human, not beast, but something borne of blood and war—faceless, nameless, but alive with a kind of hunger.

She dares not breathe, as if her breath might betray them.

Her legs burn—cramped, seized by the endless ache of stillness—the weight of Aathi in her arms, the quiet pulse of him against her chest, is all that secures her to this fractured reality.

She listens, sweating it out, the jungle pressing against her ears like an unwanted secret. It is a treacherous thing. A Judas. It carries the hum of whispered breaths, the undertow of fear curling like smoke through its branches.

She pleads with it, in silence, to stay still—to swallow them whole, to cloak them in its putrid roots and protect them, just this once.

When she was small, she would press her ear to the thick, wrinkled bark of trees, imagining she could hear the stories woven into their veins. Appa had told her that the jungle was full of tales—old, forgotten tales long before war and bloodshed and mothers sacrificed to the smoke.

She thought, back then, that if she listened hard enough, she might hear the gods themselves, their voices a soft hum in the thicket. Now, all she hears is the terrified stillness of a boy too young to know fear, the frantic rhythm of her own heartbeat, and the slow, sickening decay of a world that no longer remembers its name.

Another step. Too close. The earth holds its breath, as if it, too, is afraid. She tightens her hold around Aathi, her fingers pressing into the delicate bones of his back, a silent plea: stay. Don't move.

Her gaze never rises; she does not dare look into the eyes of whatever hunts them. They are not hidden, not cloaked in shadow—no, the jungle simply knows how to lie.

How to wear a face of innocence and watch you fall into its lies.

Another shot.

At first, it is only the warmth—a bloom of heat against her stomach, spreading like ink in water. Then, the world tilts, slow and sure, and her limbs go weightless. Her fingers, once clutching his hair, loosen, like sand through a hand. The pull of gravity is sudden, merciless.

Aathi's gasp cuts through her, sharp and raw, as her blood begins to stain the pale fabric of his shorts, darkening the threadbare cotton; it is a bruise that won't heal.

The jungle screams once, but it's not a cry—it's a rending, the tearing of something sacred and old, echoing across the cavities of her chest.

Then, it ceases, as though it never existed at all.

Silence.

A voice, low, unbearable, drips into her ear like honey. It is neither wind nor whisper, but something deeper, older, rooted in the kernel of this world.

"Kavitha."

It is not Aathi. Not Amma, with her gentle hands and soft hymns of protection. Not Appa, whose hands had been the very map of her childhood. No, it is the jungle itself, a language

she had long ago forgotten—its words steeped in ash, in smoke, in the wetness of blood spilled and bygone.

"Kavitha."

Her lips tremble, pulling into a smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

The jungle knows, doesn't it? Knows that she is already gone, that she will never feel the warm grasp of Amma's hands on her fevered forehead again, that she will never hear the heavy footfalls of Appa as he trudged home from the fields, nor the soft laughter of Aathi.

Aathi's eyes widen, not in terror, but in something worse—something akin to understanding.

He sees it, too, the way the world is bending, crumbling at its edges, retreating like the tide pulling back from a shore long blotted out.

The soldiers' boots crush against the earth, leaving deep, aching marks that would never heal, even if the ground itself could. Their shapes are not men, but phantoms draped in flesh, faceless and faceless still, their guns raised like an ancient sentence, unspoken but already passed.

The jungle exhales, and its breath is heavy, laced with dust and decay. It is the smell of a world that has swallowed too much, chewed it up, and spat it out in pieces.

The last thing she feels is the pressure of Aathi's small body against hers, his fingers trembling beneath her skin, as if he could hold the last vestiges of the world in his touch.

The jungle keeps its secrets, as it always has. She is one more, lost among its shadows.

One more lost thing the earth will cradle, and never let go.

Somewhere in the distance, a bird calls, but the sound is far away, as if even the jungle itself is moving beyond her. Beyond them. She lets go. She lets it all go.

It is only the jungle. And the silence it keeps.

She squeezes her eyes shut and waits for it to take them, too.