SHORT STORY

A Community That Cooks Together Stays Together

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"Left at the Loneliest" by Roi Yves Villadiego

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Samima rolls the dough and creates perfectly round chapattis. It would have been wonderful if life were as easy as preparing chapattis and not like a croissant with twists and turns, demanding special baking skills and undivided attention.

Samima is working faster than usual. Ruchira is also doing hers in a hurry. Both are toiling in absolute silence, unlike the past when they discussed the day's happenings and everything under the moon, indulging in the latest gossip and tales from their villages — a neighbour's teenage son flirting with school-going girls; a lass who attained puberty found roaming around with a young man; so and so's mother-in-law ill-treating her daughter-in-law; middle-aged Ruchira's eternal awe for her own grandkids' special abilities in learning lessons and extra-curricular activities; immeasurable appreciation about how thoughtful their husbands are; newly-wed, twenty-year-old Samima's relentless efforts to learn new recipes to impress her in-laws.

The fire in the large clay oven in front of them glows silently. Samima lifts her head, her body heaving with exertion. In the crepuscular light, she witnesses the visible greenery around slowly melting into the dusk, awaiting the attendance of nightfall, like an enigmatic mother who veils her over-active child cradled on her lap, trying to safeguard being alerted by the presentiment of some unexpected occurring that might lie ahead.

Samima briefly glances at Ruchira's face gleaming in the oven's blazing light, her *dupatta* loosely hanging over her shoulders. Her *salwar--kurta* seemed unclean, as if not washed for days. Samima shifts her gaze towards the murky sky, dimly lit with a couple of stars, and adjusts her black burka, feeling her *kurta* underneath drenched with sweat. She feels the beads of perspiration on her forehead and wipes them with the back of her wheat flour — laden hands, placing them on the garment enveloping her head. She wonders why it's stiflingly hot but doesn't discuss it with Ruchira, and gets back to work solemnly. It's the lean period when the shift changes and one set of soldiers is replaced by another. Once the guardsmen are back, they won't be allowing them to continue with their chapatti-making activity.

"How long will they be here?" Ruchira asks, to no one in particular, feeling the hot, molten lava-like temper boiling inside the crater of her mind.

"Don't know. Probably till the time the war is over." Samima says, lowering her voice, wondering when the war will be over or perhaps it will ever cease. She places a hand over her seven-month-pregnant belly as if caressing her child.

Ruchira and Samima lived in the villages situated at the north-western foothills of the Himalayas, but in two different countries — India and Pakistan. Preparing chapattis and

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cooking them on a *sanjha chullha** every evening on the Pakistani side was their usual activity, but recently, there has been a change of scene. It all happened after the outbreak of the war between the two countries. Then their husbands were called to join their respective opposite forces. The womenfolk never abandoned preparing chapattis in the community oven, instead they simply adjusted to the routine of the soldiers, finding out a suitable time when there was a change of guards and nobody would be around.

“What time is it?” Archana asks, joining from beyond the border.

“Probably 7 p.m. I came here a little while ago.” Samima says, feeling a bit uncanny on not being joined by other ladies from her side of the village, that surging feeling, an awkward emotion, realising that from now on she will have to consider the ladies from across the border — a mere few feet afar, but hardly ever away — to be *foreigners.*

Her memories of a once-vibrant neighbourhood played effortlessly in her mind like a bird gliding on an air current. They have been born and brought up together, under the same sky, the same sun and the moon, tended to one another with steadfast love. Then suddenly one day they are declared as foes by these unknown authorities, who remain invisible but omnipresent in their lives, and these innocent victims are forced to follow their orders with extreme diligence or bear the consequences.

“They will be back anytime. Let’s hurry up.” Ruchira says, breaking into Samima’s thoughts.

“What are you ladies doing over here?” A soldier in uniform hollers, ambling over to them. “Don’t you know there is a curfew in this area?”

“Yes, *jaanab.* We are almost done.” Samima says, making a movement with her outstretching index finger pointing towards the already prepared chapattis.

Ruchira is numb, but with fiery eyes, battling an inward furor like an aeroplane encountering unexpected turbulence.

He takes a bucket of water that the ladies had brought along with them and splashes it on the fire. A grey smoke towers above and vanishes, as the water subdues the rising flame, douses the wood and coal, before fully extinguishing the fire and forming a large pool of it inside and all around the oven. Alarmed, the womenfolk let out a terrified shriek and fumble with their utensils, cooked chapattis and half-kneaded dough before quickly disappearing from that area.

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Alone in her house, Samima paces up and down the room, wondering when her husband will be back home and when their lives of being prisoners in their own village will be over. Without any warning signs, she experiences strong cramps in her abdomen, groin and back; feeling signs of contraction and then the sensation that her water has broken. She tosses and turns on the floor in pain and shouts aloud but the neighbouring house is too far away and nobody can hear her. She feels intense pain and falls into a state of semi-consciousness laying on the floor alone.

On the other side of the border, Ruchira is not at peace. Her mind revolves around Samima's protruding belly. Is she alright? Does she need any help? She will be delivering her first baby and the young lady is inexperienced in this matter. Ruchira has this disturbing thought over and over again. Being a midwife, she has delivered several babies on both sides of the border. She peeks outside from her glass window. The sky is draped in muddy red attire. Perhaps it will rain. The weather during the peak summer season is quite unpredictable. No one knows when it will change. She wraps herself in a light woolen shawl. It may be cold outside.

Once on the path towards Samima's house, she realises that she will not be able to take the usual road that connects both the villages on either side of the border. The security has been beefed up at the newly established border turned fortress, demarcated with barricades having iron rods hooked between two rows of makeshift cement barriers. Barbed wire has also been put up to restrict pedestrians. She senses a sharp bitterness inside, a whirlpool of emotions contesting among themselves to resurface. A sudden pang of hopelessness grips her mind on remembering the cruelty inflicted on the villagers of both countries through the creation of the masked wall that is outwardly indiscernible but perceptible to a greater degree, being full of malicious intent. A terrible rage overpowers her, followed by a desire to weep over the fate of their deprived brotherhood, their love and bonding violated by the intrusion of this barrier, as this terrible injustice has been perpetrated on them. The road that was once frequented by happy citizens of the two countries has now been taken over by grim-looking men in uniform. Ruchira tries to recall whether she has ever seen any soldier laughing or even adorning a thin smile.

Ruchira takes the route via the forest. As she goes deep inside the area, she feels a chill in her bones, and her body shivers from head to toe. Earlier, whenever she visited Samima's house, she always took the well-accustomed road but never the jungle route. She keeps turning back, as the feeling of someone following her doesn't leave her. She thinks she has seen a figure of a tall man lurking among the thicket, as if ready to pounce. An owl hoots somewhere, accompanied by at times, a terrible howling and at times the doleful chorus of

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nocturnal animals far away. The clouds rumble occasionally, announcing the possibility of heavy rains, and in the spotlight of lightning that falls on the wilderness, she startles on encountering the copses that appear in ghostly shapes, completely alien and otherworldly. She recalls the story of Lord Krishna's birth in the royal prison and how he was secretly carried in a basket by his father in the midst of incessant rain and thunderstorms and finally, transported to a safe place. Is Samima going to give birth to Kalki in similar circumstances in this Kali *Yuga*? Will Lord Krishna in this new form come to slay the wrongdoers and punish the vicious, mendacious beings who believe in creating walls, not bridges? She finds consolation in that thought.

Usually, it takes only five minutes to reach Samima's house, and yet it seems as if she is on a never-ending path. Suddenly, she hears a rustle somewhere behind her. Before her mind can process the noise to be that of some animal, she gets hit on the head by something hard. She turns back before falling into a swoon. A man in uniform is standing right behind her with a rifle butt pointed towards her.

On regaining her senses, Ruchira finds herself seated under a tree in the midst of pitch darkness. A nagging headache and bruises on her hands beset her resolve to continue the journey, but she quickly collects herself and tries to figure out the way forward. Unexpectedly, a man ignites a match, sitting in front of a tree opposite to hers. In that light, Ruchira recognises that it is the same man who had hit her a while ago.

"So you are spying for our enemies." The man says before releasing the glowing matchstick until the flame burns quite close to his fingers.

In that momentary light, it seems to Ruchira that his uniform is that of an Indian soldier.

"Spy… eh… no *saab*… no *saab*." She squeals, her voice turning into a wail, feeling her position to be passive and defenceless. She stares at the man fearfully, while her entire body begins to tremble under the strain, as if her strength is slowly draining away from her.

"I don't trust you. You must be on a mission. Otherwise why would you go out via the jungle route towards our enemy's den? Surrender, you wretched woman!" The man summons from the darkness.

"No, no, *saab*, believe me. I want to see my friend Samima who is expecting." Clenching her jaws, she feels her teeth grind, her entire body taut and stony, as she proceeds towards the man. Her eyes have grown accustomed to the inky blackness by then, and in the light of the darkness, she bends down and swiftly snatches the rifle resting near him like a gust of wind sweeping away the fallen leaves. With a fierce effort, she straightens herself, walks a few paces away from him and lets out a thin cackle of laughter, holding shrieks of derision. Once

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she positions herself with the rifle pointing towards the man, she feels her shoulders droop and a tingling pain in her arms — nervousness surpassing control.

“If you don’t allow me to go, I will shoot you.” She says vehemently, aiming the rifle at him. She is no expert in handling a firearm but she has seen how people use it in movies or at least she can pretend that she knows how to use it.

In the dark, she can feel the bewildered man’s eyeballs measuring her moves. Taking a deep breath, she scampers through the forest towards the side leading to Samima’s house.

After a little while, she reaches Samima’s house. She finds the door ajar. She abandons the rifle outside like children throw away a toy after they have lost interest in it. Stepping inside, she sees Samima lying on the floor — hair tousled, clothes dishevelled, writhing in agony. A slimy liquid is spreading on the floor, oozing out from the lower half of her body, filling the room with a sense of urgency.

“How come you are here, Ruchira *bhabi*?” Samima asks in an inaudible voice on seeing her.

“I saw you at the *sanjha chullha* and immediately had a feeling that it is probably time for the baby to come out.” Ruchira says, stroking her hair fondly.

Samima feels comforted in her presence. Ruchira turns around to close the door when she finds a soldier in a frowzy uniform at the doorstep. His eyes tell her that it is the same man from the forest, perhaps a monstrous replica or a Golem.

Ruchira stands threateningly, blocking the doorway.

“Samima needs me. Please *saab*, I beg of you.” She calms down, and says with folded hands. “Please *saab*.” She repeats.

The man ponders for a moment, then peeps inside and almost instantaneously, his upper body jerks backwards while his legs are fixed on the ground. He rushes out immediately and locks the door behind him.

Ruchira puts a large pot filled with water on the kerosene stove. After a few hours of struggle, a baby boy is born. As the baby cries aloud, Ruchira notices his features, smiles and looks resembling that of his mother. The door abruptly opens from outside and the man enters. He stares at the child in a manner as if he has never seen a newborn, with a soft smile under his moustache — charmed by the tiny, innocent being. He leaves the door open and settles down at one corner of the room, his eyes much more relaxed than before.

“The child is blessed.” The man begins. “I got the news that the war…” His voice drowns in the noise of thunder, followed by a heavy shower clattering on the roof with a savage vengeance like a drummer.

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After a brief period of unrelenting downpour, the rain stops. Ruchira and Samima, along with the newborn child, reach the *sanjha chullha* area. The soldier follows behind them. They are astonished to find the womenfolk of both the villages have assembled and the militaries are nowhere in sight.

“I told you the war is over.” The army man says, harboring a broad grin.

With great difficulty, they start the fire and finish preparing the chapattis while picking up their previous evening’s incomplete conversations with renewed volubility.

The sky starts brightening bit by bit with the stars paling, showing signs of dawn. Slowly, the firmament becomes lighter, the east blushes as its cheeks turn ruddy, the outline of trees is gradually visible with the leaves stirring in the gentle breeze, and the chirping of birds commences with vigour. The freshness of the morning touches the women deeply as if suddenly awakened from an ongoing slumber. They gaze at one another with eyes full of happy dreams and renewed hope that the soldiers won’t be back ever again in their abode of peace and tranquility.

*A *sanjha chullha* is a traditional common oven in India and Pakistan.

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