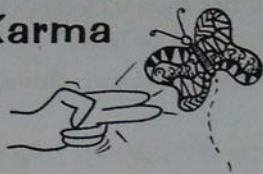


Kalmu and Karma

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KALMU, 8

In the village of Pottacheru in Koraput, Odisha, Kalmu is bored of playing with the burnt remains of his hut. Some people Baba calls 'police' have burnt all their houses down. The charred bricks are fun. They crumble to dust when he hits them with his fist. It makes him feel powerful. Bricks otherwise are so hard. They never break even when he drops them from the highest branch of a tree. But now he is tired.

He harasses his Amma who is cleaning her half-burnt sarees. With her teeth she tears the blackened aanchal off one saree and holds it up to see if the rest of it will be wearable. Kalmu tugs at her elbow. She knows what that means. She picks up a small basket covered by a large plate. She lifts the plate, peeks in, slips her hand inside and emerges with a butterfly, its wings pinned closed between her forefinger and thumb. Kalmu's eyes light up as she ties a thread to the butterfly's body and holds it up for him... a fluttering, live toy at the end of a string. Kalmu bounces the butterfly like a yoyo and then swings it around in circles. The creature flaps helplessly a few times before surrendering. It dangles.

Kalmu runs through the village, to other kids outside other burnt huts. Two of them have butterflies on strings too. Kalmu's, though, is the prettiest. And it still flutters every minute or so, in a confused flap of changing colours.

Till it dies.

Kalmu spots another butterfly flitting about nearby. He drops his yoyo and chases it. The insect settles on a rock. Kalmu creeps up on it slowly and claps his cupped hand over it. But it escapes. Kalmu runs behind it for a long time trying to catch it but it flutters out of his hand-trap every time.



The sun has started to set.

Kalmu's mother looks at her saree. It is torn almost in two, burnt all the way around the edges. Hanging limply from her outstretched hands, it too looks like a dead butterfly.

Kalmu comes huffing back to where he has dropped his butterfly, still lying in the dust. He picks it up and swings it around. This one is more fun, he thinks. It will do whatever I want it to. Just like the burnt bricks.

And, spinning the small red winged creature in circles over his head, Kalmu suddenly feels powerful again.

KARMA, 8

In the village of Natmargu in Dantewada, Chhattisgarh, Karma paints words on a big sheet of chart paper as his Bapu says,

"Yeh... jameen... humaa-aari." He pulls the last word in the middle like Karma's headmaster does in spelling-dictation class.

"Slow down, Bapu, I can't write the words so big so fast," Karma says, and writes 'jameen' over the 'jameen' once more with his little hand, so it looks thick. So thick it looks as if Bapu is shouting it out! Karma laughs at that thought.

Bapu asks him, "What's so funny?"

Karma says, "You are!" and dips the brush in the katori of black paint. Karma feels like painting a moochhi on top of Bapu's mouth. But Bapu is staring at the chart paper. So serious he looks!

Karma starts the 'humaari'. "Why don't we paint this sign in English?" he asks. "I wonder if those babus can even read Hindi."

"They'd better," says Bapu, sounding even more serious. "It's our national language. They are Indians, same as us."

"Then why do they want our land?" Karma asks, confused. "Don't they have their own land?"

"...hai," continues Bapu, pointing at the chart paper. "Make sure the last word fits properly."



Karma sits under an imli tree and watches Bapu. Bapu is standing in the sun holding the chart paper across his chest. It looks like a shield. A magic protection. Karma thinks now that he should have painted that moustache below his Bapu's nose. Bapu might have looked like a warrior.

All the farmers of Natmargu have collected now. All?

No. "Where's Sodi's bapu?" wonders Karma. "Even Linga's bapu is not here. But there's Oonga's bapu. But Hemla's? He promised Bapu he'd be here!"

Karma counts... one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight...

"Twenty-three?!" Karma is horrified. "Only twenty-three bapus? How will only twenty-three bapus save our fields from the factory babus?"

A big car comes and stops near the 'Venus Steel' board. Nobody gets off. Even the windows stay closed. They are tinted dark. But Karma can make out two shapes inside, in the back seat. A truck approaches. It's full of policewalas. "How smart they look in that green uniform," thinks Karma. "I will tell Bapu tonight that I want to be a policewala when I grow up."

"Arrey, why are they pointing their guns at our bapus?" Karma runs towards them to stop them. He shouts at them. He tells them that that man with the magic shield is his Bapu. That he painted those words on his Bapu's magic shield. That those words are in Hindi, our national language. That when translated in English they mean "This... land... is... ours."

One of them pushes little Karma to the side. His hand is so strong Karma gets scared. Karma stands quietly. He watches them as they gather everyone like goats to be taken for grazing. They put all the bapus into the truck. Bapu looks at Karma from there. He looks helpless. Karma thinks Bapu's also scared.

But the policewalas don't look scared. Policewalas never look scared. Everyone listens to them.

Karma thinks, "Maybe if I become a policewala no one will ever be able to take my land away from me."

KALMU, 13

Kalmu once got drunk on salfi and had a daydream. His back turned into a bow. His fingers became arrows. He pointed his finger at a deer. Bent his back till he could bend it no more. Then he released it. PTTAANNNGG! His finger shot out of his fist.

After today he will never drink again.

The jungle-bhai have taken his bow away. They have put this thing in his hands. They call it a 'rifle'. It is heavy. Like Kalmu's Baba's dead body. The mouth of the rifle is a round hole. "This is where that hot hard metal thing must have come flying out from," thinks Kalmu. The thing that made the hole in his Baba's head.

"I'll do it to that police-lok," thinks Kalmu. "His head won't have a hole in it, it will split open. And then I will wear that hot hard metal thing around my neck."

Kalmu thinks about those two men who came in their big gaadi some years ago. The younger one had said there was metal in the earth under the village. That's when the police-lok too had started coming to their village. The first time they had set fire to it.

Kalmu was very small then.

"Is this what they make out of the metal?" thinks Kalmu. "These hot hard things that make holes in heads?"

Singanna looks at Kalmu. He has no pity in his eyes. In fact he looks into Kalmu. Kalmu likes that. He too doesn't want any pity in his eyes. Not when he is face to face with those police-lok again.

Kalmu doesn't feel small any more.

The jungle-bhai make Kalmu make promises. Kalmu makes them. He will wear any uniform. He will do anything. Not sleep. Not eat meat. Not drink. Not dance the dhimsa. Not get married. Not have children. Not get any more tattoos done. Nothing.

Even though all his friends will be doing all those things somewhere far away someday. Everyone has left the village. Even his Amma. In fact, there's nothing left of the village for anyone to leave any more. At the mouth of the forest stand large machines now, which will soon be digging their earth for that metal. The thought makes Kalmu's eyes wet.

"I can't let my eyes ever get wet again," he tells himself.

He looks up at his sal tree far away, near the village. Even from here in the forest Kalmu can see the motka tied near the top. Even from here he can smell the sap oozing out from the cut in the bark and collecting in the motka.

Even from here he can hear himself scream as they struggled to hold him down. Four of those police-lok.

Weaklings.

"I don't need this rifle," thinks Kalmu. "Those police-lok do."

All he needs is this — this forest. "But will this forest ever be ours again?" he wonders.

Every time Kalmu has these thoughts his eyes get wet. If he drinks a gourdful of salfi right now this feeling will go away, he thinks. But then he looks at Singanna, and Kalmu's eyes don't feel like getting wet any more.

KARMA, 13

The few farmers left have been saying that the land is cursed. They should have sold it to the company all those years ago instead of protesting. This year insects destroyed the crops. Last year it had been a flood.

Karma hadn't even wanted to sow this year. But ever since Bapu went with the policewalas and never returned, the burden of the family had shifted to his small shoulders.

Karma is squatted in his field, digging the dry earth with his nails, angry with himself for not thinking of this earlier, when his Ma calls out for him. "Factory-babu is here. He's asking for you."

This time everyone decided to sell.

Sodi is packing his things. His bapu is taking his family to the city. Linga's bapu has decided to stay. He's been promised a job for him and his son in the factory when it starts. Oonga is angry. He didn't want to give up his land. But his bapu doesn't want to live at the mercy of this land anymore. "Might as well let them have it. What is it doing for us?"

Karma tries to talk to Oonga but his friend's eyes are on fire. That look scares Karma. He leaves Oonga alone.

In fact he leaves everyone alone. His Ma has been working in the factory-babu's office for a year now.

And Karma has been preparing for this day.



The district school is a three-hour walk away. Karma remembers going there to learn Hindi, English, arithmetic and geography many years ago. For the last five years now the school has been a camp. Of the jungle policewalas, the ones in those smart green uniforms who took Bapu away. Everyone fears them. No one ever dare take *them* away. Karma had sworn to become the person whom no one can ever take away. For that he will have to be in that smart green uniform.

For that he will have to go to the same school again. But this time not to study, to train.

The school still has that face of everyone's Bapu — Gandhiji — painted on its wall. Although it has faded now, washed repeatedly by the last five monsoons. Coiled all along the walls is dangerously sharp barbed wire. Gunny sacks of sand, piled like a wall, circle the school. Karma wonders if that's to keep the flooding waters at bay. But then he suddenly spies a rifle sticking out from between them. The wall is for protection, yes. But not from water.

He tries to walk in through the corrugated metal gate, heart thudding, when a strong man with a rifle stops him.

Karma feels a strange excitement when the commander asks him why he wants to join the CRPF. Karma has been rehearsing the answer to this question for years now. Ever

since the last time he saw Bapu, and the first time he saw these policewalas.

"Because I never want to be afraid again," he says.

KALMU AND KARMA, 16

It is a beautiful night. The jungle is humming with a thousand whispers jumping from leaf to leaf. None of them can see the sky. Above their heads is a continuous roof of thick treetops. They have been moving through the region non-stop for three days. All the others have taken breaks but Karma can't. He is the 'scout' on this combing operation, since he is the only CRPF jawaan in the entire troop who knows such jungles so intimately.

Karma can't remember the last time he felt afraid of someone. Ever since he held this rifle, two weeks into his training, he felt indestructible. But sometimes this rifle scares him too. It makes him feel urges. To shoot anyone who upsets him.



Kalmu stops to sniff the air. The only way to defend a jungle is to become one with it.

Just this morning they had got information about the CRPF doing a combing operation deep in the jungle. The police-lok had never dared come this deep inside ever before. This is not a good sign. They must have someone in their

ranks who knew jungles. "How many jungles must be destroyed before they get enough metal?" thinks Kalmu.

Kalmu sniffs again and catches the scent of ammunition now, and... metal. He listens closely to the humming of the trees. The rhythm is punctured by the distant sound of boots softly crunching on dead leaves.

"Tonight we will kill them all," he thinks.



It is a beautiful night. The next morning would be beautiful too. The sun would rise very early. Its light would sparkle like little drops of silver on the jungle stream. It would be the first day of spring, the season when the farmers ready themselves for a new crop.

Two boys, who could have been farmers, are in this jungle now. They both know how beautiful the morning is going to be. But one of them will never get to see it.