

The Calendar Birds

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Boys, sniffed Ankita, wrinkling her pert little nose. Filthy vile creatures, always jumping around in muddy fields and dirty pools and puddles, kicking about footballs in the mud, or climbing up trees and falling down and scraping their knees, or running down the roads at top speed and then colliding with each other or other people, or getting themselves into some sort of scrape or the other, or making a nuisance of themselves in general.

Boys! she snorted. No, there was no question of making friends with those on their estate. Brutish, clumsy young fellows! Just the other day, Milind Gulati tried to drop that nasty toad down her back. What a horrible, slimy, loathsome creature! (She was referring, of course, to that obnoxious Milind here, she clarified, when her father tried to put in a word or two.) And her sister Neha was no better. As much of a tomboy as any Ankita had met, just as bad as her elder brother and his gang of friends.

So, Milind and Neha were out of the question. No making friends with them. Neha was around her age, true; but no, it just wasn't possible. And that portly, dim-witted Karthik Iyer? He was a year younger to her, yes, but he was too much of a bumpkin to make friends with.

'And the other girls here are much older than you,' said her father at last. 'So that leaves no-one else, does it?'

All the other girls were older than her by at least five years, mostly in their teens, and they had no time for a silly nine-year-old girl who still insisted on dressing up her dolls.

The little kiddies were rather nice—she really liked those cuddly babies and the two-to three-year-olds. But it wasn't, as she explained patiently to her father for the third time, possible to 'make friends' with them. They were just too young! Not only could they not make intelligent conversation, they were too ignorant of worldly matters.

Even at school, Ankita didn't yet have a best friend or two; just a handful of other girls with whom she sometimes chatted, that was all. She was known universally as a shy, introverted girl who kept herself to herself.

Mr. Dhumal gave up at last. He couldn't see any way out. His daughter was so stubborn, so pig-headed, that she thought she could decide for herself who she could make friends with, and she would not budge an inch if Mr. Dhumal tried to show her that there were at least some children on the estate

who would bond well with her.

She wouldn't make friends with the Gulati siblings, that was final. And no other nasty boys—no, not even Karthik Iyer. If that meant that she would have to wallow in her loneliness—her so-called loneliness, as she said once again—so be it.

'I'm as fine as I am, Papa. Don't you worry about me,' she said, giving him one of her sweetest smiles.

Mr Keshav Dhumal sighed. 'You're as obstinate as your mother!'

At once he regretted mentioning Chandrika. Ankita looked at him with her tremulous brown eyes, but said nothing. She merely lowered her head. A lump caught in her father's throat, and a pang invaded his ribcage.

Ankita looked, mostly, very much her mother. She had inherited her fine-boned face and lustrous complexion. Her sharp yet gentle features, though, were her father's. She was already a very pretty girl, and would one day blossom into a beauty, like her mother had been. Mr. Dhumal was certain about that.

Chandrika. She of the limpid eyes and bubbling laughter. The house was so silent now, with seven months having passed since her death from malignant malaria at the tea garden in Assam's Margherita.

He sighed heavily, and got up, blinking back the salt in his eyes. Well, he would now have to bring his daughter up all by himself. The trauma of losing her mother at the age of eight, combined with all the trouble of relocating themselves to Bombay, had left her devastated. He could well see that she was rather lonely, but his office duties were too onerous for him to give her much time.

Yes, it was not yet Mumbai then; but still Bombay. Life was still leisurely and placid in this enclave of an old firm established by British industrialists, and now owned by a group of Indian boxwallahs. Polaris Steel, the Calcutta-headquartered engineering company, was the number-one manufacturer of high-grade alloy steels in western India; and its sprawling estate in a suburb of Bombay near Powai Lake, lush with greenery, housed picture-postcard quarters for its staff.

It was just a couple of months since Mr. Dhumal, Ankita's father, had arrived in Bombay and taken up his new job as the estate manager. If it were not for the lush green estate—more of a finca than a campus—it would have been rather difficult for Ankita to adjust to Bombay. Born among the verdant hills of Kasauli, she had spent most of her childhood in the tea gardens of Assam. Unlike the rest of the magnificent metropolis, this finca was a lovely

tranquil oasis in the midst of the noise, and the hustle and bustle, and the pollution of the industrial township that had grown up around the Polaris steel factory on the Bombay–Agra Road. It nestled like an emerald amidst the ugly suburban sprawl. There were small red-roofed houses surrounded by manicured lawns and lovingly maintained gardens. They had a clubhouse for parties, a swimming pool, and a badminton court. Ankita was waiting expectantly for mid-November, when the new lines would be painted and new nets strung up, and they could finally play on it.

But who would Ankita play with? She would have to find some friends for that first!

Her father never allowed her to mix with people from outside the campus. No riff-raff for his precious little daughter, as he said. And so they lived lonely lives in a secluded corner of the estate, in a pretty little bungalow with white picket fences.

And yet, Ankita had really looked forward to living in Bombay, hoping to make new friends and meet interesting people. Ever since her mother's death, she had felt the acid of loneliness gnawing away at her days, and especially her nights. Unbeknownst to her father, she would lie awake in her bed at night, thinking about her mother.

It wasn't as if Ankita didn't know anyone at all there. Among the few grown-ups she had become acquainted with at the estate was an old gardener, whose job was to tend the flower-beds around their bungalow and the guest house. She didn't know his name, but simply addressed him as 'Mali'. She was fond of painting, and she often chatted with him while finishing her watercolours of the nearby groves of mango, peepal and banyan trees. It was from him that she learnt about the different kinds of flowers—the common sunflowers and marigolds and tulips, of course, as well as the exotic petunias and geraniums and begonias.

'I noticed a slight nip in the air early in the morning,' Ankita said to her father one morning at the breakfast table. September was not over yet, and yet the warmth of the morning sunshine was now mellow.

'Yes, there's a new crispness in the morning air, isn't there?' Her father smiled. 'It means that cold weather has arrived.'

'Oh! Is it winter already?'

'Not really. It's still a few weeks away. In any case, Bombay winters are never too cold, but very pleasant.'

She looked across at the couple of sentinels opposite the bungalow, as she did every morning when she drew aside the curtains of her bedroom window. This pair of conifers—Ankita did not know what they were called,

and Mali did not know their names either, but were probably some kind of fern—was to her like a pair of sentries, standing guard on the edges of the lawns of the large guest house. They were not very tall, as trees went; just a couple of hand-lengths higher than Ankita's father, who (as she well knew) was just under six feet. But she always thought they looked very majestic, standing proud and erect next to the rose beds. Each tree had lots of little branches, crowned with olive-green cones and leaves, standing upon a single slim trunk. After the gardeners trimmed them, they resembled a pair of enormous, heavy umbrellas.

But this morning there was a surprise waiting for Ankita. She noticed that the tree on the left had occupants! A pair of small dark birds, no larger than sparrows, was sitting on one of the branches. The girl smiled to herself as she observed their lordly air, and how they were surveying the lawn. She could make them out quite clearly from her window. Ankita wondered if the couple was going to move in permanently into the neighbourhood.

Just at this moment came her father's voice. 'Ankita! Ankita! You'll be late for school! It's six-fifteen already. Hurry up!'

When she returned from school in the afternoon, she noticed that the morning's visitors were now very active indeed. One of them was hopping from branch to branch, carrying bits of grass and straw and hair, and the odd feather or two. It had a funny, endearing way of bobbing its tail and up and down before darting off here and there. She stopped to watch it carry off its trophies to its perch inside the tangled maze of dark brown branches and dark green fronds and needle-shaped leaves. Its companion was assiduously building a nest there, well hidden among the foliage. She wouldn't have noticed the tiny nest if she hadn't looked very carefully for it.

Suddenly one of the little balls of feathers gave a little shriek of delight and dashed off to a corner of the garden. The girl was startled to see a flash of bright orange as it flew off. It came back a few seconds later, triumphantly carrying a little black spider it had seized from under a granite rock. Ankita didn't like spiders at all, and so she was quite glad at its capture. Good riddance, she said to herself, and turned into the gate of their bungalow.

Ankita asked the old Mali about the pair when she met him the next time. 'What are those birds called? Do you think they'll be staying in that tree for good?' she asked, pointing to the evergreen on the left.

The gardener looked up from the bed of nasturtiums he was weeding at the sound of her voice. He peered through his thick lenses at the petite nine-year-old girl, with her quiet serious face and large luminous eyes. 'Eh?'

he asked, cupping his ear with his hand.

‘About those birds—’ said Ankita, pointing to the nest, and repeated her question. Both the birds were very busy indeed, flitting from branch to branch, picking up bits of straw and feathers or attacking the occasional unwary ladybug or earthworm. They were continuously chattering, discussing domestic matters and exchanging notes.

‘Those birds?’ asked the old gardener, in Hindi. ‘Oh yes, they come here every year. I’ve been seeing them for the last three-four years. When it gets cold, they come to stay in Bumbai.’

‘Oh.’ Ankita didn’t know what to say. She had almost no idea at all about migratory birds. ‘Where did they build their nests last time?’ she said after a while.

‘Same tree, same branch.’ The gardener nodded, sagely. ‘Hmmm, and the year before that, and the one before that, too.’ He added, ‘I’ve been here forty years now, and I’ve seen many other birds of that kind—black head and tail, with an orange bottom. Right now, there are one or two pairs on the northern side of the estate as well. Each pair makes its own nest in the same tree every year. Must have paid the rent on the branches in advance, I suppose!’ He chuckled heartily at his own *bon mot*, then turned back to his nasturtiums. ‘They must know how hard it is to find a decent place to rent in Bumbai.’

Ankita was impressed. She looked up with new respect at the little feathered creatures, hopping around their newly constructed quarters in the cradle formed by the branches and fronds of her favourite tree.

That night, before going to sleep, she took a last fond glance at it. All was quiet and peaceful, with an autumn moon shining brightly through shreds of ashen clouds. On the manicured lawn of the guest house, the twin sentinels stood at watch by the gate. The moonlight cast lattices of diffuse shadow and pale silvery light around their feet. She could not make out the nest, containing the sleeping couple, hidden away well inside the rustling fronds.

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Mr. Dhumal threw himself into his new job, and conscientiously toured the estate every morning and evening. Ankita did not see much of her father, and she would have felt very lonely indeed if it were not for the fact that she had at last made a couple of friends at school. These two girls—Meghali Baruah and Tripti Patnaik—were in the same class as she was, and over the weeks the trio became inseparable, sharing their tiffin lunches, bittersweet memories, and little secrets.

She had begun to enjoy their company so much that she didn't realize how quickly the months were passing. Soon the mild, gentle winter of Bombay was over, and it was suddenly late March, getting warmer and warmer. Winters in Bombay are never chilly, and after her experiences of Himachal Pradesh and Assam, she was quite surprised by the evanescence of the season. Still, since the finca was built on a slope of the Sahyadri mountain range, it was a tad colder than the main city itself.

One morning Ankita became aware that she had not noticed the tenants of the tree across their gate for several days. She began to look around for the birds, straining for a glimpse of a bright flash of orange under a black tail and brown wings. She kept her ears open for their pleasant warbling, but all she could catch was the harsh cawing of the ugly crows, the twittering of the ubiquitous sparrows, the whistling of the mynahs. Plain, common birds.

At last Ankita was forced to accept the fact that the visitors had departed. Old Mali, who seemed to be always pottering about in the vicinity, confirmed this when she asked. 'Yes, those birds leave as soon as the sun gets too hot. Can't stand warm weather.'

The wheel of the seasons moved swiftly over Bombay, the delightful spring giving way to the fiery tracks of the summer sun. The weeks passed by, hot and languorous and redolent with mango, frangipani and magnolia blossoms. Then, on the seventh of June, the monsoon arrived, like clockwork; just as Ankita's geography textbook had said it would. The Western Ghats could be seen from the estate, and the girl watched, entranced, as the immense peaks and ridges were gradually dislimned by indigo and ebony thunderclouds. Then the mountains were completely obscured by torrents of silver-blue rain as the monsoon broke over India's western coast. This was her first experience of Bombay's monsoon—and, for her, it was unforgettable.

Soon the rainy season was over as well, and it was autumn once again. Ankita had quite forgotten by now the avian visitors who had come to her neighbourhood exactly year ago. She was now busy with her schoolwork, her friends, and her paintings. In fact, it was while she was sitting with her watercolours in the garden one pleasant Sunday morning, when autumn was seeping into winter, that she caught a glimpse of the birds. They had returned from their summer home and were taking up residence once again at their pied-à-terre in Bombay, and were chirruping in excitement.

It was the very same tree, and, as the gardener had prophesied last year, the very same branch was taken up as the perch. Ankita clapped her

hands in glee and sat down to watch as the couple went about building its new nest.

At lunch she told her father about the tenants in the opposite garden. ‘Look, Papa, how cute those little birds are!’ Mr. Dhumal was interested, and went out to look at them in the evening. He was no longer as glum or saturnine as he had been when he had first arrived in Bombay, though he was still quite introverted. But he did share Ankita’s joy at the domestic activities of their winter neighbours. He said to her, ‘They must be some kind of migratory birds. You know, birds that spend their winters in warm places and then go back to where they were born.’

When his daughter wanted to know more about the pair, Mr. Dhumal promised to fetch a book about them from the library. A few days later he got hold of a colourful tome. ‘This is a book by a famous ornithologist,’ he said to his daughter.

‘What’s an orthino-ornitho-whatsit?’

Mr. Dhumal said, ‘An ornithologist is someone who studies birds.’

In the section on Indian migrants, he found pictures of the very bird Ankita was so curious about. He showed them to her, and then read out the notes on them.

‘These are called Black Redstarts,’ he read out to his daughter. ‘They are a kind of “calendar birds”. They arrive at the same spot very punctually every year—often on the same date. Same feeding territories occupied every winter...often same perches for roosting...return to same localities for breeding in spring...’ Suddenly he sat up straight. ‘Now, this is fascinating. Just listen to this, Anku. Some kinds of black redstarts come all the way from some of the world’s tallest mountains in Nepal and Kashmir. From the snow-capped Himalayas! Now what do you think about that?’

The young girl was thunderstruck. Imagine those little creatures, nearly as small as sparrows, flying all the way from the Himalayas to their garden in Bombay! It was unbelievable! The next time she saw the birds prancing about in the autumn sunshine, she felt a sense of awe, mingled with admiration.

Then, one day, Ankita discovered that the female had laid eggs, and she was entranced. She began observing them every morning, reporting their progress to her father—‘The chicks have hatched!’ and ‘Oh, papa, they’re growing up! Their mother’s feeding them! How cute they are!’ and ‘And now they’re learning to fly!’

Ankita was ten years old now, and thoroughly enjoying her life in Bombay. Time passed quickly, and once again it was spring before she knew

it. Having packed its bags again, winter was sitting in the departure lounge of the airport of the seasons. Only a chill lingered in the air. The wild geese, ducks and cranes had become alert, with the visas of memories stamped on the genetic passports inside their wings activated by the growing warmth of the sun. They would soon begin their northward flights.

Before the month of March was over, Mr. and Mrs. Black Redstart had started readying themselves for the long flight home. They left quietly one day, without any publicity, and Ankita once again realized a little too late that they had vanished. She whispered a goodbye to her avian friends.

This time she promised herself that she would wait for autumn, and welcome the black redstart couple when they would return. She decided that she would find out their nesting place in the tree this time, and make a painting of the birds in their nest.

Just before September, Ankita met the old gardener on the road one morning. He had packed all his meagre belongings into a couple of small bags and was carrying them.

‘Are you going away?’ Ankita said in consternation.

‘Yes,’ replied old Mali. ‘I’m going back to my village in Kumaon. I’ve grown too old for this kind of work.’

She watched him turn the bend and disappear, till only wisps of dust remained as reminders of his departure.

The next day Ankita heard some more upsetting news. Her grandmother and aunt—Mr. Dhumal’s mother and sister—had come to stay with them for a fortnight. She met them after such a long time that she had almost forgotten their faces. At bedtime on the evening they arrived, she caught snatches of the conversation between her father and their visitors from her bedroom. She could only hear a few words properly: ‘leaving Bombay...Ankita’s schooling...Ankita’s mother...boarding school’. When she fell asleep, a cold weight of suspicion had begun seeding itself in her thoughts.

A few days later, after they left, Mr. Dhumal called his daughter to his study and explained to her that he had been asked to leave his job and that he was going to return to his hometown. He explained to her, slowly and carefully, that he had been able to arrange her admission to a boarding school for girls—‘a very prestigious school in Dehradun’—and she should consider herself lucky that she would be joining there from the next session, in January.

‘But I don’t want to go anywhere, papa!’ said Ankita tearfully. ‘I’m

happy here. We're both happy here. I've made lots of friends, and I love this estate, it's so splendid...'

Mr Dhumal sighed. 'Yes, but how can we live here anymore? Don't you see, I've been asked to leave the manager's job. In any case, we'll have to vacate this house by October.'

Ankita gave up—she had to, of course—and began to wonder what the boarding school would be like. She consoled herself that before leaving Bombay she would be able to say goodbye to not only her classmates, but the black redstarts as well. She still thought of them as the first friends she had made in Bombay, and she remembered that they were supposed to come back in September.

Then one afternoon, when autumn was tiptoeing into Bombay, the little girl had a shock. Someone was chopping down the two trees on the lawn! She quickly ran across the road. It was the new gardener, a young man who had come in place of old Mali.

Ankita cried out in despair. 'What are you doing?' The gardener looked down at her, startled. She looked up and saw that he had a sallow face, a scruffy beard, and light, sardonic eyes. He didn't bother to reply and continued to chop. He had already brought down the tree on the right and was now knocking down the trunk of the other.

The girl yelled again. 'No! Stop! What do you think you're doing to the tree?' This time the surly fellow grunted out his answer. 'Can't you see I'm chopping it down?' Then he added, more to himself, 'It'll be much easier to cut the grass on the lawn now, without these blocking the mower. I'll just pull the lawnmower back and forth...'

Ankita said plaintively, 'No! I won't let you do this! Stop!' She desperately hugged the tree—just like the women in the forests of Uttar Pradesh who, unbeknownst to her, had been trying to save their trees by embracing them. They had been trying to stop loggers from felling ancient oaks, teaks, banyans and other trees, as part of what would later become famous as the Chipko movement.

But here, the gardener looked at her as if she was mad. He roughly shoved her aside and continued to chop down the tree. She fell on the ground, sobbing—and then ran off to find her father.

Mr. Dhumal was busy with his paperwork at his office, but listened patiently to what his daughter was saying. His face darkened. 'Look, Anku, there's not much I can do now. The company has a new management now, new owners. They're doing things differently now. The estate itself might well be sold off—who knows what'll happen to it? All these trees, these

flowers, these gardens—in a few months’ time, probably nothing much will remain of them...’

Ankita looked at her father, appalled. She ran away, tears streaming down her face.

The next morning, Ankita felt an aching emptiness within herself when she saw the vacant spots on the lawn, where only a couple of stumps stood instead of the trees.

Just at this point of time, the black redstarts were nearing the end of their long journey. For weeks, they had been travelling, following clear flight paths that had taken them over the foothills of the Himalayas over the dusty plains of northern India. Clock mechanisms inside their tiny brains had helped them fly in tune with the rhythms of daylight, using the sun as a compass. At night they had oriented themselves with the help of star maps, and by following constellations in the night sky, they had pinpointed their positions. Their routes were charted out with the help of familiar landmarks—mountains, rivers, forests, towns. They reached Bombay at last, eager to rest their weary wings on a particular branch of a certain special tree in a suburb of the city.

The next morning Ankita found the black redstart couple disconsolate. They kept hopping around, looking this way and that, arguing and chattering all the time. It seemed as if they could not make up their minds whether they had come to the wrong garden, or whether there was something amiss. Ankita felt like running across the lawn and somehow comforting them—she wanted so much to tell them, ‘Yes, yes, this is the garden you wanted, this was your home. But that wicked bully of a gardener has chopped your tree down.’

The puzzled, unhappy pair spent the rest of the day pecking at the flower beds and the rocky ledges, searching for worms and other titbits, but they were obviously not at all interested in feeding. They kept coming back to where their tree had stood and looked forlornly at the spot, and then at each other.

They flew off sometime after dark. When Ankita woke up, she wondered whether they had shifted to some other tree nearby. She searched carefully for them, but couldn’t find the birds at all. A poignant sense of loss, a vague indefinable sorrow, spread like a dark stain through the fabric of that day.

The Dhumals were going to leave Bombay in less than a week. Their furniture and luggage were packed, and Ankita and her father found themselves very busy indeed. But even then, she would occasionally look out

wistfully at the surrounding gardens, looking for the birds, hoping against hope that the redstarts had come back. But the homeless birds, betrayed at being uprooted, had left the locality for good. They were now busy building their nest elsewhere, quite, quite far away.