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ORANGE

MOON

A NOVEL



SHARAT KUMAR

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A Novel

SHARAT KUMAR



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We love because it is the only true adventure.

~ Nikki Giovanni

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I

Daisies and Daffodils

They spent most of that year building the high road through a narrow gorge in the mountains of North Sikkim. The slopes of the mountain were steep, and to set up their camp, they leveled a plot of land with bulldozers. The river Teesta flowed deep down the valley. During the monsoon months the roar of its swollen, muddy waters reverberated in the gorge. After the monsoon the waters receded, and by the beginning of November the river was a thin, clear blue stream with trout in little pools that formed behind the boulders.

Above the river were terraces planted with paddy. As the evening breeze came up, it filled the camp with the fragrance of paddy. Thickets of bamboo stood alongside the road. A forest of pines covered the higher slopes, and near the top of the mountain were tall deodar trees. With the onset of the monsoon, wild grass covered the innumerable foot trails etched out by shepherds, and it became almost impossible to reach the peak. The forest was a repository of snakes, which emerged from their pits in large numbers during the rains. By the end of November, freshly fallen snow covered the mountaintops. And as the winter advanced, snow

flurries often drifted down to the road. But the snow never settled; it melted soon after it fell.

The perennially snow-covered peaks rose at the far end of the gorge. During the clear days of January and February, the snow against the blue sky was dazzling. The crisp mountain air and the winter sun filled the road builders with energy. And as the clouds began to appear towards the middle of April, there was many a hailstorm. Bears were often seen on the higher slopes, picking strawberries that grew in wild abundance. Daisies, buttercups, and daffodils bloomed during these months, decorating the mountain slopes with their shades and hues.

The gorge was enveloped in mist during the monsoon. Rain fell in torrents and the sound of showers beating on the tin roof resounded through the silence of the night. Stones and boulders rolled down the mountainside, which had been cut by the bulldozers for construction of the road. The unpaved stretches of road turned into pools of mud, which had deep ruts caused by the movement of the convoys of heavy army trucks. Sometimes the trucks got stalled in the slush and blocked the road for days. The camp would then lose contact with the world outside, and its life was restricted to the mist-laden gorge. When the blockage cleared, a long line of trucks crawled up the narrow, winding road, bringing fresh provisions and accumulated mail that cheered everyone's spirits.

Four miles to the north of the camp, the Teesta

vanished behind a bend in the mountain. The river emanated from the Green Lakes that nestled among the summits above the snowline, on the way to the eighteen-thousand-feet-high Donkila Pass on the Tibet border. After the devastating floods of the preceding year, a reconnaissance team of the Assam Rifles took three days to reach the Green Lakes. They reported that a huge mass of ice had broken off from a glacier and slipped into the Green Lakes, causing a twenty-feet-high wave of water to swoop down the Teesta. The floodwaters washed away more than three hundred of the Tibetan men and women building the road. But later in the year, the border war with China broke out, killing a much larger number of soldiers, and by the end of the year no one talked about the three hundred Tibetans washed away in the flood.

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