

A Short Story

The Jatinga Files

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I wish I could turn the clock and bring the wheels of time to a stop. But no...Death has its own designated time and place ... And it was death that was fast approaching for the birds...

It was a cold November night. The sky was covered with dark clouds. There was a thick fog that had enveloped the forest. The beating of drums tore through the silence of the night. The fire lit by the local tribal people brought in a red glow to the dark sky.

The moment of reckoning was coming near. The birds would die tonight....

My name is Dr Jonathan McPherson. People love to call me John. I am an ornithologist by profession. I actually introduce myself as a bird watcher. There are around 3 billion species of birds in the world. Their total number would be somewhere between 100 billion and 400 billion. Some of them fly, some don't. Some of them are very beautiful, some of them extremely ugly, and some are very dangerous. Some of them live on land, some of them keep on flying over the ocean. But many of them are dying... Or getting extinct... And they need help...

'Do you know that sparrows in India are getting endangered?' I was teaching a class of forty students at Mumbai University.

'Sparrows getting endangered?' A male student sitting in the middle row looked surprised. 'I thought sparrows were plentiful in India.'

'No, they will no longer be plentiful. The modern construction is making the task of nesting extremely difficult for sparrows. They are losing their natural habitat. The sparrows are shy birds. They are having great difficulty in gathering food. The radiation from mobile towers are hurting them. They will soon die....'

'Sir, I read somewhere that birds know beforehand when they would die. They start flying very high or go into a hideout. And they perish in the sky or in their hideout. Is it true?' A girl sitting in the front seat asked.

'Oh no, that's all illogical surmise.' I nodded my head. 'It's only human beings who know that death is coming.....'

John, will you be there to hold my hand when I die? Carol had asked me. Yes darling, I'll be always there for you, I told her.

But I was not there when she died !!!

'Sir, do birds commit suicide?' The girl sitting in the first bench asked. She was asking strange questions. And the questions were making me very uncomfortable.

'No, birds do not commit suicide. They might die in accident. But suicide? No. That looks farfetched. The brain of a bird is very small and does not have a neo-cortex like us. So they might have feelings of pain but they are unlikely to commit suicide because of mental anguish !!!' I smiled at the girl who had asked this question.

'Sir, have you heard of Jatinga?'

I literally froze on the ground. It was as if a shockwave had passed through my body.

Did I know Jatinga ?

Oh yes, I knew Jatinga very well. Jatinga was the place where Carol had died !!!

'What is your name? What do you know of Jatinga?' I asked her.

'Sir, my name is Sumedha. Sumedha Saikia. I come from Assam. And Jatinga is the place where birds commit suicide in the months of October and November when the sky is dark and the forests are covered in mist and fog !!!'

John, the sky is dark tonight. A thick fog has enveloped the forest. They have lit the fire. The birds will die tonight. I will have to save them!!!

These were the last words of Carol. And then the phone line got cut off...

I looked at Sumedha. She was tall and fair with a longish face, sharp nose and slit eyes. Her dark hair was arranged in curls. She was good looking. But there was an aura of mystery around her countenance.

‘Sumedha, please meet me in my chamber during the recess hour. I need some information from you that is extremely important.’

I couldn’t concentrate on the class. Somehow I wrapped up the lesson and came back to my room. There were a lot of disturbing thoughts permeating my brain.

It was at 1 o’clock in the afternoon that Sumedha knocked on my door.

‘Come in,’ I said.

She pulled up a chair and sat down in front of me.

‘Sumedha, are you from Jatinga?’ I asked, looking at her face.

‘No Sir, I am from Guwahati. My father is posted in Jatinga. He is the forest ranger of Dima Hasao Forest Range.’

The Dima Hasao Forest Range !!! The Moonless Night. The drumbeats. The thick fog. The birds jumping into the raging fire!!!

‘What do you know about Jatinga, Sumedha?’

‘Sir, Jatinga is 330 km from Guwahati. The closest railway station is Haflong, which is also a prominent hill station in Assam. It lies in the Dima Hasao District, which is home to several tribes like Dimasa, Zeme, Hmar, Kuki, Baithe and Hrangkhwal. The Dima Hasao district has a unique geographical position, being surrounded by the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland and Manipur. If you go there, you will feel as if time has stood still with the oldest culture and traditions being practiced there.

‘Tell me about Jatinga and the birds.’

‘Haflong is a ridge, Jatinga is a valley. Jatinga is about 9 km from Haflong. The roads are not good, very rough hilly terrain meandering through deep jungles. The

suicide of the birds happen particularly on a strip which is 1.5 km long and 200 meters wide. It happens somewhere between August to November. On a dark night when fog, drizzle and south westerly winds come together!!!'

'How do you know so much about Jatinga, Sumedha?'

'My Papa told me. He's enamored with Jatinga. He tells me a lot of stories about Jatinga.'

'Has he ever told you about Ms Caroline McPherson?'

'Yes Sir, he did. She disappeared from the bungalow at Jatinga last year during one of those mysterious nights when the birds die. There were a few bird's feathers on her bed. All of them were smeared with blood.'

'What happened to her, Sumedha?' I asked eagerly. 'What did your father say?'

'My father said she was carried away by a large evil bird. She might not be alive, Sir. Was she your.....'

'She was my wife. And I want to know what happened to her. Can you take me to Jatinga, Sumedha ?'

'Oh yes, Sir, Papa can make all the arrangements.' She was feeling happy that I wanted to go to her place. 'When do you want to go?'

'Tomorrow. And I want you to come with me....'

And so the journey started. Sumedha and me. We took the flight from Mumbai to Guwahati, the capital city of Assam. From Guwahati, we boarded the Kanchenjunga Express at 4.30 in the morning. The train would take us through Chaparmukh, Hojai, Lumding, Hatikhali, Maibang, Wadrenghisa, Daotuhaja, Mahur and Migrenghisa before finally touching the New Haflong Station. It was a distance of 279 kilometres and would take around 7 hours.

We had booked our seats in the Sleeper Class. I didn't want the enclosed air conditioned coupes to destroy the charm of Railway journey. You get the real essence of train journey when the gust of wind caresses your cheek and ruffles your hair. You get to know the real beauty when you can look out of the train window and see the ample greenery and the rising Sun or the setting Sun.

Both of us had got window seats and we were sitting face to face with each other. In the North East, the Sun rises quite early. The train had started at 4.30 in the morning. It was now five o' clock in the watch. I looked outside through the window. The reddish color of the rising Sun had lent an ethereal glow to the outer sky.

Sumedha was sipping tea and reading a novel. I looked at her. She was looking very pretty and vivacious in the morning light. Despite wearing glasses, her eyes were very beautiful. Her locks of hair was carelessly interwoven in waves around her face.

'Sir, did you love your wife?' She must have realized I was staring at her. I felt a bit uncomfortable.

'Yes, very much. We were married for around ten years. Although we did not stay together, our hearts always used to beat for each other.'

'Then why did you not rush to Jatinga last year when you heard that she had mysteriously disappeared?'

I sat in silence for a few moments.

'You want to know the real truth? I was afraid. I was very very scared. I don't have much knowledge about North East. They say it is a land of voodoo and black magic.'

'The people who say so are absolute fools.' Sumedha looked annoyed and angry. 'The North East States have the highest literacy rates. We have matriarchal society here. Women are given due respect. There are no dowry demands or crime against women here. And the people speak very good English.'

The train again let out a whistle. We were about to enter a tunnel. There were several tunnels on the way to Haflong. It was quite mysterious and adventurous.

‘We dislike people from Mainland India. They bring all the polluted thoughts and criminal instincts. They exploit our men and steal our women. And they call us Chinkies when we go to Mainland India.’ There was a feeling of hurt in her voice.

I really enjoyed the train journey from Guwahati to New Haflong. The greenery, the foliage, the tall ranges of Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the deep valleys all were simply mesmerizing. I now understood why Carol loved this place. Even I would love to settle down here.

There was a Xylo SUV waiting for us at New Haflong Station. Sumedha’s father had sent his driver to pick us up from the station. We had to travel another 9 kilometres to reach Jatinga.

The roads were bumpy and meandering through thick forests and dangerous curves. If the driver missed a turn, we would fall fifty feet down into the valley. But Robert was a good driver. He was also a localite.

Our stay was arranged in the forest bungalow. I took a bath, had a light meal and slept the whole afternoon. I was dead tired. When I woke up, it was evening. The Sun was setting in the western horizon. There was a reddish glow in the sky. In the North East, the morning comes quite early and the night also comes very early.

There was a cold breeze blowing. I wrapped a shawl around my body and stood near the window. There was a playground nearby. There were some children playing with bamboo sticks. There was a girl flying a kite.

Sumedha was right. There were still places in India which were untouched by modern civilization. No mobile phones, no video games or play-stations. These children were playing with abandon joy. They did not know the complexities of life.

'Sir, are you lost in your thoughts?'

I turned around. There was Sumedha standing on the door step. She was wearing a white T-shirt with jeans pants. She looked very fresh and vivacious.

'Ah yes.' I replied. 'You know, Sumedha, this is the room where Carol had stayed last year when she disappeared. I perhaps got the last call from her from this room.' I was getting a bit nostalgic.

'Papa is calling you downstairs. He has arranged some tea and snacks for you.'

'Okay, tell him I'm coming in a few minutes.'

Sumedha went away. I changed into shirt, trousers and a woolen sweater. It was getting dark all around. And it was getting cold.

They had arranged chairs and tables on the verandah. There was a dim light that lent a mysterious aura to the environment all around. Sumedha and her father were seated there waiting for me. There was also Robert, the driver, and another man who was tall, fair and handsome with broad shoulders.

'Hi, I am Binod Saikia, Sumedha's father.' The elderly gentleman introduced himself. 'And, this is Mawsalma. He is the local councilor.'

The tall fair man shook hands with me. He had a firm grip. But his looks were strange. Perhaps he did not like me.

'You are a tourist? Come to see the birds committing suicide at night?' He asked me.

'Oh no, he is Ms Caroline's husband.' Sumedha's father replied. 'He came to...'

'Go away, foreigner. There is big danger waiting for you. Your wife.....' His voice was somber and cold as steel.

'Mawsalma, he's my guest.' Binod Saikia interrupted. 'I would request you to be a bit more polite with him.'

'You know, Binod, what happened last year. Why have you allowed him to come here? We can't have any more unfortunate deaths.' He got up angrily and left the guest house.

I looked at Sumedha's father. 'Sir, what happened last year? What happened to my wife?'

Binod Saikia looked very sad. He took a sip of green tea. 'Your wife, Ms Caroline, she wanted to stop this ritual of bird's committing suicide. She wanted all lights to be switched off. She wanted that the fire should not be lit. And the locals were not very happy. They earn a substantial amount through tourism. If the bird's suicide ritual stops, they'll lose the money. '

'What happened to my wife, Mr Saikia? Was she murdered?' I looked into his eyes.

'Yes, I am afraid so. Robert was here that night. Robert, tell Mr John what happened.'

'It was a bird. A very large bird.' Robert was stretching his arms to show how big it could be. 'It carried away Ms Caroline. And the blood smeared feathers were left on her bed.'

'I don't believe this.' I shook my head. 'I want to be there at the watch tower tonight to see what actually happens.'

'I am sorry I cannot give you the permission, Dr John.'

'Papa, you have to. For my sake.' Sumedha pleaded with her dad.

He looked at his daughter and then looked at me. 'Okay, we will go to the watch tower tonight. But let me warn you....there are dangers. Robert, you will carry my gun with you.'

It was twelve o' clock at night....

I wish I could turn the clock and bring the wheels of time to a stop. But no...Death has its own designated time and place ... And it was death that was fast approaching for the birds...

It was a cold November night. The sky was covered with dark clouds. There was a thick fog that had enveloped the forest. The beating of drums tore through the silence of the night. The fire lit by the local tribal people brought in a red glow to the dark sky.

The moment of reckoning was coming near. The birds would die tonight....

And they came in waves.... I have never seen a sight like that. The black bittern, the tiger bittern, the egrets, the sparrows, the pigeons , the doves...The birds were coming like mad apparitions rushing towards their death. They did not have any pattern of flying, they looked like lost sailors and they were jumping into the fire. I adjusted the binocular lenses to have a closer look. It was a sight I had never seen in my life.

We were sitting in the watch tower at Jatinga. It was on the top of a hillock, about fifteen feet above the ground level. Binod Saikia and Sumedha were sitting with me. Robert was sitting a little far away, a 0.30 Winchester Rifle in hand. It was not a modern weapon but could save us from predatory birds. We were sipping coffee to keep ourselves awake.

The night was growing more sinister and dark. There were a lot a flapping of wings and deaths of birds happening around us. I was becoming nauseating for me. Suddenly, Robert came near me and pulled my arm. He pointed his index finger towards a particular direction in the sky.

And then I saw it. It was indeed a large bird. Larger than an eagle or a falcon. It had spread its wings and flying in circles over our head. I froze in terror. Was it going to attack us?

It suddenly swooped down and disappeared into the jungle. And then we heard a shriek. It was a human voice. Someone was dying !!!

All of us climbed down from the tower and ran towards the jungle. Binod Saikia was leading the way with an 8 battery torch in his hand. Robert was running after him, with his gun in his hand. I and Sumedha were following them.

We reached the middle of the forest and saw a macabre sight. The body of Mawsalma was lying on the ground. There was blood oozing from a wound near his heart. It was as if someone had stabbed him with a sharp knife.

Binod checked his pulse and nodded his head. 'No, it's too late. He is dead. We have to inform the police.'

Suddenly there was again bristling among the branches of the trees. And a huge bird swooped down and pierced the heart of Robert with its beak. And then it disappeared into the darkness. Robert fell down on the ground.

It happened so fast that we could hardly react. The legend of the large black bird was true. We saw it kill two people in front of our eyes. We were just dumbfounded by the events that occurred so fast.

'Dad, I think Robert wants to say something.'

Binod rushed towards Robert who was lying on the ground, wreathing in pain. But Robert pointed his fingers towards me.

I came near him. He held my hands in his. 'God bless you, John Sahab, and forgive me because I have told you a big lie. Carol Madam did not disappear. She was murdered. She was killed by me and Mawsalma. We killed her and buried her body under the ground.'

'And the black bird? What about it? We saw it with our own eyes.'

'This was the only bird that Madam could save last year. The bird must have seen us killing Madam and disposing her body. And it came back for revenge this year.'

Robert died in my arms. Mawsalma was also dead. The mass suicide of the birds had also stopped. The fog had cleared, there was now mist covering the leaves and the green grass. The Sun was rising in the east.

Did the birds have brains? I was pretty convinced that that they did not. Their neo-cortex is not developed like us. But what did I see tonight? Carol had saved the black bird before she died. And the bird had come back after one year to take revenge on the people who had killed her.

Nature has its own way of meting out justice. There were tears in my eyes. Sumedha held my hand to comfort me. Slowly, we walked towards the Forest Bungalow. The morning was bright and sunny once gain.

The End