



THE BEST COURT IN THE WORLD

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Aung lives with her father in a lush, hilly district of a coastal division where narrow concrete roads bleed through the green, rising hills, twisting and turning. The vehicles that take those roads, the heads of the passengers, also twist and turn. Like everyone else, they too depend on the hilly forests. The touch of urbanisation isn't tangible here. But it ironically and cruelly lurks in the shadows among the elephants' routes, among the heavenly clouds. They have a communal name and identity to protect. They also have many sets of faces to pose with in front of tourists' cameras for tourism leaflets filled with floral, touristy language.

Like many houses here, Aung's house is also a strong bamboo structure erected at the foot of a hill. A few metres away from the cluster of six such houses, the land drops steeply, exposing a vast, slanted patch of forest, many more similar houses that are down below, and a mob of clouds with caps of hills — sunlight tinged, dark, mid-shade — penetrating their cotton candy bodies. The slanted patch of forest used to be theirs. They would pluck bananas from the trees they planted, rip onions and garlic out of the ground, snip the weeds that grew around the ginger vegetation. But all the plucking and planting at the mercy of their ancestral and rightful land are now relics of the past. They can't unhinge themselves with full force and fly into the pantries of those who owned them.

Twelve years ago, when Aung was five and her mother was still alive, a rubber manufacturing company forcefully snatched the slanting patch of forest from

the villagers. They said they would need the land to bloom a plantation full of rubber trees. Although the concerned villages raised their concerns, those concerns were deemed too minor to acknowledge and too little to disturb a private company's private, important lungs. In exchange of the grabbing, the company built electric fences around the villages so that the wild elephants couldn't ram into the houses too weak for their bodies, trample people under their mud coated feet, and pierce some of them wildly with their ivories. Losing the forest meant a huge loss for the people while building the fences brought a tiny cloud of relief. Even though it was a battle for the elephants that couldn't reproduce after being electrocuted and simply died, posing a threat to their preservation, a task which was left at the mercy of the nature, no one cared. Some had lands to grab and money to make. Some had lands to find and survive. As for the cultivation works and agricultural livelihood of the people, they were given a new land.

But the land is too small for a communal one. It also needs a lot of walking to reach the location.

The stars are scattered in the night sky like hydrogen and helium eyes. Inside the house, the bluebottles buzz in unison, glued to the thin metal surface of the orange-lit bulb dangling over the eating mat. The mat flaunts an elephant face stitched with multi-coloured fabric. Aung brings a pot of rice and keeps it on the elephant face, waiting for her father to come with the smoked salmon. As soon as she opens it, swirling waves of steam emerge and drive the bluebottles away. The bluebottles know that it's dinner

time. They should disturb when the fish is here. And even if they don't succeed, they should feast on the leftovers. Aung's father's eyes indicate that he has succeeded and the smile dancing on his lips indicate that he is happy. The smoked fish are producing sizzling sounds, as though they are still being smoked, but without fire. Aung is impressed seeing the textures on their bodies. The appropriate smudges of coal, the appropriate smudges of brown, and the tail appropriately blackened in a darker shade. Her mouth is watering. This is a ceremonious event since it's the first time she had cooked smoked salmon. Had her mother been alive, she would have clutched her husband in a tight hug. So as for now, she fills in the emptiness left by her mother. She makes him feel loved in his daughter's eyes, which resemble the same shade of black as his wife's and a dark moon. Aung serves white rice on banana leaves and carefully lays one fish over each. *A leafy platform, a white hill slowly breaking at the sides, and a dead salmon king on top.* They begin eating in careful, fish-bone picking silence as the crickets call in the background, just as usual. As soon as they finish dinner, sputtering engine sounds muffle the cricket calls. Aung notices a flashy mechanical light spilling through the little rectangular opening beside the door. It seems as though it is a synced event — the completion of dinner and the arrival of something surprising. With the light, spills a sense of oddity. A sense that asks *why there is a vehicle during this hour.* Her father orders Aung to stay inside as he goes out to check.

Everyone is driven out of their houses by the oddity. Three lean men in

chequered shirts are standing at the centre, one sentinel truck looming in the background. The truck's headlights from behind have rendered them faceless, and the tall trees with bats in deep slumber hanging from their branches like undiscovered nocturnal fruits are visible. One of them reads out an official letter in an unforgiving manner and ends it with a loud statement,

"You have only three days to vacate this land and settle elsewhere. We need this for development purposes."

Aung sees everything through the window. It is a clear manifestation, starkly similar as her known people often discussed, about receiving orders to leave their lands and the costs of defiance, like sustaining machete blows and having houses burned to ashes. As someone living in the district, she's been always aware of things like widespread vandalism, conflicts, and illegal land grabbing against a certain kind. *Her kind.* Maybe her kind is meant to drift like a migratory aerial creature, from one place to another, leaping from comfort to discomfort, good to bad, solvent to poor, with no nest being its home for too long.

The lean chequered men leave in the truck. The mechanical headlights conclude disturbing the trees, its nocturnal fruits, and the night, leaving them in their lightless meditation, the only act of mercy about the whole happening. As the truck blurs into the distance, sending the resting dust flying off the road, made visible by its back lights, Aung catches a glimpse of the back of the truck which reads, "The best court in the world is the human conscience."