

# Ajooba

By  
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No one knew where Water came from. A group of men had come upon Water suddenly one night. At the edge of the settlement, was the nursery that they were trying to develop. It had fruit trees and herbs and many other plants. On the way home, after a very merry marriage party, at the edge of the nursery, some of them had met Water for the first time.

"Kaun hai?" Mahesh Kaka had asked, as Water had unfolded from a dark pool to a flickering flame.

"I am Water!"

"Water! That's your name?"

"Yes sir."

"Are you a traveller?"

"No, I just came in search of a home."

"Where are you from?"

"The river or the rain."

Because most of the group had been in slightly high spirits from all that they had drunk, they heard different things, or heard things they wanted to hear or heard them in a way that they made sense to them. So this is what they heard

"I love to roam..."

"Travelling was a strain..."

"From a village near the river..."

"Want to rest for a while."

It was late into the night and because travellers were few, and they were curious about this new traveller, they asked Water to stay in the nursery.

"Stay here tonight. It is a clear night. Tomorrow we will see."

The next day many more of the men went to meet with Water. Where was Water from - that they already knew. What did Water do?

"I help grow things," was the answer.

"I need a few days rest from my travelling. Can I stay in the nursery?"

They all looked at each other, moving away for a quick discussion.

"Would it be safe to let a complete stranger stay in the settlement?"

Not one person knew anything about this traveller, or how long the stay would be.

"But may not stay for long; what's the harm?"

"If the traveller is happy living in the nursery, it will keep the cows and goats away."

"And in this season when all of us are busy. It's good for us to have a willing caretaker for the nursery."

There were other bubbling suspicions and some reluctance but curiosity and need pushed them to the side.

So at the edge of the Nursery, at the edge of the settlement, Water stayed.

It was at the Nursery that Bali saw Water for the first time. The children were always sent there to get things - a little *jungle tulsi* for scratchy coughs, some *kuwar phatta* to sooth burns; *nirgudi* to ease the pain in the joints of many a grandmother.

Soon they started to go there to play. Water had come with nothing, just a bundle of clothes and a wind flute, which sang when twirled with the movements of the wrist. Was it a stick or a flute, Water never put it to the lips, but it sang. How

Water's body swayed. How beautifully graceful Water looked. Children tried to stay at the Nursery as much as they could. And they were slowly learning something new.

Most people thought Water to be a boy, after all which girl would travel alone like this. Yes he was a boy! The young men came and joked with him like they would with other young men. But children have different eyes. They could never be sure.

Yes, thought Bali, you can never be certain. She felt the same for her sister Chutki, so different from other girls and sometimes the same - sometimes like a boy and sometimes not. What are you today, she felt like asking her many times. She felt the same for Water.

At the Nursery, something strange started to happen. Every plant that Water touched grew with vigour. Many of the shrivelled up plants, Water brought back to life - the *kaala kutij* that Bholi wanted so badly for her dysentery; the *adulsa* that cured coughs and colds, even the highly moody *safed gudhal* bloomed.

In the afternoon when most of the men and women were at work, Water danced in the nursery. And how! It wasn't like they hadn't seen any one like this before. At many of the festivals, many boys dressed as girls and danced the night away. Many times

too, they had seen girls in closed rooms dress up as boys and dance with the other girls, all giggling with secret pleasure. But Water's grace was a spell. So Water found a place in the hearts of the children and some of the adults, with dance.

Others started to find pleasure not in Water's grace but in Water's usefulness. Many would leave their children at the nursery when they had work and couldn't mind the child. Not just children that could walk and talk but even their babies, the ones that could only cry. It was Vaijanti who had discovered Water's special gift with children. On her way to her work, she had stopped at the Nursery hoping she would find her daughter there. It was this daughter's task to look after the baby while Vaijanti worked all day. But Bhawna wasn't there.

Vaijanti fretted, "What to do now?"

She was contemplating walking back home, when Water spoke, "Give her to me. I'll keep her in the shade of the Neem. She will be fine."

"What? I don't think she will stay. Will you be able to manage her?"

"I can try, I'm sure we will both be fine."

Water spoke, not entreatingly, not pressing her too much, just simply. Vaijanti left the baby, not just because of her need, but also because there was something about the way Water asked her. In the afternoon Vaijanti returned to find the baby happily gurgling, in its cloth swing between branches of the Neem tree. Soon this became routine for her and then the others followed.

The older girls too started coming to the Nursery, first to pluck flowers, then to stop and talk to Water, to sing and dance. With Water they went down to the tube well, while they filled water, Water made channels creating angles that would allow water to flow up stream using its own force.

"Look Water is taking out water", they'd shout out to each other. Putting their hands in the running water, "Water! How cool you are," they'd laugh. Throwing it over their bodies, "Water, how silky you feel," they would whisper.

The Nursery with its trees and its herbs was blooming. Not restricted to only growing plants, Water knew just how to use a plant for curing anything. And each time a plant was used and it worked, it seemed that the plant too, would grow stronger. So in the nursery with good fortune and a little extra something, everything flourished - the babies, the plants, the trees and

the children, who had made the Nursery their new school. When Water tended the nursery, weeding out grass, breaking dead leaves, all the while keeping an eye on the babies sleeping under the 'Baby tree'; the children would swing from the low branches of trees, and fire questions at Water.

"Can we make wind flutes like yours, Water?"

"You need a special wood and a special day. Let me find that wood, then we shall wait for the right day. And may be I will."

"Are you boy or girl, Water?"

"I could be whichever I choose,"

"Are you going to marry a girl or boy?" they would ask in chorus.

"Any... Maybe neither", would be the quick reply.

"Arre", they would chorus, "How can that be?"

"Anything can be, if you let it happen. People can be anyway if you let them be."

From the edge of the settlement, the Nursery started to seem like the centre. Women would feed their babies there, then



leaving them there, run back to their chores. Coming back from work people stopped a while too hear the wind flute dancing, drink water, talk for a while before they went on. It gave people a sense of calm. The Nursery seems like a holiday from every day life. It seemed that they could say things, do things that they wouldn't normally do and move on. It wouldn't stay with them. They could leave it at the edge of the settlement.

There was something about Water. Even though Water must have worked hard, what with the herbs, and the plants and the babies, Water never seemed tired. Water made it seem like there was no work in it at all. Maybe that's what the settlement did not see - the work that Water did. The image that stayed in everyone's mind was of Water dancing to the rhythm of the wind flowing from the flute; living in the nursery because they allowed it - a taker of their kindness.

Water continued to swing the wind flute, and what music the flick of wrists, brought. How Water's body swayed with the music. Then the whole settlement could fall in love with Water. Girls would imagine themselves in Water's arms and so could the men. It was ok till they only imagined, and then Raja happened.

A young boy Raja, looked at Water and Water saw him, some sparks flew. Raja and Water began to spend time with each other.

At first people didn't mind. Then when Raja started to refuse girls for marriage, they began to get worried. The marriage season was approaching, and it was time that Raja settled his mind on a girl that he could marry. But no, he wouldn't, and the shamelessness of him, once jokingly he even said that he might run away with Water.

Raja was already on everyone's mind when Bindiya kaki caught her daughter Chandni, mumbling Water's name in her sleep and caressing herself. And even more strange, Chandni talked of Water as a girl. A young woman fantasizing about a strange man was bad enough but about a girl! Things were getting dangerous!

Water from the edge of the Nursery, at the edge of the settlement was slowly starting to seep in.

Every one started to discuss Water, Water and Raja, Chandni and Water. "Water has to go away. Enough is enough!"

"But what's wrong with Water now. When he had stayed and worked in the Nursery no one minded."

"Yes, in a year Water has made the place greener than it ever was. Many flowers to put in our houses, saplings to make our gardens green. Enough medicine to keep the doctors away. Many herbs for many ailments."

"Arre, what worker, what's so difficult in keeping a running Nursery running? That wastrel, never doing a minute's work, we were the ones who gave our land and our hospitality."

"Better the doctor and his fees, than letting this *neem hakeem* poison us."

"But how well Water looked after the babies the children who played there."

"Looked after the children? Spoilt them is what he did. They hardly go to school, spending all that time in the Nursery and the number of questions they ask - 'Why can't I be that?' 'Why can't I be this?' 'How can that be?' 'Why can't this be?'"

"And look at the women, the way they shirked their duties, leaving the children to Water and doing God knows what in their spare time. Had they kept a watch on the children it would not have come to this."

"That scoundrel dancer. Throw Water out."

"We trusted Water. And now we are all set astray."

"Water is freak of nature."

"We should have never let Water come into our lives.

"Should have kept Water at the edge. We have so many things to do, our life is hard, why start this new problem. Tell Water to go."

"It must be that wind stick, that's made us go mad."

"Want to be everything, any thing, that's not possible, is it? To be anyone? To live any way... Too much."

So a spark grew into a forest fire.

Once again like the day Water had come, people of the settlement went to have a talk.

"Water this can not go on. You have to behave one way or the other, are you a woman or man, will you marry a girl or a boy? Tell us!"

Water sat thinking. "I cannot answer questions to which I have no answers. Not in your words. I am a girl while I love Chandni and a boy when I love Raja." Water's voice trembled but the conviction was steady.

"That is not possible. It will be so easy if you turn it around, be a boy for Chandni, or be a girl for Raja. Choose either a girl or a boy from your people and settle down to make a family. Leave ours alone."

"But that is not what they love? Is it?" Waters voice was growing steadier taking strength from conviction.

"My flute, weren't you all surprised when you saw it? Was it a stick or flute you asked? I never put it to my lips, but the kiss of the wind makes it sing. That's what I am. I flow with the wind that kisses me. My family too will be like that, open for winds to make their tunes."

That evening some men met Water at the edge, angry for what Water had brought into their lives.

"We never want to remember that you existed, that we had any thing to do with you. Go away!"

"I will leave if you want. But I can't take with me the past year. That will live with you."

The people remained silent but firm. "Leave now and we will erase any interaction with you from our memories."

"That's what scares you, doesn't it? That you had something to do with me? That in some ways you may doubt yourselves about what you are sure of. And it isn't just about love and about what happens now, is it? It is what may tumble later, isn't it?"

Water's question was answered with a blow, and then some one snapped the flute.

It broke with a single note. And suddenly it became still.

Water went away that same night. Chandni and Raja disappeared too.

The Nursery came back to normal, no longer the flourishing exotic place, but an ordinary garden of plants, some dying and some growing.

A new plant has grown on its own in the Nursery. The flowers of this plant are white as they bloom, by the end of the day they turn pink, and the next day they turn a deep red. The flower dies by the third day.

This plant has sprouted all over, not just in the nursery but in small front gardens, along the road and on empty waste land. People call it Ajooba for the wonder that it is.

The wind flute too, is heard singing in the wind. People don't forget so easily, things that give them pleasure. Heera was the first to make it, then Preetam and then many others followed. Even though the elders break it as soon as they see one, a new one is soon born, in some other hands.

