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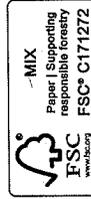
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FUTURES HOPES

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**WALKER
BOOKS**

THE DRONGO'S CALL

by Bijal Vachharajani

"There is sadness in our soil." Amma's words to their neighbour Bedamma last night echoed in Ara's ears as she bent down to pick up the mud. The smell hit her, even before she touched it. Sour and wrong, bitter and hard, as if it had been wrung and left to dry on the clothesline. She let the soil slip between her fingers.

It had been a bad year. One bad year stretching into another, and another. By now their entire farm should have been covered in bright red coffee cherries. But the unseasonal rain had spoiled part of the coffee harvest. First, when the monsoon came, it had barely rained. When it did rain, filling up the thirsty ponds and lakes, it hadn't stopped; it was an unforgiving, endless deluge. Then coffee borer beetles, those horrible selfish pests, had attacked. Ara hated the hairy black insects that looked like Mekke the goat's poop. They sucked the plants dry, leaving nothing for anyone else. *Selfish*. Worse, the farm had no other crops to fall back on now, unlike when Amma was a girl and they grew millets and vegetables.

Ara took a deep breath. The air reeked and stung. The pesticides had at first brought bumper crops and kept the borers away. But as the years passed, they just stopped working. The borers found new ways of fighting the chemicals and returned, stronger than ever.

Ara was sure the sadness had oozed into the soil right around the time Baba had left for the city, to find work there. That day was etched in her mind, as if woodborer beetles had left an imprint of that moment on her. She had thought that her father was going on an adventure to the city where all those shiny films were made. In the beginning, he would send a little money every few months, then that stopped. Amma tried to call him. Again and again the message would play – *The number you are calling is currently switched off, please try again later* – sending shivers down Ara's spine. But trying later did not help.

Ara walked back to their house, to its bright pink walls like the sticky candyfloss she loved eating at the annual fair, and the corrugated sheet roof on which monkeys scampered about. Amma was there too, feeding the chickens. She looked wrung out, her shoulders hunched. Ever since Baba had left, it was as if her face was perpetually folded into a frown, like a closed wallet. An empty, closed wallet. Her thick, beautiful hair was now streaked with grey as if the unseasonal rain clouds had woven into her plait. Ara couldn't remember the last time her mother had let her hair down, or played with her. Now Amma's mood was as unpredictable as the monsoon.

Amma stood up and looked at Ara. "Have you seen

Mekke? That goat of yours has disappeared. Did you leave the gate open again?"

Ara scowled. How did parents never forget one tiny mistake! Two years ago, when Ara was eleven, she had forgotten to lock the gate behind her. All the roosters, hens and chicks had promptly run out and she'd had to spend the evening chasing them back home! Now every time someone forgot to lock the gate, it was Ara's fault.

"I wasn't even here!" Ara said. She started running around their yard, yelling, "Mekke, Mekke." The goat, her best friend, had a habit of running away. Mekke loved to run into the forest and eat the freshly fallen leaves from the jackfruit trees. Who could blame her? There was just the silver oak trees on their farms now; all the other trees had been chopped and sold long ago.

"I will go look for her." Ara ran into their field, her plaits swinging around her like banyan tree roots. Their home was with a cluster of other houses ringed by their coffee fields. Beyond was the forest where bees once swarmed to make honey. And before that was... Oh never mind. Ara pushed the thought of that weird house on the outskirts of the village away.

As she ran, she spotted her second-best friend, Ranga, in his family field right next door. She waved her hands at him, feeling quite like a monkey, and yelled, "Mekke's run away again! Oi, come fast."

The thing about best friends is that they don't ask too many questions when it comes to adventures. Ranga was the same. He abandoned the task of chickoo-picking gleefully, and ran alongside Ara towards the forest.

"What did she do now?" Ranga's plump arms and legs moved in sync with Ara's long ones. His hair kept flopping onto his face.

"She ran away again; she's sulking because I didn't let her eat my Geometry notebook."

"You really should have let her," Ranga said. "You hate Geometry."

"Aiyō, you don't say anything." Ara stuck her tongue out at him. Then she ground to a halt. Ranga bumped into her and the two of them fell down. "She's been running away a lot," Ara said softly. She plucked at a bit of grass and continued, "She comes back with a full belly, like she's eaten an entire mouthful of the moon. I don't understand where she goes and who is feeding her. She's *my* goat!"

Ranga nodded thoughtfully. "You're right, she's finding food somewhere. Good food too. Last time I saw her, she turned her nose up when I offered her kitchen scraps. She never turns her nose up at anything, not even Bedamma's muddy shoes. We have to find out. Come on."

The two of them ran around the village looking in every shed, house and field. Bedamma had not seen the goat. Nor had Kethegowda. Sambagowda just laughed at them and said, "It's a goat, maybe someone ate it up." Ara was not amused.

Finally, they reached the outskirts. "We've looked everywhere," Ranga said, mopping his forehead, which was beaded with sweat. "Even the top of all the trees. There's only one place left."

Ara shook her head. "No way, she wouldn't go there. No one goes there."

"She's a goat; she does not know that." Ranga rolled his eyes, and together they both turned towards the house.

The weird house sat at the edge of the village and the forest. Everyone in the village knew everyone and they knew everything about everyone. But Ara and Ranga knew nothing about the old woman who lived in that weird house.

When Ara had asked Baba about her, she was told to do her homework instead, and Amma would cluck and glare at Baba. But Ranga said that Bedamma said that Kethegowda had told her that Sambagowda had said that the family had a huge fight with the village. It had been when the timber companies first came. The entire village had agreed to fell the trees, except for that family. They had reminded the village elders that they worshipped trees. But times were hard, and everyone else agreed. The family had gone to the courts, stopping the timber company from taking their trees. They won, but the villagers were bitter – the company had promised them more money if all of the trees were sold to them. A raging fight had ensued. After which the family was never spoken about, or invited to any of the village festivities.

The old woman's daughter and son-in-law had moved away when they got married, and she lived alone now. Ara had only seen her from afar. She looked like an old wrinkly apple.

Ara and Ranga crept towards the weird house. A grove of tall trees stood guard outside, shielding it from curious eyes. Just then, she heard a loud bleat. From *inside* the weird house. The two of them stared at each other, eyes wide.

"Mekke!" Ara whispered. "It's her. You were right! She has gone in there! Listen, she's calling to me to rescue her."

"Ummm. How do you know it's Mekke, and how do you know she's asking to be rescued?"

"I know her voice, of course I do." Ara glared at him. "And I know she needs our help."

Ranga didn't look too pleased at the "our". "Look, it's not Mekke. They must have goats. Everyone does. So, let's just go home; it's getting late. She will come back on her own, like she always does."

"I can't. I know Mekke's inside. She's my best friend," Ara said. "I would rescue *you* if you needed rescuing."

"I would never ever need rescuing. Also, who told you to have a goat for a best friend? Such a poochi you are."

"*You* are a poochi. A big fat poochi," Ara hissed back from the corner of her mouth. Poochis were the creepy-crawlies that could be found everywhere, especially in the rainy season. And now, with the non-stop rain, poochis, like the borers, were everywhere. "I'm going in."

"What! No, you can't. No one knows what happens in that house. What if that woman turns you into a poochi? Wait! You're already a poochi, so you can't get turned more into one." Ranga started giggling at his own joke.

Ara ignored him and marched towards the gate, before turning to see if Ranga was following her. But her friend — former friend, clearly — was running furiously in the opposite direction, legs pumping faster than Amma's bicycle. "Traitor," she whispered angrily.

Ara pushed open the gate, and then she forgot

everything — her goat, her fear and her worries. Was this a farm or a forest? Ara craned her neck to look up. Trees everywhere — jamun, jackfruit, mango, banana, ficus of all kinds, old trees, young trees. All native trees. Fat bees buzzed loudly, a comforting sound that used to lull Ara to sleep a long time ago. Then the bees had disappeared from their village, and Ara suddenly wondered if it had something to do with the pesticides.

Alongside the bees, bright red cherries peeped cheekily from every bit of the field. The banyan tree stretched across the farm, its roots digging deep into the earth, holding it together, binding the soil.

Oh, the soil. Ara's feet sank into the earth. It was rich, loamy soft, like their soil used to be.

Ara looked up to the sky; she thought she heard the cry of a crested serpent eagle.

"There's no use looking there."

Ara jumped. A tall girl had come and stood next to her, silent like an owl. Ara didn't even know that someone her age lived here! The first thing that Ara noticed about the girl was her eyes. They were greenish-brown in colour, like bits of candy toffee. The second thing she noticed was that she was holding Mekke. The goat was nestled in her arms, calmly, and snacking on a bunch of fresh leaves. *Traitor*, Ara couldn't help but think.

The girl put down Mekke, who immediately began scampering around the farm, like she had found her happy place. "It's the dodda karali, the racket-tailed drongo." The girl pointed at a ficus tree in front of them. Ara squinted and

peered into it — aha, the songbird's telltale two-tail, which looked like a long moustache, had given him away.

"He mimics everyone. I have counted forty birds. Even the babbler and the woodpecker. But that's not all. One night I ran out thinking there was an owl — turns out it was karali only. He must not have slept that night, just like me! Oh, he also loves to mimic the frog by our river and even the giant flying squirrel."

Right on cue, the drongo let out a trill like the rusty-brown squirrels who lived in the forest. The girl started laughing. Ara looked at her shyly; her laughter was infectious — like the first time that jamuns burst out of their leafy canopies on the tree, full of purple promise and happiness. Ara began to giggle as well.

"Chhaya," the girl said, skipping ahead with Mekke, making her way deeper into the forest-farm, towards their house. "My name is Chhaya."

"I'm Ara." Ara hurried to join her; suddenly she felt an urgent need to see more of this place and this girl, despite herself. As if the giggling had burst through her anxiety.

Chhaya turned, and the two girls smiled at each other, all awkwardness having melted away with the drongo's call. Ara buzzed with questions. But before she could ask anything, Chhaya had one of her own.

"Your friend didn't come with you?" Chhaya asked, with an impish grin on her face. She bent down to pick a fat seed pod, and pocketed it.

Ara went back to feeling awkward. She shook her head silently.

"Though this one didn't mind us, did she?" Chhaya bent down to stroke Mekke gently. "She comes for some soppu. I came here two weeks ago to visit Ajji, and since then she's been visiting me. I don't know how she knew I was here!"

Just then someone came bustling out of the house, calling for Chhaya. It was the old woman. Ara's breath caught. She was meeting her at last. Ara hopped from one foot to the other, feeling squirmy like an earthworm. But one look at Chhaya's grandmother, and she felt at home.

The old woman's eyes shone bright like the coffee cherries, laugh lines that seemed well-earned from lots of use and a voice like home. Her eyes took in Ara and Chhaya together.

But she beamed and held out a banana leaf dotted with sweets. "Take?"

Ara hesitated. Ajji was being so warm; Ara had not expected that. Her hand shot out to take one. Ara loved, *loved* sweets. She loved them more than the first day of the coffee harvest, and even more than the long Saturday that stretches to a lazy Sunday. Ara popped a sweet in her mouth. Oh, that was so good. The jaggery-ghee-coconut sweet tasted like sunshine after a long rainy day. She opened her mouth to say how much she loved it, when Chhaya shushed her.

Hawww, how dare she! But Chhaya put a finger to her lips and turned to look towards the field that melded into the forest. Ara followed her line of gaze and watched open-mouthed as a barking deer walked into the field. Just strolled in like Mekke had. Casually, like he belonged here. Which he did. Barking deer used to be regular visitors to their

village, Amma had said, but ever since the trees had been cut down, and the appearance of the pesticides, they had retreated deeper into the forest.

The deer's sleek neck bent down gracefully, tugging at a tuft of grass. Chewing, as if thoughtfully, the deer looked up and Ara felt he was looking right at her. She had never looked directly into a deer's eyes. They were soft and velvety like their cow Gawri's eyes. But there was something else ... a wildness. A knowing of the forest, of the flowers, the fruits. *We never get deer visitors to our farm. Only creditors, Ara couldn't help but think.*

She blinked; the barking deer vanished, having retreated silently into the foliage, lost in the wilderness of the forest-farm. "He comes here often," said Chhaya. "Once Ajji said an elephant came visiting. I was really upset I missed that. Maybe he will return this year!"

Chhaya kept chattering on, but Ara wasn't listening. She finally gathered up her courage and asked what had been racing through her mind. "Ajji, how is your farm so ... so ... not like a farm? On our farm, coffee leaves are wrinkled like an elephant's skin, our eyes are constantly red from the pesticides - and not a gorgeous red like the setting sun that sets the sky ablaze - and the birds and the bees rarely visit." She stopped suddenly, feeling a bit silly talking like that. But no one laughed at her.

Ajji walked past the tamarind tree, inviting Ara and Chhaya to do the same. "We never changed our methods. We still farm like my grandparents did. And my parents. Our trees - we worship them. They welcome birds and

animals and us; they provide shade to the coffee plants. Even more important now that the summers are so hot and dry. We grow millets and coffee, vegetables and rice. All one big happy family."

"It's called intercropping," Chhaya chimed in.

"Don't show off, Chhaya!" Ajji clucked at her.

"How?" Ara whispered. "Seeds are so expensive."

"I keep my own seeds." Ajji opened the door to a little shed in the forest-farm. Ara slipped in after Chhaya. She could see rows and rows of terracotta pots labelled with seed names in Kannada and English. The room was tiny, but it was full with saplings. And something else: the promise of life. Shoots sprouted from the pots, from the plastic water bottles that tourists visiting the neighbouring resorts used and threw away, from discarded plastic jars - every corner of the shed was bursting with plant babies. A mind-boggling variety of seeds was stored in a motley crew of pots and jars, and natural insecticides were labelled and stored carefully in tubs. Ara's mouth was wide open, taking it all in. Her family shed was full of pesticides, not seeds.

"Ajji doesn't use pesticides," said Chhaya. It was as if she were reading Ara's mind. "Even at our farm, back home, we use the leaf litter from the trees to nourish our plants, instead of fertilizers. See?" Ara looked outside, and noticed plants that attracted insects, keeping them away from the coffee and vegetable plants. Little insect traps stood in different parts of the field.

"We do use them," Ara said sadly. Pesticides had

become a way of life that no one had even thought about changing. Mekke came and rubbed her head against her legs, comforting her.

Ajji nodded. She looked like she was going to say something but changed her mind as just then the sky darkened. "You better get home." She squinted up at the clouds. "It's getting late. Come back another day; eat with us. Wait, I will pack you more sweets. Chhaya, come help me." The two of them disappeared into the house, while Ara knelt next to a sapling, touching its tender leaves wistfully. To her dismay, Ara realized she didn't want to leave the forest-farm. She didn't want to go home: to the worry lines of her Amma and the hollow coffee plants that she felt deep within her ribcage. Just then—

"Ara!"

She froze, her hand still touching the sapling. It was Amma's voice. And it didn't sound too happy. She turned slowly. Amma stood there with Ranga and his sister, Bedamma. Ranga didn't look at all apologetic.

"What are you doing here, Ara?" Amma asked.

"See, I told you, Jyothamma," Ranga said.

Ara swallowed. She tried to smile, but it kept slipping away, just like the soil of their farm that fell through her fingers: dry and joyless. She was in trouble. She would make sure Ranga would be in trouble for tattling on her.

But just then Chhaya slipped inside the shed. She smiled for her. "Is that your amma? You look just like her. I am Chhaya," she said.

Ara held her breath, wondering how Amma would react. Ranga had slipped behind his sister, who was glowering at them.

But Amma walked up to Chhaya without any hesitation. "You are Lakshmiamma's granddaughter," she said softly. For a moment, Ara was surprised by the gentleness in her amma's voice. It had been a while since she had heard that. "I have wanted to say hello for a while, but" — Amma shrugged — "life is busy and the village... They are still angry." She shrugged again as if to say that she was just one woman against an entire village.

Ara was so happy to hear Amma's warm words that she slipped her hand into hers without thinking; it had been a long time since she'd done that; it was warm, rough and familiar. Amma smiled at her.

Ara smiled back and it shone with the joy she felt about what she'd found in this shed. "Amma, see what they are doing. See their nursery." Ara held her breath, waiting for her mother's reaction. Amma bent down to look closely at the saplings. Her anger and weariness seemed to have faded away at the sight of all this new life.

"Oh!" She began muttering the names of the plants under her breath. *Ragi, jola, avare, akki*. She touched the neatly written labels in both English and Kannada — finger millet, sorghum, hyacinth, rice. Ranga had crept forward too and even Bedamma was looking around, though she was rooted to her spot like a jamun tree.

Just then Lakshmiamma came into the shed, with a fat parcel of sweets. She looked at the new visitors and a soft *oh*

escaped her mouth. There was a moment's pause. How would she react?

But Amma went up to her and hugged her. "This is beautiful, Lakshmiamma. I had no idea that you knew magic." She smiled another rare smile. "All this new life. This newness. Perhaps it is time for us all to try something else and put our past differences where they belong. In the past." She stepped outside into the forest-farm and took a deep breath. The drongo called like an owl.

Bedamma followed her, and said curtly, "Shall we go? It's getting late."

"Hush," Amma said. "Just look at all this." She bent down and ran her fingers over the crop.

Something loosened in Ara's heart. "Amma," she said tentatively. "Why doesn't our farm look like this?"

Amma sighed, and leaned back against a champaca tree. "Kanna," she said, using a term of endearment to soften what she was about to say. "Don't worry—"

Ara blinked back angry tears. "Stop telling me not to worry. I am not a child. All right, I am to you. But I see and hear things."

Amma stared at her daughter — she was right. She had grown so much. Too soon. "Oh, Ara. It's all too much. Where do I begin? Should I begin from the time your grandparents decided to sell the trees for timber and plant silver oaks instead? Or when my parents decided to only plant one single cash crop: coffee? Gone were our food crops. I used to love harvesting the pumpkins, picking jamun from the trees." Tears shone in Amma's eyes. But

she didn't stop. It felt like she could not. It was a landslide of words and feelings.

"Then the pesticides made everything worse, but we don't know how to farm without them now. And yet, the borers kept coming, sucking out everything we had. The farm stopped making any money; anything we earned we put back into buying pesticides and seeds. As our harvests failed, we took a loan, then a second. All we were left with was an unforgiving, endless line of credit. At least the land is still ours, but who knows for how long." Amma stopped and looked around her. "But now, I feel, there is another way."

Lakshmiamma smiled but faltered when Bedamma snapped, "The village elders will never allow it. What will they say, about us even coming here? There will be consequences."

Ara felt a bubble of anger inside her. How could Bedamma still talk in such a way, when she knew that they needed this. And Ranga, just standing quietly, biting his fingernails. When Aiji and Chhaya had been so welcoming and warm.

But before she could say anything, Lakshmiamma said proudly, "And what have the elders done for any of us? Where were they when Ara's baba left, Jyothiamma? What about you, Bedamma? Your husband also works in the city, and you manage everything alone. Just like us. We did this alone; mixed cropping, used natural pest control methods. We kept to our ancestors' way of living — growing not just cash crops but food for us. And we never

meant to make the villagers angry. We just loved our trees too much to let them go. And now, in return, they provide shade to our coffee."

"And so many bananas," Chhaya said. "Sakalati, kanule, yelakki, koduga, putta – and those are just the ones I remember."

Bedamma smiled wistfully. "Bananas! I grew up eating so many that my grandparents harvested. We never find them any more."

"That's not all!" Ara spoke up. "They have so many animal visitors here: the dodda karali, deer – and Chhaya told me that once an elephant came to their farm. Tell them na, Chhaya." Before Chhaya could tell them anything, Ara continued excitedly, "It's because their farm is like the forest. Even the animals think that." Ara stopped. She wanted to talk about the light that shone in Chhaya's and Ajji's eyes. But she did not. She glanced at Ranga, who was following the exchange avidly. Instead, she said, "And we can have this too, Amma." Her voice was hesitant but it grew more certain. "The first step will be our own nursery and seed bank. We will grow our own food. We will plant our local trees. That way, we will bring the birds back, and the bees."

"And an elephant," Ranga piped in. He beamed at everyone, even Chhaya. Ara shook her head; the day really had been full of surprises. Who knew just the *idea* of an elephant would win Ranga over!

But Bedamma shook her head. Her plaits flew around her, slapping a fly away. "How will one small nursery help?" she snapped.

Before Ara could say anything, Amma said, "It's a start." Her eyes were shining, but this time with possibilities. She tucked the end of her saree into her waist and began talking animatedly. "We can do this; think about it. We can bring back our native trees. Lakshmiamma will show us how. We can all work together to rejuvenate our soil, with the right plants and organic fertilizers. We can store all our seeds in a seed bank, so we don't have to buy expensive ones from the market. Oh, Ara, I am so excited."

She sprang up. "Bedamma," she went on, "just think: we will bring all the women together, we will form a self-help group. We will start tree plantation drives across the village. We can bring back intercropping, just as our ancestors farmed, and, and—"

"You can sell small batches of coffee to this company in Bengaluru," Chhaya said. "They call it speciality coffee. My parents and Ajji do that."

Ara looked at her mother. Amma's frown was less pronounced, her eyes wide with anticipation. Excitement whizzed through Ara. Today was the day when things would change. It would take time, yes, but it would happen – with a lot of work and a bit of knowledge from their ancestors. And, of course, Ajji and Chhaya. She picked up Mekke and snuggled her close. It was all thanks to Mekke that there was this wisp of change in the air.

Someday, their farm would also look like a forest. The dodda karali would return, as would the deer and the elephant. And maybe Baba would also return from the city. The air would smell like jasmine when white coffee

flowers appeared in their field, guarded by towering fruit trees. It would be filled with the drone of bees, Mekke's bleats and her mother's barely suppressed giggles. And the call of the drongo. Just as happy as their soil now felt.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Ara's village in "The Drongo's Call" is suffering badly from the effects of the climate crisis, with changes in the weather making it increasingly hard for them to grow crops. Moreover, the overuse of fertilizers has meant that pests have become resistant to them. Now, it has become difficult for the village to grow anything at all.

In the story, Chhaya's family use intercropping to keep the soil healthy. Many indigenous communities grow coffee and intercrop it with fruit trees such as banana, jackfruit and lime, as well as spices such as pepper. The inspiration for this story comes from the farmers who grow biodiversity-friendly coffee. It's important to recognize their skills, especially the women who make up forty-three per cent of the global agricultural labour force.

Droughts, wildfires, flooding and soil degradation are already hurting countries in the Global South, even though these countries are by no means the biggest polluters. Countries like China and the United States are actually responsible for the highest carbon emissions, but this has far-reaching effects across the world.