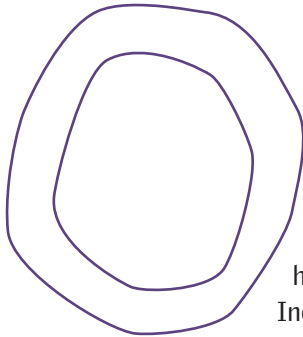


The Pit of Doom

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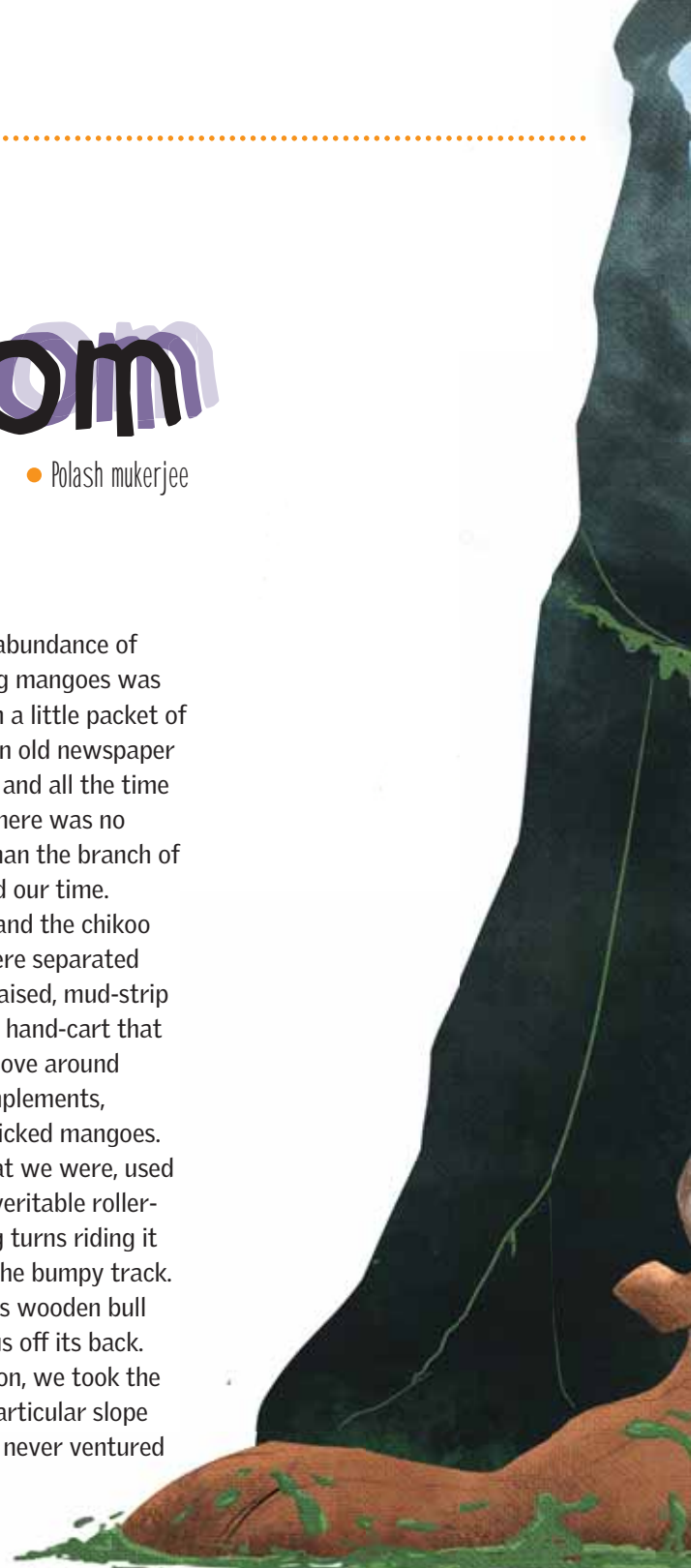
One of my closest friends lived on a farm in a small town hugging the Arabian Sea on the west and the highway connecting India's financial capital to its political capital in the east. The farm was large, with a river flowing by it. There were several plantations, growing mainly mangoes, but also chikoos, jackfruits and pomegranates. There was also a nursery for flowering plants situated within the farm.

We spent a considerable portion of our summer vacations at the farm, often playing amongst the shaded orchards and the river banks. The low branches of the mango

trees and the abundance of large, tempting mangoes was heavenly. With a little packet of salt wrapped in old newspaper in our pockets and all the time in the world, there was no better place than the branch of a tree to spend our time.

The mango and the chikoo plantations were separated by a narrow, raised, mud-strip of a road for a hand-cart that was used to move around agricultural implements, saplings and picked mangoes. We, being what we were, used this cart as a veritable roller-coaster, taking turns riding it up and down the bumpy track. Sometimes this wooden bull would throw us off its back.

One afternoon, we took the cart down a particular slope where we had never ventured





before. I was pushing the cart while my friend rode. We passed below the low and heavily mango-laden branches of the trees, ducking to avoid some stray leaves and pushing harder to go ever faster. We gained momentum with every passing metre. The path ahead dipped and then rose. What lay beyond was not visible from where I was. Curious as a cat, I pushed the cart hard, intending to gain as much momentum as possible so as to make it leap off the mound.

As the cart dipped and then started to climb, my friend began to scream. From his vantage position, he could obviously see something I couldn't. I let go of the cart, thinking the incline would slow it down. My friend, knowing better, leapt off the side of the cart into the grass alongside the track. Slowly, two horns became visible over the horizon of the mound. Then

a face. It was a brown cow staring right in our direction, further down the track. As I climbed further, I saw that there were a total of one more cow and a calf, two facing us and one away, directly in collision course with the now

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runaway cart! There was nothing to be done.

The cow moved, startled by our loud screams and jumped away from the cart. The calf ran behind the cows. The third cow, however, the one facing away from the cart, was caught unaware. The cart hit the cow on its

hind quarters, forcing it down the slope where it disappeared from eyesight.

We galloped after it. There was a large, dark pit, about eight feet in diameter, covered in the shade of chikoo trees. When we peered down the edge, we saw the cow's head looking back at us. The pit was quite deep, and there was no sunlight at the bottom. The cow's legs and lower body was not visible. The pit contained a blackish-green substance, which appeared almost paste-like and thick in consistency. The struggling cow had been smeared with it. The paste had rendered the walls of the pit slippery so the cow's struggle to get out was fruitless, only plastering her body further with the sludge. The cow looked around helplessly, craning its neck, looking for a way out.

By this point, we were absolutely terrified. My friend ran to get help, while all I could do was stand

there and talk to the cow, telling myself more than it that help was on the way. I looked around and spotted a wooden ladder that was tied to the trunk of a nearby tree, but that would be of little help. As the minutes passed, the cow's moos turned from panic to longer tones, almost pleading for help. A tractor was brought to pull the cow out. Thankfully, it was unharmed. I stood by, shaking in fear and wailing at the top of my voice. Even when I returned home that evening, the shock had not left me.

Even after I returned the next week, I was wary of going near the part of the farm where the pit was. For me, the pit with its greenish swamp-like paste was a quick-sand ogre, which even swallowed whole cows. Why did they have to have such a dangerous pit in a farm? Such a dangerous monstrosity did not belong in the farm, with all the mangoes, chikoos and our playground.

The following summer, when we went to play football under the trees, I noticed that the bases of most of the mango trees were covered by the greenish-black monstrosity from the pit. I shivered a little. My friend shrugged off my question. Soon, we encountered a man carrying a bucketful of the same paste. He was

spreading some of it on the base of a mango tree. This time, it was more flaky and drier than I remembered it. Behind him was our trusted handcart, with a heap of the same stuff piled on it. I recoiled in horror. What had happened to our roller coaster!

It was then that my friend's father

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arrived. He told both my friend and me to follow him, and took us to the same horrible pit! I followed him, feeling safer due to his presence. A few men were working near the pit. One of them appeared to be half within the pit! As we moved closer, I saw the wooden ladder that he was using to descend into it. The men were digging out the green stuff and piling it in a heap! Scared, I

asked my friend's father what it was. He replied that it was compost, a natural fertiliser for the trees.

The pit turned out to be a compost pit, where the organic refuse matter, dead plants, saplings, animal waste, spoiled crops and food grains were disposed and decomposed over time. The resulting mixture, my friend's father explained, looked like a greenish-black paste, but was extremely rich in the nutrients required by trees.

I was surprised to know that it was this very substance that was responsible, in part, for all those bowls of aam-ras that I had devoured. So much for the monstrous pit and how it didn't belong in the farm! That evening, after dinner and three delicious bowls of special aam-ras, I went out to the courtyard. To my surprise, there was a large gunny-bag full of the same green compost, resting at the base of a tree. A cow smelt it, searching for food. Finding none, it sauntered off. ☺