After tending the garden, Sujata was tired. She walked toward the gate and sat down in the shade. She had gone to bed late the previous night. She could not have helped it; there were quite a few cakes to bake. These two winter months were always the peak season for cakes. Once winter was over, she received orders only for special occasions, such as birthdays.

I must have grown old, she thought. Her limbs now felt the fatigue of sleepless nights. Her eyes felt heavy, and the lids drooped. But the roses needed tending, for this was also the season of roses.

Many had approached her that morning. Everyone said the same thing, “Nancy! How do you bake such terrific cakes? The sunflower cake, the Taj Mahal cake, the pyramid, the boat, and the teddy bear cakes. They are so beautiful to look at that one hesitates to run a knife through them. Where do you get such wonderful ideas?”

At this, Sujata’s face would light up with a sweet smile. She would feel that those compliments and admiring looks were the real rewards for her labour—one reason why she never bothered to put a fixed price tag on her cakes. The customers paid according to their sweet will. As in the case of any artist, the artistry and attractiveness of her work would clinch the deal.
In this small hill township, everyone understood cake to mean Nancy’s cakes. Young and old, all called her Nancy. This amused Sujata. Nancy was the Goanese lady from whom Sujata had learned the art of baking cakes. Years had passed by; the township had changed, and so had the houses, but Sujata had not forgotten Nancy. She had never imagined that something that she had learned as a hobby would turn out to be a vocation.

She called her cakes “Nancy’s cakes” out of gratitude for her mentor. People had forgotten that she was actually Sujata.

Now, wiping drops of sweat from her brow, she smiled. She opened the steel-coloured postbox at her gate. No, there was no mail for her. The box spoke in a grave voice: “You look for letters as if you receive them daily.”

Sujata smiled, somewhat amused. Dusting the box with her sari end, she said, “Why are you so envious? If nothing else, don’t I get at least three letters every year—on the lovely New Year’s Eve?”

The box did not give up. “Yeah, those letters without the senders’ addresses on them! And yet, your expectations, your love! Huh.”

In the tone of a loser, and yet making one last attempt to win, Sujata retorted, “You are obsessed only with those three letters. Don’t you remember those two years? How many letters I received in those two years from Bombay and from London!”

The box yawned and kept quiet. She was after all, a mere postbox; how could she talk incessantly? The big oven for baking cakes, the huge Victorian clock, and this postbox—these three talked with Sujata, noticing her utter loneliness.

It was a Saturday. The school would close early. All those homebound schoolchildren would come running. “Nancy! Nancy!” they would shout. So many kinds of voices: some shrill, some hoarse, some cuddly, and some sullen. Shrill Voice would say, “Have you made cookies for me?” And Croaking Voice with unkempt hair, “And my cake?” And Shy Cuddly Voice, “O Nancy! I love you so much!” Mint Voice would say, “See, Nancy, if I have a touch of fever!”

And Sullen Voice, “I shall never go to school again! Today, Miss asked me to stand up on the bench. I shall stay with you. I shan’t go home, not even if Papa and Mommy come to take me. Never. I shall bake cakes with you.”
Sujata talked with all of them sympathetically, meeting them at their age, at the same wavelength, tuned to their frequency. Some would go home after their share of cakes and cookies. Their parents, feeling guilty, would pick up those who stayed back in the garden. “Nancy! Our children trouble you a lot.”

“Really? I want to be born again and again in this house, close to this nursery school to be bothered thus.”

What could the parents say? Every day, at the break of day, there would be moonrise at Sujata’s place. Moons rose daily at her window saying, “Nancy! Wake up, Nancy!” If one moon was dressed in red woollens, another wore a rabbit hat. If one had a broken tooth, another’s eyes had traces of sleep in them. Sujata would wake up. They would all enter the garden together, and she would go for a morning walk. On holidays, they would all eat cake. Afterwards, Sujata would remind the moons of their homework. They would return home. Sujata would be all alone again. When she entered her house in silence, the grandfather clock would speak like a patriarch: “Half of the cakes you baked overnight have been eaten up by the kids. What is left to sell? How are you going to manage your household?”

When school was over, Sujata would stand near the window. The children all looked the same in uniform. One child would be left behind. Sujata’s house was above ground level. The child could not climb up the steps. He used crutches. This weak child was not fond of food. Sujata would give him flowers—roses and lotuses. Grateful, he would take Nancy’s hands and place them on his cheeks. “After you told them, the other children, not to snatch away my crutches or try to trip me, they don’t do it anymore. I love you so much, Nancy!” Sujata would look at him, unable to say anything.

New Year’s Eve was three days away. Sujata opened the postbox. No, there was no letter, again. But arrive they must. And soon. They do every year. Sujata knew who they were from, even though there were no addresses of the senders.

For back then, too, it was December. The hill town was in the grip of a severe winter. One night, Sujata’s sleep was suddenly disturbed when she heard a noise in the courtyard behind her house. Getting up, she went and stood near the back door. Ah . . . what terrible pain! Someone had
sprung on her and, with strong and rough hands, shut her mouth up in a vicelike grip. She fell to the floor. Another dragged her into the house. They twisted her head so badly that she could not even breathe properly. Darkness gathered all around her. Then they released her. In the clear light, she saw that they were three. Each held a lethal weapon in his hand in readiness. Sujata stood up in great pain. She was completely soaked in sweat, even in that severe cold. Sujata became angry with herself. Just days earlier, she had been down with typhoid, fighting a lonely battle with the disease. In that acute pain and fever, she had yearned for death. But now that death confronted her, with the murderers pointing their weapons at her, she was in a cold sweat. She was ashamed of herself.

She stood upright, even though in great pain. She observed the three murderers. They were young men in their early twenties. One of them was perhaps even younger. There was a hint of a beard on his chin. Another, with brown hair, was very fair-skinned. The third young man had cruel grey eyes. Snakelike, they hissed, “Why did you open the door? If you had not seen us you would have survived. We are being pursued like mad dogs. We still have a lot of ground to cover, and we must be stealthy. Whoever spies us with our deadly weapons must die, or we shall be captured. Of course, we won’t mind killing you. You already have one foot in the grave.”

Tender Beard was shivering in the cold. “We can’t manage without some tea. But never mind. The state you are in, you cannot make any tea. Show us the kitchen—we shall make some tea ourselves. We can do anything.”

“Oh! Even kill people,” Sujata couldn’t help interjecting.

“What!” With that brutish cry, Cruel Eye gave Sujata a blow. She held her mouth tightly with her hand. Drops of warm blood trickled down from one corner of her lip.

In an irritated tone, Brown Hair said to his companion, “You believe in action even over trifles!”

Sujata went to the washbasin and washed her face. Tender Beard put some water in a saucepan and placed it on the stove. Going into Sujata’s bedroom, the other two asked the woman, “You live alone in this big house? What do you do? What do you do for a living?”

“I bake cakes, do gardening, and love children.”
“Is that all? Can you live on that alone? The old woman is surely mad!”

Tender Beard brought in some tea. Even for Sujata. She brought a plate of cookies she had baked that evening. Cruel Eye looked at the others and put one in his mouth. Pointing at the photograph of a young man on the wall, Brown Hair asked, “Who is that?”

Sujata put aside the tea and got up. Cleaning the already clean and lovely picture frame again with her sari, she stood there. “This is the photograph of an emissary of God, a doctor by profession.” She kept standing there. The murderers saw that her age was slipping out of her body like a tree shedding its bark. Now she looked like a young girl, a bewitched doe in an evergreen forest. She went on and on, as if soliloquizing. “Many years ago, while driving past this town, he met with a minor accident. He stayed at my place for three days. After that, he went to London, where he used to write to me regularly. We were very young then.”

“You didn’t marry him?”

“One needs qualities of the highest order to deserve a marriage with the emissary of God.”

Sujata had not taken her eyes off the photograph even for a moment since picking it up. She was mesmerized. Tender Beard said, “You must have been very beautiful then.”

“I am beautiful even now. See, I still have such a big mirror. I see myself only in it.”

Sujata cackled at her own joke. The sound of her laughter in the dead of night alarmed the murderers. Instantaneously, their hands reached for their weapons. One said in an unruffled voice, “We cannot defy party orders. Whoever gets to see us must die. We have no other option. You will have to die. You must think that we have helped you out of the loneliness of your old age. Now tell us, this being your last night, how do you feel? What thoughts come to your mind?”

“Why does that matter to you?”

“Because, in our chosen life of terrorism, death stalks us. That is why we are curious to know how it is with you.”

Sujata sat on a deck chair. At the mention of death, a strange sensation ran through her body. Irritated with herself, she sat upright. Even so, she gave out an involuntary sigh. She said, “There is a rare tree in my garden.

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that is the only one of its kind in this town. It needs watering every day. It will die without water from tomorrow onwards. A little boy has his birthday tomorrow—I have baked for him the cake of his choice. Tomorrow, he will not be able to take it. I would have got that grandfather clock overhauled—now that will be impossible.

“I had never imagined death would come to me like this. I had imagined I would be working in the garden. A handsome man would open the gate and come in. Smiling gently, he would say, ‘Come. It is time for you to go.’ Suddenly, pain would cease; I would die with soil in my hands. In my last breath, there would be the fragrance of that soil.”

All were silent when she finished. Then Soft Beard pointed to the picture on the wall and asked, “Who is that?”

Sujata’s face brightened. “Is he not the Pied Piper of Hamelin?” she said. “You must have read that in your schoolbooks long ago. You may have forgotten by now. How would you remember these things after taking to terrorism? This piper freed Hamelin of the mice, but he was not given his due, as the townsfolk had agreed. So he led all the innocent children out of the deceitful town of Hamelin into the hills. Attracted by the music of the piper, the children followed him on their own. None of the parents could stop them from going. The pipe has always been so enchanting.”

The three continued to look at the picture; the day was about to break. Brown Hair said, “You must be thinking badly of us.”

Sujata smiled faintly. “No. I only wonder how you could turn all the qualities of a soldier into those of terrorists.”

Cruel Eye caught sight of a beautiful butterfly cake. “What a wonderful cake!”

“Hold on! Don’t move an inch!” Sujata shouted in a stern voice. “That is the birthday cake of a child. I will allow no hand that holds a deadly weapon to touch it!” She spoke so loudly that she became breathless. “There is no time. It is almost dawn. But for me, this is the time for moonrise. Finish your work quickly. Kill me fast. Ensure that no violence takes place in the presence of the children. Finish me off before that.”

Sujata stood up fully prepared. Closing her eyes, she prayed to God. Let the boy with crutches be all right. She silently bade goodbye to the wall clock and the poor boy. She waited for the sound of the bullets of the deadly weapons. It was getting late. She opened her eyes and saw that the
three were turning toward the back door. Just then she heard the sound of the front gate opening. The expression on Cruel Eye’s face changed at lightning speed. He reached the window quickly but carefully. Sujata, too, looked toward the gate through the curtains. “This is the time for my moonrise.”

A child was entering through the gate. “Nancy! Nancy! Good morning.” A very healthy child sauntered in. A little girl followed. After them, more and more moons, or maybe would-be-worlds.

Cruel Eyes looked at Sujata. Such bright light fell on her face! He felt as if he had himself been a fugitive, carrying the burden of the deadly weapons on his shoulders and fleeing from place to place for months, one moonless night after another, and at long last, he saw in Sujata’s face a shining full moon. By now, his friends had started calling him from behind. He gave Sujata a look of annoyance, and said, “Do not think that I could not kill you. It was just because the children came in.”

Sujata could not help smiling at this bit of arrogance from the young man. “Take care, boys! I wish you safe passage!”

They must have had a safe passage, because from then on, Sujata received three greeting cards on every New Year’s Eve.

This afternoon, too, Sujata was expectantly waiting for the cards and talking to the postbox. Suddenly, she collapsed. The following day, when the funeral procession started, all the children of the town joined it, ignoring all disapproval by the elders. The funeral procession turned into a victory procession.