



Kaziranga - A horny affair

Pranav Borah

Get ready for a roller coaster ride with Vikram thru the wild jungles of Kaziranga National Park and the flooded plains of Majuli, the largest river Island in the world.

Experience the thrill of trailing poachers while the dense forests resonates with gun shots, witness the abysmal deluge of flood at Majuli and the survival struggle of human and animals alike.

Come, get involved in the horny affair.



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Prelude

Night, they say, hides a thousand secrets. The humdrum and the liveliness of the day are gulped and caged in its bosom. The familiar place or the familiar face of the day becomes a mystery in the dark alleys of the night. For some, the night is the outlet of one's creativity and while for some, it is the outlet of the monster lurking inside them with their sinister motives. The false façade of the day is replaced by the evil terrifying face of the night.

An eerie silence had descended over the lush green forests. The night is still. The only sound that resonates through the dense forests is the sound of the crickets and the occasional sound of the herd of deer grazing on the tender dew covered soft grasses. A herd of elephant gallantly walks by. The wailing sound of the crickets rises and falls as the wind keeps blowing every now and then.

From the distance, a rhino slowly keeps walking. With its head bowed down, it stops every now and then to nibble on to the tender grass that lies on its way. It keeps a watchful eye over its baby as it trails behind it. The baby will be a full grown male in a few months.

Suddenly, breaking the silence of the night, a bullet propels out from the barrel of a gun. The herd of deer immediately springs to its feet. The bullet finds its way and hits its target on its head. The rhino falls to the ground, writhing in pain. The baby rhino tries to wake its wounded mother. A second bullet silences the animal. The baby rhino looks on with teary eyes. A group of poachers yank their jigsaw blades and start cutting its horn apart. They cut the horn and tuck it on to their gunny bag and disappear under the thick veil of darkness of the night. The eerie sound descends again.

Welcome to Kaziranga, a world heritage site and the abode of the world famous one-horned rhino.

Human's insatiable greed for its horn is driving the rhino to near extinction. The horn is composed of protein keratin, the substance with

which human nails and hair are composed of. From time immemorial, human have been using the rhino horn for many of their fancies. The horn is used for medicinal purposes in some countries. In most of the South Asian countries, including India, the horn is believed to cure ailments, rheumatism, food poisoning, typhoid, carbuncles, fever to name a few. In some countries, the horn is used to carve out exquisite carvings to be used as decorative items.

The government on their part is trying their best to curb poaching; however, success stories are too few worth mentioning. The big question which strikes the mind is why the government is unable to contain the illegal poaching. A microscopic view reveals startling facts.

The guards are under staffed and are ill equipped. They are equipped with rifles used in the World War II while poachers have modern automatic weapons. The guards are ill equipped, ill paid and equally low on motivation. Moreover, serious financial constraints plague the administration of the world heritage site. It is a David versus a Goliath battle where the Goliath wins every time. The forest officials have been lobbying for automatic AK47 guns; however, the government has been turning a deaf ear.

The guards have never received any special combative training. The annual floods of the Brahmaputra which in daunt the national park every year add more woes to the Rhino and the many wild life. During the floods, the animals in search of "safer" haven venture out to the nearby villages where they become easy prey. The land of the national park is slowly being captured by human settlements. A proposal of aerial surveillance by using unmanned aircraft has been cleared; however, it would be of interest to watch it seeing the light of the day.

Kaziranga is an ideal example of how the greed and insatiable hunger of mankind has led to the near extinction of many wild animals of planet Earth including the one-horned Rhino. As you read this, somewhere in the wilderness of Kaziranga, a rhino is being killed and a baby rhino might be grieving over the body of its dead mother.

Chapter I

The traffic at the inner Connaught circle was quite sparse as compared to other busy weekdays. Connaught place houses the corporate offices of many of the country's leading business establishments. However, today being a Saturday, most of the plush offices are closed. I maneuvered my sleek sedan and took the U turn towards "Spice Media" office. The morning sunlight reflected angrily from the huge shiny glasses of the Jeevan Bharati building. I peered through my wayfarers at the sunlight soaked building.

The building had been testimony to my journey in this city till now. I recalled the many evenings that I had spent staring at the glittering glass walls of the building, sometimes admiring, sometimes cursing and sometimes ruing at my fate. Those were the days, I thought. Yes, those were the days when I dreamt of making it big someday and of being filthy rich while munching a vegetable patty and then filling my half filled stomach with the *machine ka thanda paani*. Was it 50 paisa or a rupee then, I thought? It must have been 50 paisa.

I came to the capital city much against my parent's wishes. My mother mellowed down the morning I was leaving, however, father was as adamant as he was always. Being a school teacher, he wanted me to complete my studies and then prepare for the civil service exams. "At least you will not starve to death" he once said over dinner. I lowered my head and kept on nibbling on to the dinner. Another one of his prophetic sermon, I thought.

"My students are collectors, officers and a few of them are even serving as deputy commissioners and my son wants to be a journalist" he said angrily. "All through our life, your mother and I had compromised and sacrificed a lot so that you do not have to do the same in life" he carried on his verbal tirade.

I nonchalantly pulled the next *roti* from the casserole, as if he didn't exist there. The casserole had long ceased to keep the *rotis* warm but mother still used it and father surprisingly still found the *rotis* warm. I put down the lid and noticed a few pieces of stray yellow *dal* from the lunch sticking on to it adamantly.

Mother had lost more of her vision after her cataract operation in last year's eye camp. I suggested father that we should operate her cataract at the nearby Shankar Netralaya. "Those doctors out there are bloody cheaters", father said while flipping the pages of the Navbharat Times, his legs spread on the verandah. "Chaturvedi's son is a surgeon in that hospital. His father tried to bribe me once to pass him in the examination. If a guy like him is serving as a doctor, God save the patients then" he said without looking up from what he was reading. "I have decided. Next month, the local youth club is organizing a free eye camp. The best doctors come to these eye camps." "But father..." I protested. He thrust out his hand at my face and said, "I know better than you".

"Look around the house, will you?" father said as he waved his skinny thin arm around. "The roof had been leaking since the last rains, the bathroom door will come off any day and I can't remember when the house was last painted. We had compromised on everything in life so that we can give you a good education but you care nothing about it and want to be a goddamn newspaper boy."

"Not a newspaper boy father, a journalist", I corrected him tersely. "One and the same thing", said he between clenched teeth. "Besides a two times meal, what have you given us with your mere income of a school master?" I retorted angrily. He glared at me. His eyes shot blood red in anger. Those eyes had scared me in numerous occasions earlier, but not anymore.

"So, this is the way you will talk to your father now?" he shouted. "Enough of your lectures" I grumpily pushed the dinner plate, washed my hands and slammed the door behind me with a deafening noise. The noise resonated through the almost empty house. "Break everything and

kill us both, will you?" he shouted behind my back. "All because of you" I heard him shout at mother. Poor mother, she has to silently bear his every venom filled word.

The truth is always bitter, I thought as I walked down the half lit alley in front of our house. Except for Col. Saxena' elegant bungalow, the area was always dark. A few stray dogs were barking at a cow which was busy scouting for food inside the garbage bin. A foul stench filled the air as I passed by the overflowing municipality garbage bin. I held my breath and walked briskly. I saw Col. Saxena park his shiny white car inside the garage. His buxom teenage daughter was strolling in the manicured garden in front of the bungalow with her ugly Pomeranian in tow. This is what is called life. Wishes need riches, and riches can make all the wishes, I thought as I walked past the bungalow.

I walked past the "Body Temple" gym that had recently opened. "Yaar, it is a unisex gym" I remember one of my cricket mate say excitedly while we were returning from the coaching centre. "Really?" I asked, my mind filling up with wild fantasies. "Imagine, running on a treadmill besides a sweaty female or lifting dumbbells besides a curvy figure" he said making his eyes wide. "Wow" I said as I imagined myself. Within a week, the entire cricket team joined the gym. Later on, we found that the only curvy female in the gym was our neighbor Verma aunty whose XXL figure replaced the treadmill in two months' time.

It is not that I always wanted to be a journalist. When Rakesh Sharma went to space, I wanted to be an astronaut, when Sachin Tendulkar debuted, I yearned to be a cricketer and when Harshad Mehta made headlines, I dabbled with the idea of becoming a stockbroker. "Could you not keep your mouth shut?" hissed Rajesh angrily as we left the principal's office. "I saw three of you stealing Asif's Tiffin. I could not lie to the principal", I protested. "Okay, accepted that we stole his Tiffin but he was asking the entire class whether anyone saw us stealing. He did not ask particularly only you. Why did you have to open your bloody mouth?" said he.

"I said the truth, I cannot lie to anyone" "*Saale*, are you a journalist that you have to speak the truth every time?" said the others as they shoved me around. On the way back home, I thought "Is this all that is required to be a journalist? This is easy, just speak the truth".

After a lot of persuasion, father somewhat softened. I saw mother wipe her tears with the end of her amber colored sari as I was packing the satchel that I had borrowed from our neighbor. She was standing behind me, her one hand holding the door and the other holding the end of her sari. I felt a tinge of sadness deep within. "Take this along, you might need them" she said as she pushed five currency notes of a hundred denominations. I pushed the notes under the back pocket of the jeans and pulled the bag over my shoulder. "Don't worry if you fail. I have already spoken to Professor Dinanath. There is a vacancy at the provincial school for a Hindi teacher" said father. I shuddered at the words while standing at the railway station on that rainy damp morning.

I envisioned myself entering the pale, rickety worn out class room of the Provincial school with a bunch of noisy children throwing paper planes and chalk at each other. I came back to the present with a shock when the train blew its loud whistle. I quickly touched my parents' feet and hurriedly walked up the steps of the train.

Chapter II

I stopped the car at the boom barrier and flashed my identity card. The guard looked at the card and then at me. He flashed a knowing smile and raised the barrier. I maneuvered the car into the underground parking lot of the building. The parking lot was empty except for a red shiny Range Rover, my boss Mr. Thapar's Range Rover. I looked at it enviously as I auto locked my car. I looked at my wrist watch and started taking long strides. Mr. Thapar's abhorrence for late comers is well known and I did not want to be in his hate list.

At six feet and two inches and with a muscular gym toned body, I could pass away as a model of any of the fashion magazines. I was aware that

my innocent boyish look and the dimple on my right cheek made the fair sex swoon over me at office. Yet, I feigned ignorance for my heart beat only for one, Sonia Razdan. We met at a common friend's party a few years ago. Both of us are ambitious, young and share a common zeal to make it big in life. All these years, she had been my pillar of strength and supporting me whenever I needed her. Although my father does not chide me anymore, still we do not share a great father son rapport. Sonia knows everything about my family. Having lost both her parents at an early age, she grew more attached to me.

I looked at my reflection against the shiny aluminum walls of the lift as I pressed the button to the 14th floor of Magnum Towers. I leisurely ran my hand over the thick crop of stubble on my cheeks as the lift speeded up. It made a soft sound as it stopped. I stepped out of the lift and strode towards the entrance. I made a cursory smile at Tara, the new receptionist, as I pushed the sliding glass door. She was wearing a white skirt and a matching peach-colored silk blouse, cut low enough to emphasize the swell on her breasts. I wondered from where Thapar cherry picked his receptionists.

The opulent office was almost empty. The hall way was dimly lit. Two of the office boys were sitting near the coffee machine sipping hot coffee and ogling at Tara. I cleared my throat as I walked past them. They immediately stopped ogling and started talking animatedly. "Bloody nymphomaniacs" I said under my breath.

What can be so important that he could not discuss over the phone, I thought. Of all the bosses in my career till now, Mr. Thapar had been the most unpredictable one. I clearly remembered our first meeting. It was a cold foggy morning in the month of December. I was having a runny nose. My nose had become red like that of a circus clown as I kept on sneezing intermittently. It worsened as I entered Mr. Thapar's plush cabin. The room was moderately warm.

He was standing in his customary position, leaning against the glass wall at one end of the room. His cabin overlooked the Regal cinema below.

After the formalities, he asked all of a sudden, "Would you like to go on a vacation?" The thought of a company paid vacation seemed tempting enough that morning. My mind was racing between Melbourne where we had recently opened an office and Bussan where the International Film Festival is scheduled next week. Images of foreign shores started to dance in front of my eyes.

I felt like kissing him. It lifted my damp spirit and miraculously, my sneezing stopped. Very expectantly I said in a low voice, "Sure boss". "Great" said he. He pushed an envelope towards me. "When do I have to leave?" I asked with a saccharine coated voice. He took a sip of the hot coffee, the vapors from the piping hot coffee sticking on to his eyeglasses. He looked at me through the glazed glasses and said, "Anytime you want. In fact, you can move in the next one hour. The next train leaves at around 2 O'clock in the afternoon".

"What? Which train boss?" I asked in disbelief. "The Duroto Train to Kolkata" said he. "Where am I going to boss?" I asked my voice barely audible by now. "Have you heard of a place called NJP?" he asked, putting down the cup of coffee. Where the hell is that, I thought. All that I could manage was a blank stare. "It is New Jalpaiguri at West Bengal. The annual meeting of the Eastern Railway is scheduled there. You will have to interview the general manager". Suddenly my day dream broke into a million pieces. I felt like grabbing him by the neck, choke him to death and fling him out of the glass window.

Later on when I narrated the incident to Sex Ray Daljit, he burst out laughing. "KLPD" he shouted. "On the beaches with the bitches at Melbourne, ha ha ha". "Yeah, laugh at my expense, buddy. Every dog has his day" I said as I tried my best to nurse the wound. "Maybe, but today, you are the dog," Daljit said as he spread his arms over my shoulder. "Chal, let's have a *sutta*" he said. There is an interesting incident about how Daljit came to be known as Sex Ray Daljit.

He is a *sardar* from the hinterland of Shillong. Barring the surname 'Singh', there is nothing which hints him to be a *sardar*. The meek *sardar*

with facial hair that resembles more of patchwork than actual beard fell in love with a true *sikhni*. Her father, Dr. Gurpreet Singh, could never stand him. He got her engaged to a blue eyed *sardar* from Canada. He begged and even fell on his feet for her.

"I better keep my daughter unmarried for life than to get her married to you' he said and kicked him out. On the wedding night, after the *baraat* had arrived, a drunken Daljit scaled the high wall of Dr.Gurpreet Singh's clinic and added an "S" on his clinic's sign board. In the morning, all the neighbors and by mid day, the whole town was talking of "Dr. Gurpreet Singh's SEX Ray clinic". The furious doctor tried to find Daljit but it was too late. By then, he was on the Delhi bound Northeast express.

I hope it is not like the NJP episode, I thought as I knocked softly on the glass door of the cabin. "Come in, Vikram" boomed Mr.Thapar's voice from the other end of the room. I walked through the coffee colored carpeted floor. He looked younger in the navy blue track suit, though his beer belly protruded out like an overblown balloon. The fat of his body had reached his neck and it appeared as if his bald head, with large lips and bulging eyes were balanced on his shoulders. The bushy eyebrows struck out from the edges of his thick black framed spectacles. I shook hands with him and gently pulled a chair.

I looked at him for any clue but his poker face conveyed no emotions. He had been a maverick journalist, in fact, a photo journalist during his earlier days. During the 1984 riots, he was chased by a group of men at the Kingsway Camp at North Delhi while he was shooting them while they went on with their rampage. He was chased all the way towards the university road and just when he thought he had lost them, he felt a sharp pain on his back. He fell flat on his face. The group started beating him with hockey sticks. Had it not been for the patrolling PCR van, he would have been dead that day. He had a few broken ribs and was admitted at the Ram Manohar Lohia hospital for two weeks. He still walks with a limp, a souvenir of those days.

“How is it going, Vikram?” he asked in his deep coarse voice. “Everything is fine, sir. Thanks for asking”, I replied, a thousand thoughts playing at the back of my mind. He raised his eyebrows and asked, “Tea or Coffee?” Now this is serious stuff, I thought. Never had he been so kind to me. I felt like the scapegoat who is fed and fattened weeks before the *Bakri Idd*. Before I could reply, he poured out a cup of tea and stretched his hand towards me. I gingerly took a sip of the black tea and looked at him earnestly.

He got up from his leather covered chair and stood beside the glass wall, his back turned towards me. He pulled a cigar and toyed with it. “You must be wondering why I called you so urgently, right?” he asked. I gave a blank stupid look. “We have a situation. Vikas Sehgal was supposed to go to the Northeast but unluckily, he met with an accident and has fractured his leg. Poor fellow, the doctor have advised him bed rest for a month” he said, his back still turned towards me. “Nothing new in this, but the problem is that I have already given my commitment to the Production Head and he will never accept anything negative now. I called you as you are the last resort for I know, you are the only one who can do it”, said Mr. Thapar ruefully.

Bloody Thapar, you should have been at Bollywood, I thought. “It is only a matter of a week. You just got to go there, take photographs, make a report on the flood situation out there and return back” his voice changing to a low pitch as he tried to sound the affair as casual as possible. I let out the choicest of expletives in my mind, covering his entire family predominantly his mother and his sister.

I recalled the assignment to Diglipur, a sleepy Bengali town, 300 kms from Port Blair. My eccentric boss heard about the town from God knows where and his interest increased when he came to know about the pains the people undertake in celebrating Durga Puja in the midst of the Indian Ocean. After I had reached the island, it kept on raining incessantly. I was trapped in the island, at the mercy of nature for the next three days. I run out of conjectures in figuring out what kind of sadistic pleasure he derives by sending me to such unheard places.

I shifted my weight and asked, "Where exactly would I have to go to?" By now, I had resigned to my fate. "There is an island named Majuli in the midst of the Brahmaputra River and the other place, I think you must have heard of, is Kaziranga" Mr. Thapar said, a trace of a faint smile appearing on his lips as he spoke. "Yes, I have heard about it. Kaziranga is the only place in the world where the one horned rhinoceros is found", I said.

"Great, you seem to know the place" Mr. Thapar said as he rubbed his hands excitedly. "Every year, the Brahmaputra River floods both Majuli and Kaziranga leaving life in jeopardy for human and animals alike. I want you to bring the first hand information from both the places. I want emotion, drama so that the audiences are glued on to their television sets, their hearts pouring out to the innocent victims and their minds mystified by the wrath of nature. I am sure you will be able to bring out the tragedy, the sufferings and the helplessness and lay it bare in front of the civilized world. You are getting it, right?" he said with a wicked smile plastered on his face.

"I sure will boss" I said with a voice that was intended to sound excited but it only ended in a soft whisper. "And I do remember your request for an internal transfer to Mumbai; you will receive the confirmation mail once you are back" he said as he stopped pacing around and stood behind me. I had bitten this bait a year back, I thought. I felt an urge of swinging my arm around and plant a jaw breaking blow on his shitty face. I took a deep breath and said, "Boss, I have completed five years over here and the transfer has been long due."

"So what? You think that just because you have completed five years makes you eligible for the next level?" said he. His voice boomed around the room. He set down on the sofa. "Look around you Vikram. There are people around here who have completed ten to twelve years but they are still slogging their asses where they had started. You should consider yourself lucky that you are getting assignments that make others envious." I clenched my fist under the table and tried to control my boiling temper. "This is the fault with your generation. You want everything fast. Just like this", he said snapping his fingers.

“Life is not like an instant Maggie noodle. You need to prove your mettle”, he said in a changed demeanor quite contrary to what it was a few minutes ago. “I understand sir” I said trying to sound as humble as I can. “Good, this is one quality of you which I admire a lot. Mark my words. This attitude of yours will take you places” said he, “you understand things pretty fast”. I could feel the intended sarcasm in his words. “Okay, let’s get to business. Your point of contact over there will be a person named Mr. Payeng. He will assist you in everything over there. He is quite a helpful guy” said he as he dialed a number. He handed the phone to me and said, “He is on the line, have a word with him.”

He thrust the receiver towards me. I reluctantly took the receiver. The guy sounded a jolly fellow although he spoke in broken Hindi. “Very well then, before leaving, please meet Tara. She will help you with the air tickets”, he said. As I exited from the room, I felt like a volcano, ready to burst out my anger at any moment. That was easy, thought Mr. Thapar as he set down leisurely on the chair. He pulled out a cigar from the leather case.

The moment I stepped out of the cabin, I dialed Sonia’s number. I kept on listening as the phone rang and stopped. I gritted my teeth in anger and redialed the number. Where the hell is she, I thought. Just as I was about to disconnect, she picked up the call. “Hello” I heard her soft voice at the other end. “I am going to kill this bloody bastard someday. What does he think of himself? Am I his slave?” I burst out.

“Calm down. What happened?” she said. “Calm down and let him keep on screwing my happiness? Bloody pigheaded rascal. Once I get a better offer, I will spit on his shitty face and kick this bloody job” I shouted at the top of my voice. My voice echoed in the empty parking lot. “So, Thapar is at it again? What is he up to this time?” she asked compassionately.

I ran my hand through my hair and stopped it at the nape of the neck. “He is sending me to the flood ravaged areas of Assam, can you beat that?” I said, almost shouting out the words. There was a brief silence at the other end. She took a breath and said, “Look, these things are a part of professional life. This is just the beginning. You will have to overcome

many more hurdles in life. Take this as a challenge". "Are you Thapar's girlfriend or mine?" I asked sounding irritated. I heard laughter at the other end, "Darling, of course yours". How long will you have to be there?' she asked.

"For a week" I said ruefully. "Don't worry; these seven days will pass away in a jiffy. Just make sure that you are back at Delhi by next weekend lest you miss the meeting with my uncle. You know how hard it was to make him agree for this meeting". "Hmm. Don't worry, I will not miss it".

"I got a call from the promoter at Mumbai today. I am planning to fly to Mumbai and finalize the deal this time. You don't worry; everything will be a cakewalk for you. I trust you", she said and disconnected the call. By now, my breathing had become normal and the anger had vanished. I leaned against the car. Unlike me, she is so matured and practical. What I will do without her, I thought as I sat down and started the engine. The phone beeped. "Meet you in the evening, at your place ;-)", Sonia had messaged. "I will be waiting", I replied back.

Once back home, I pulled out a chilled can of draught beer. I set down on the bean bag and took a sip of the beer. I did not gulp it down but let the beer tickle all my every taste buds. I looked out of the Victorian window. Far away in the sky, the evening sun was slowly setting down. The sky was changing its hue from blue to orange red. The sunlight passed through the transparent window and the room was flooded in bright light. I looked around.

The flat was filled with every luxury I aspired all through my life. A wall mounted plasma television, soft sapphire colored carpeted floor, a modular kitchen at one end –I felt a sense of pride. The journey from the one hall and kitchen accommodation at Bagdola to the apartment at the up market Riverdale Heights has not been a bed of roses. During this journey, I learnt one of life's most important lessons - with money, you may not be able to buy happiness but it sure does make you happy.

I pondered over Sonia's words. She is right, I thought. This is just the beginning; I got to achieve many more in life. After all, all these luxuries have come from Thapar's money. The beer made my head light and my mind romantic. "I love you", I texted her.

I heard the gentle sound of the knob of the front door. I turned around and there she was, as ravishing as always. Her hair was let loose. They ended inches above her neck. She hugged me tightly from behind. I took a deep breath and felt the familiar rosy smell hit my nose. "You know this rosy smell makes me go mad", I said. "Is it?" she said. She lowered her head and kissed my lips. Her hair fell all over my face. I got up and took her in my arms. My hand slid under her satin top while I kept kissing her rosy lips. "You seem to be in a hurry today?" "I am", I said excitedly and kissed her again. I pulled her top over her shoulders. She felt my manhood and let out a sigh. I raised her on my arms and started walking towards the bedroom.

Chapter III – Center shocked

The early morning flight from Delhi to Guwahati via Kolkata was jam packed. I reached terminal T3 an hour before the scheduled time. With a mindful of apprehensions, I boarded the flight. The seats were all occupied. The recent price hike in the air fare did not seem to have any effect on the commuters. I walked all the way down the aisle till the end.

I recalled an incident that had happened long years back. It was my first assignment. I was at a remote village in Western India which had only a single bus plying only once during the day to the nearest city. After a lot of pushing and shoving, I finally got the bus ticket. After about half an hour, a bus finally came along the road.

I boarded the bus and started searching for my seat. I reached the end of the bus but still no sign of my seat number. I rechecked my ticket. It clearly mentioned seat number 35. The last seat on the wooden plank at the rear end of the bus read 34. I was center shocked. I had to travel on