



THE RELEASE

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«Everything here is cardamom,» he says, wishing to punch a semi-circle through the air with the right hand, but his hand is so fast that it comes almost full circle, close to a pirouette – an action that leaves him feeling slightly dazed. But the man's circular movement is appropriate because cardamom encircles us here. A little further north is the grove with the big stupa consecrating the spot where three lamas had met in 1642. They had come from different directions over the Himalayas to enthrone the first religious leader of the Tibetans of Sikkim: Chogyal Phuntsog Namgyal. His conduct, his reign, was watched over not only by the Buddha but also the Kanchenjunga, the third highest mountain in the world, the glazed white peaks of which emerged for a few minutes out of the dense clouds that normally obscure them.

Norbugang Tschörten on the western edge of the sprawling Yuksom is the birthplace of the land and is worshipped accordingly. Thousands of prayer flags of various hues flutter in the woods, inviting you to rest and reflect. But as it is humid and cold under the trees, I climb over the boundary wall and walk out into the fields basking in the sun. I simply love this moment at which I get out of the dark and cool and enter the bright and warm daylight, which the eyes are still not accustomed to but which delights and relaxes every cell in the body, invoking a sense of redemptive intoxication, or heady redemption, as it were. I always notice then just how cold my jaw is, how contracted, and how it gradually begins to thaw and relax again – and it seems as though the language is streaming back into my body.



My interlocutor has recovered from his blow and is now standing right in front of me. He's wearing a black suit with pinstripes, but under the jacket he's wearing not a shirt but a bright orange T-shirt. A wide-rimmed woollen cap sits on his head, his eyes are almost closed, and one can see only a distant glint behind the folds of skin. His cheeks are covered with a fine down, with only a few strong, long strands of his hair dangling, like slain roundworms, from his cheeks and his chin. His mouth seems constantly busy with something and I'm afraid he will spew a stream of blood-red betelnut juice at our feet. But he only opens his mouth for a moment and in that second I see that he is just



playing around with a canine hanging loosely out of his upper jaw. It's hard for me to tell his age; perhaps, like me, he's about fifty, perhaps a lot older. Or younger? His skin is pretty smooth.

«Don't even the faces of our old women look like cardamom? Cardamom adorned with gold?» he observes with a chuckle, swaying a bit on his feet, losing a bit of his balance.

«But gold does not warm you in the winter,» he says, removing a small bottle filled with a tea-coloured liquid from his trouser pocket: «But this certainly does!»

«You mean cardamom,» I correct him.

«What?»

«I mean, you wish to say that cardamom does not warm (you) in winter.»

He stares at me uncomprehendingly. Then he shakes his head and I suddenly get the feeling that he thinks I am a figment of his imagination. In a bid to prove I'm real, I switch to another topic: «It's nice here, and nice and warm.»

He laughs again, and the sound is like that of a bamboo pole splintering inside his chest. «Look at those faces! They only want gold, gold, gold!»

My manoeuvre to change the subject has obviously failed. Well, it's true that the heads of old





people here look a bit like cardamom pods. In Sikkim, it is not green cardamom that is cultivated, but the black one – the capsules of which are dark brown, crinkled and fibrous. In this part of the state, little else is grown other than *Amomum subulatum*. On every patch that is halfway cultivable, this member of the ginger family patterns the earth with its lanceolate leaves. That is because the spice is a lucrative business, with the farmers earning 1,500 rupees or more per kilo. You can get rich with it, people here tell me with assurance. Black cardamom plays an important role, especially in Mughlai recipes. It is also used in the mix of spices that make up India's masala tea. However, nobody cooks with it in Sikkim itself.

«Only gold, just gold,» the pinstriped man chants once again. Then he falls silent, swaying slightly on his feet, his bamboo stick raised in

the wind. His face is now serious, a study in concentration, as though he's thinking hard about something. He seems to have forgotten that he is standing in front of me. Perhaps that's the cue for me to depart. But suddenly his face brightens up, he raises his chin a bit in the air, looks at me cheerfully – triumphantly, actually – lowers his head again, purses his lips in the form of a kiss, inhales deeply through his nostrils, and spits his canine tooth out into his right hand. Then he lifts the tooth close to his eyes, clenches his hand into a fist, wipes some blood off his lips with the back of the fist, shoves his left hand into his trouser-pocket, pulls out the bottle of booze and holds it out to me, with an expression of absolute release on his face.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaran.