

THE  
**F.A.I.R.**  
PROJECT

**TINY HAMMOCK TALES:**  
*Of Rivers and Flowers*

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The F.A.I.R. Team

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*The peace we seek in the extraneous and mundane,*

*Lies within us, waiting patiently for us to find it.*

*Yet we continue to be drawn outwards to the conflict*

*That surreptitiously resides in all that is extraneous and mundane.*

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The bed on which Rayesh (/ruh-yuh-ei-sh/) has spent the last 19 years of his life seemed to be right out of a science fiction novel, one that would have an esoteric scientist create portable sleeping devices for wanderers that roam a post apocalyptic world. Rayesh was five years old when he realised that his life would be that of a wanderer, one where he may never have a place that he could call home. So, with the creative imagination that behoves a 5-year old, he put together a hammock which he could call his own, one that allowed him to always be home, for his home went wherever he did.

Every morning, he would wake up and start removing the hooks on either side of the hammock on which he hung his belongings. He would proceed to gather the hooks using a contraption that resembled a keychain holder that allowed all of them to rest together, while he focussed on untying the hammock, and laying it on the ground. Then, one by one, he would arrange his belongings inside the hammock, neatly cross tie each end and convert it into a sling bag that through a miracle of ingenuity managed to secure each and every possession that he had collected over the course of his travels. Every day, this routine would signal the start of his journey to his next adventure.

Today, he had planned to cross the river Rieat (/ree-yaa-uht/) in order to lay his eyes on revered flower called the Unir (/oo-neer/) which only blossoms once a year at a peculiar spot where the river is believed to have flowed from once upon a time. Locals of the area believe that the Unir possesses mystical powers which were blessed by the almighty God when the Unir was seen to be growing at the bed of the Rieat. In anger at the manner in which the Rieat mercilessly caused the plant to face its wrath through the seasons, God forged a new path for the river so that the Unir could celebrate the bloom of its flower year on year.

To reach the Unir, one would have to cross the river Rieat from the narrowest point of the bank which was also the closest to the island where the Unir resided. To reach there, he had to walk a few kilometres through the villages of the Khureeds (/kh-oo-ree-duh/) and the Ranghis (/ruh-un-gees/), both of which, were on the same side of the river.

Having been around for a few months, Rayesh was well versed in the traditions and religions of the region that he was in. By now, he knew that the Khureeds would never let anyone pluck the Unir as they considered it to be divine to the extent that the plant was allowed to remain without a temple, or a fence which could curtail its view of the land, out of respect for all that the Unir stood for, all that was good and bountiful about their home.

The Ranghis, on the other hand, believed that God had brought the plant out of the belly of the Rieat so that humankind could benefit from the tremendous medical benefits of its flower. They considered it to be disrespectful towards God if one were not to make use of the gift that was so benevolently presented to them.

As he entered the Khureed's village, he noticed that almost everyone was dressed in new clothes and seemed to be in a festive mood. Babu, the cycle repair mechanic on the outskirts of the village who was busy giving away free cycle repairs today, stopped Rayesh and said, "Today you are here early, what happened? Couldn't sleep with the anticipation of the Unir blooming?" Before Rayesh could answer, Babu went on to say, "Of course that must be it! It is the same with all of us. We wait on this day every year and the wonder, amazement, and serenity that the blooming brings to our village, somehow seems to increase every year."

Rayesh was just about to respond and had barely said, "Yes I know...", when Babu (/baa-boo/) again stopped him and reprimanded him, "How can you know? You have never seen it bloom! And I am sure that in all your travels, you have never seen anything as magnificent as the Unir. You just cannot know." Finally, Rayesh was able to get in a complete sentence, though by now, he knew that the excitement Babu had, was the kind of joy that you can't reason with or try and put into words. A kind of joy that is so serene that it doesn't matter if a volcano erupts or the Earth shatters, the smiles on the people of Khureed would not go away today.

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Rayesh parted Babu's company with what he believed were his final words, "Babu, I think I have seen the Unir bloom every day since I have been here, as that is what all of you keep talking about." He laughed, and continued, "In fact, now I think that I even dream about it, and every time I see a field of flowers, I keep wondering whether they are the Unir. But then, I have never seen the Unir. This again happened to me the other day when I crossed that U-shaped rock that you had told me about."

Babu laughed and said, "Yes, it's only tourists like you who go to that rock. We have seen it so often, that none of us go there anymore. But, it is a good attraction for tourists." With that, Rayesh carried on through the smiling faces of the people of Khureed towards Ranghi.

As he arrived in Ranghi, the village seemed very different from where he was just coming from, even though there were only 500 meters of distance between the two. Everyone seemed very nervous, to the extent that no one seemed to notice him as he entered the village, which was strange, as usually everyone flocked to him to hear the stories of his adventures.

The village florist had not set up his shop yet, but rather, had packed up all of his flowers. Rayesh couldn't resist, but ask, "Raiji (/Ruh-hi-jee/), big order today? Someone has bought all of your flowers already?" Raiji laughed nervously and said, "No, no, today is the blooming of the Unir. You have been with us for so long, you know that we are all excited and have so many things to do to welcome the Unir this year."

"Oh, is that why everyone is so pre-occupied and in such a tearing rush to get things done?" Rayesh asked. "Yes, yes, this is a very big day for us! Everything has to be just perfect! You can see, we are all still in the clothes that we slept in last night because till the time we don't finish all the preparations, no one will get ready," Raiji replied.

Again, before Rayesh could respond, Raiji continued, "You see, today is not a regular day of getting ready. Today we will all have to cleanse ourselves with the soil of the island without using any of the water of the Rieat, as today is the day of the victory of the Unir over Rieat. Have you ever tried to have a bath without water?" He laughed, "It takes a lot of time. So, we need to get everything done before we start getting ready."

"Without water?" Rayesh asked.

Raiji replied hurriedly, "You won't understand. Anyway, stop distracting me. I need to get all of this done. But be back by 4 PM as we'll all go to the banks together and wait for the Unir to bloom before sunset. I assure you, that all your time with us will be defined by this one moment, and you will tell stories of watching the Unir bloom wherever you go next, for years to come." Understanding that it was time to go, Rayesh replied, "Yes, I do believe that I will tell of this day for years to come, maybe, my whole idea of flowers will change after seeing the magnificent Unir. Or maybe, you will learn something new about the Unir today."

"Yes, the Unir is that magnificent. We feel something new every year, and every year it gives us more than it did the previous year." Raiji, reminisced.

Rayesh started leaving while saying, "Yes, which is why it takes so long to bloom. Even though, all other flowers are blooming, it is only the Unir, and this small patch of flowers behind the old watchtower that hasn't bloomed yet. Raiji was again pre-occupied and said, "Go, go, Rayesh. I need to finish my work now." He laughed and added, "maybe you can go up on the watchtower and shout and tell us when it is 4 PM. That old watchtower will finally get someone to climb it again."

With that Rayesh moved on towards the narrowest part of the bank of the Rieat which was still a kilometre away. As he approached it, his eyes wandered to the boats which were decorated for the festivities that were to take place later in the day. He was almost tempted to break the chains that bound the boat to the shore and use one of them to reach the Unir.

He gazed across the river and savoured the transient quiet and the consequent calm. After crossing Khureed and Ranghi, everything seemed still. He casually played with an oar in the boat and concentrated hard on where the plant was, almost as if that would make it move to him, after all, it was a magical plant.

Then, with a sudden swiftness, as if the flower had surged some sort of energy into him, Rayesh stood up, proceeded towards the river with his hammock and his oar, both of which seemed like extensions of his arm. He tied his hammock towards the top of the oar and entered the river.

The water, which had reached his waist by now, felt cool in the summer heat. He pushed forward, using the oar as a walking stick. As he got in deeper, he used the hooks from his hammock to hold on to the rocks he could find, with one eye on the island and the other on all of the belongings that he possessed. Slipping and sliding, bruising himself on the rocks and pebbles, he pushed forward. The closer he was to the island, the more his pace quickened. By now, he was cold and the water did not soothe him anymore. It dug into where he had hurt himself and burned his skin.

He flopped on the island as he reached it, but not before carefully placing his hooks back into their rightful place. Gathering his breath, he observed the divine plant they called the Unir. The plant sat by its lonesome, seemingly ordinary when viewed in its surroundings. For someone who was unaware of the legend, he doubted if they would have even noticed it.

As he gathered his energy, almost mechanically, he began the process of unpacking his hammock. Treating his belongings with as much care as the villagers did the plant, he arranged them on the ground. He gathered a few twigs and lit a small fire to rid himself of the cold water he was drenched in. Then, he carefully set up his hammock next to the Unir and sank in it to cherish what he knew would be a short-lived respite.

His eyes opened to a commotion in the distance. At first, he ignored it. But as it grew louder, he knew it was time.

He sat up on his hammock to see the silhouette of a crowd that had gathered on the other side of the river. The villagers must have seen the smoke rise in the distance. The Rieat was seemingly louder, as if participating in the chaos, and all Rayesh could pick out from the noise, were screams of his name between sentences. He didn't know whether it was the Khureeds or the Ranghis. They looked the same, they sounded the same, and seemed equally fraught and furious.

He got off his hammock, picked up the oar and planted it next to the Unir. He then unhooked his hammock and using the oar to support the hammock's centre, flipped it upside down, digging the hooks attached on the edges of the hammock, on either side in the ground. The hammock now looked like a tent that hid the flower from direct sight, exposing only its stem.

He thought of how the hammock had become his signature. Otherwise, to the Khureeds he would be a Ranghi, and to the Ranghis, a Khureed. But, with his hammock, he would always be the boy without a home, an outsider to the communities he had crossed.

He kicked dirt in the direction of the fire to douse it. The crowd in the distance had begun to move. Some villagers had entered the river and began untying their boats. Others stood on the shore. Though their shouts had turned into murmurings, their eyes kept suspiciously oscillating between Rayesh and the Unir. Rayesh looked at the Unir and bent down to pick up a bullhorn and a set of shears that he had laid down on the ground. He waited for the villagers to board the boats, and then, almost as if he had rehearsed this moment a million times, blared into the bullhorn:

"Stop wherever you are. Do not come forward. The closer you come, the sooner I start cutting the stem." Like the silence that follows thunder, the valley fell quiet for a few seconds. Then the commotion ensued again.

Rayesh could see the villagers trying to make sense of the situation. With the boats drawing near, he could spot the Ranghis and Khureeds racing to get to him, in the midst of blaming each other for hosting 'this traitor.'

"Step back Rayesh! Do not dare touch the Unir!" The villagers seemed to have found the bullhorn that Rayesh had left for them near the boats, for he knew that conversing over the babble of the Rieat would be difficult. But he also knew, that were it not for the distance created by the Rieat, the conversation that they were about to have would not be possible.

Rayesh blared, "I will cut the Unir if you come closer. Stay where you are!"

"The Unir is a gift from the Gods, if you dare... the plant is sacred and whoever harms it will face dire consequences!" came the response from the bank.

The villagers were snatching the bullhorn away from each other, reminding Rayesh of the crowds he had seen on almost every pilgrimage he witnessed during his travels; the constant shoving of the other in exchange for an additional few seconds towards an inexplicable purpose. Rayesh tightened his grip on the bullhorn and

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roared louder than the others, as he had to because his bullhorn which he carried in his hammock bag was much smaller than the one he had left behind for the Ranghis and the Khureeds.

“You give the Unir such lofty titles, but can you not see it is just a plant, like all other plants and flowers in the valley? How does it matter if I pluck it, any more than the flowers you pluck and arrange on the shelves of your shops every morning? While those flowers provide you livelihood, the Unir just sits by the shore, swaying in the wind, and yet you worship only the Unir, and so fanatically at that?”

The villagers replied, “It was God who came down and shifted the course of the Rieat to allow for the Unir to bloom. He planted only one Unir in the entire world, in our village. An outsider like you will never understand. It is blessed and continues to be a symbol of hope to our people.” The bullhorn was snatched away again “...and don’t forget that it cures our illnesses. Do you want our villagers to die of disease?”, added the Ranghis.

For the first time in this commotion, the differences between the Ranghis and the Khureeds had emerged. The conflict was now double edged, where on one side, it united both villages against Rayesh, on the other, it reminded them of the rift that was bequeathed to them over the years.

Historically, the ideological gap between both the Ranghis and the Khureeds had separated them for centuries, and in this case, not even God could unite them. The Ranghis believed that God’s intent was to bestow them with a gift, which, if not appropriately utilised, disturbed the balance of nature. The Khureeds, on the other hand, thought it to be sinful to inflict harm on anything that God had cared so much for. Since God couldn’t come down to clarify the purpose of the Unir and end their long-standing battle of interpretations, Rayesh knew that for his purpose, he had to try and get their attention back.

He questioned them, “You may be right. I probably don’t understand the Unir. But being near it, I can tell you that while the flower smells like freshly cut vetiver, its stem smells like myrrh. Delicate violet veins have formed a design under its petals. It is so intricate that one would have to hold it against the sun to see it.

This is what I see in the Unir. I fear to wonder your answer, if I were to ask you to explain the Unir to me. Other than its symbol and reverence, would you be able to tell me what it looks like?

And, while the Unir may cure illness, how is it different from Tulsi, Aswagandha, or Triphala? Or the loam from the banks that we apply on our wounds, or the wood we use from the forest to keep us warm in the winter? And if it does cure illness, why shouldn’t you share it with the world? Especially our world which suffers from so many diseases and illnesses. If the God that planted this flower is the same God who created this valley and everything beyond it, does the flower not belong to all of us who were also created by God?

Isn’t all of nature a gift from God? Isn’t all of nature a symbol of hope? Don’t you think that God would have created each component with equal love and to serve a purpose? Wouldn’t it then be just as much mine as it is yours?

Half a moment of silence later, he heard their response, “The Unir cannot fall into the wrong hands. It is our gift. God bestowed it upon us and he has given us the responsibility to take care of it.”

Rayesh wasn’t sure who “us” referred to. It was not that the Khureeds and the Ranghis were one. Though they prayed to the same God, practiced the same religion, believed in the power of the same plant, they were still not one. He could not understand that despite all that unified them, why they felt compelled to allow this one difference to dictate their relationship with each other for centuries. He was not sure if they did either.

He raised his bullhorn and smiled as he said, “Pardon me, if I cannot tell which one of you said that. Unfortunately, my vision from afar doesn’t allow me to distinguish between either of you, the Ranghis or Khureeds. Please tell me, which one of you is the rightful protector of this plant? Otherwise, I will continue to remain confused about who I am speaking with.”

“Enough Rayesh! The flower has been a part of the Khureed’s legacy for centuries! How dare you disrespect our traditions! We are and always have been the rightful protectors of the Unir!”

“And the Ranghis?” Rayesh knew he had fuelled the flame. But he maintained his composure, because he had learnt that for him to pacify the rage in others, he had to first maintain peace in himself, like the placid ocean gentles the furious Rieat.

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"The boy is right, the Unir has always belonged to the Ranghis! We were the first to settle on the Rieat. Our ancestors discovered the flower during the Great Hunt..." the voice faded into an unrestful stirring.

Rayesh paused to gather himself as he saw both groups squabble amongst them. He was both astonished and saddened by how easy it was to turn them against each other. "How naive must they be, to remember what happened centuries ago, and forget the harmony they were living in just yesterday! How ignorant must they be to know for centuries that one is plucking the petals to use as medicine while the other forbids even touching it!" Rayesh said under his breath. "And yet they continue with this charade.", Rayesh thought, contemplating that perhaps in an alternate universe, a need for a conversation like this would not have arisen in the first place.

His words were no better than the babbling of the Rieat. They were heard, but never understood, appreciated or even given a thought to. The wall of belief in the minds of the people had made them deaf to words which threatened to tear that wall down. After all, the wall had been strengthened after centuries of cementing it. Rayesh could sense this. He just did not understand the blindness of approach and the hesitancy to answer questions, for their anger seemed to rise with each question that he asked.

His attention shifted to the boats that were drawing near. He stepped back and stood next to the Unir, hoisting up the shears in an attempt to scare the villagers.

"Stop Rayesh!" Rayesh looked at the nearest boat to spot the aggressor. "We will not let you leave here alive if you do anything to the Unir!". The threats were growing louder and more serious.

Rayesh continued to be assertive. He aimed the bullhorn at one of the boats and shouted, "You are willing to take a human life to protect a relic? Oh, how grossly you misunderstand the morals of the stories your ancestors must have told you! If that were the lesson, the valley would be full of Unirs, but no one to celebrate its blooming!" he said, as he heard faint footsteps coming from his side of the shore.

Some of the villagers had crossed the river from the point he had. He saw them running towards him, with frenzy in their eyes unmistakable even from the distance. He turned towards them, the bullhorn still next to his mouth and warned them to stop. They didn't.

They only stood a few meters away from him, and Rayesh knew this was the last time he could stop them. One of the villagers screamed back at him, "You came here, you stayed with us and now you are questioning us? We don't care if you believe in the Unir or not. We believe in it. The least you could do is respect us."

Rayesh knew that they were not wrong. He was disrespecting them. But it felt as if they were disrespecting themselves. He understood the need for a belief, what he did not understand was the hatred that stemmed from the strength of this belief. The refusal for conversation, the injustice that could be ingrained in it, the irrationality that accompanied it, and the disregard for the existence of multiple belief systems at the same time.

Seeing the movement near the Unir, the village crowd on the shoreline stopped their squabble, and stared at the stand-off. The breeze was heavier, and the Rieat seemed to have come to a standstill with the boats buoying on its surface. The valley had paused its affairs to watch the drama.

Sensing the anxiousness, Rayesh picked up the bullhorn, and planted himself in a place where he could see all his audience. He laughed in disbelief as he said, "I am not disrespecting you. You are disrespecting your own Unir. You say it is divine and you have spent years worshipping it. Tell me, where did you cross the river from? How long have all of you stayed here? Did either of you...", he said turning to both sides "...even notice the patch of Unirs growing by the riverbed, next to the U-shaped rock, and below the watchtower?"

Silence fell across the bank. Questioning looks were exchanged amongst and between both the Khureeds and Ranghis. Rayesh wasn't sure if these looks questioned the facts that were just revealed to them, or of the disbelief in their own selves. Faint murmurs grew louder. Crowds began moving, shifting towards the directions that he had pointed them towards. As Rayesh waited for the commotion to die down, he heard voices questioning what he had just told them, "Why should we believe you? What do you know about our village and the Unir?" Rayesh smiled and replied, simply and with conviction, "I know what I can see."

He waited for someone to confirm and verify what he had just said, holding up the shears the entire time, fearing that the revelation of this information would not do much to turn away the anger, perhaps even



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heighten it. He heard shouts of confirmation followed by a sense of confusion and knew they could not question him anymore.

Lowering the hand that held the shears, Rayesh said, "You say the Unir brings you good hope, I planted and brought you a lot more good hope. Some may even say that I planted and cured all the illness in this village. I am not questioning your faith in the Unir, I am simply questioning if it is only the Unir that can bring you hope or cure your illness. You have fought with each other for centuries, arguing over the purpose of the Unir and why this single Unir was planted here. Well there you go, you can stop your fighting; you can stop the questioning. You want to nurture good hope and faith, you can now do it in your own villages, under the watchtower or next to the U-shaped rock. You can choose to share and nurture it together near the boats. You can stop the centuries of fighting and finally revel in the abundance of the very same Unir that had distanced you."

Rayesh waited for a response but was surprised to see the villagers who had crossed the river beginning to retreat. The crowd that had gathered across the riverbed also began to disperse. This could either have been a sign that they understood what he was saying and were retreating to reflect on what he had said, or that they were now tired of the arguments, or maybe because they felt a sense of loss. A loss, perhaps of a sense of purpose that they found in the age-old selective bickering between both villages.

Unsure of the reason for their retreat, Rayesh too turned away to pack his things, only to hear a muffled voice from the bullhorn which did not seem to be addressed to him. Standing at a distance, he was not sure who addressed it to whom. The sounds increased as repeated voices began debating.

Even though Unirs now bloomed in their respective villages, their conflict had perhaps found a new home.

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