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The Hill Stood Like A Sad Monument

Saranyan Bv

The hill looked out there like a sad mountain. Hills are never sad, God made hills delightful and full-souled, but this one represented sadness all the way till it touched the tip of the obscure horizon. I didn't want to look, it forebodes things that's likely to sadden me for life. May be not. May be, maybe not. What answer would the Ketri hill in Rajasthan offer, I didn't know. The answer will be when we climb up for which we have assembled at the base.

For the time being I wanted to rest my legs, stretch for a while, that's all I wanted. I yawned and another yawn followed. I hadn't slept the previous night, was travelling through the craggy road keeping a watch on the driver to see if he was awake.

The guy at the tea-shop at the foot hill wanted to know if tea will be required, he was closing shop and looked for easy business before the nightfall. He would set the milk to curds if we didn't care. The road that led to the hill had two stones on either sides, to say it was the beginning. The stones were white-washed so it stood out.

We were seven of us under the tree which had shed most of its leaves. No way to hide under the shade if it was noon, the shade should be moving and dodging the sun that came above and went.

The tea-shop had a cot thrown out for the customers who came to drink from the shop and who wanted a bit of air. I thought of stretching. It would be four to five hours up and down, one of boys said. It may take more time if it was my son there, they said. Not until the morning if it was really him.

A beggar stood near the cot, he was not part of the seven I mentioned; he had an empty bowl which made me sad. He lowered the bowl so I could see. This is no time for all that, I was myself in need of pity and consolation. I was not sure if the beggar had slept on the cot sometime. Now the cot woven with coir and open to the sky with four bamboo legs was all I had.

As I said we were seven of us including the police inspector and the cop with two strips on his arms. One more cop was with them, he was young, youth showed on his cheeks, his eyes kept shifting randomly, it showed he is new to action.

The Professor who accompanied was listless under sky, showed signs of wanting to get back quick. I wished he tags along. The battered old Ambassador car that he brought me till this point, pointed the road back to the University. It indicated his intent. These guys are cleaver, I mean the faculty at the University. They lived in cocoons like moths but know how to come out if there was heat under their ass.

His driver was leaning on the bonnet pressing the front tire with knees. I don't think the bonnet or the tire had cooled from the drive, but he had his limbs on. He didn't care if his trousers got dirty.

The Professor was the only connect between the university and my son. Besides the two students who were shifting on their legs and looking hungry. They looked hungry all the time. The taller student seemed to carry his head in his hands, his arms permanently under the chin, like it was a car-jack. They were here to accompany. Two more had come on motorbike, but they left already.

One of them before leaving, took me aside and said, it might not have happened by accident. Somebody was behind it, if I were you, I would get him, he said. He meant get the guy who may have caused the accident. He didn't say who it was but said there was a fight, it's time to lodge the complaint before it was too late.

It was meaningless to talk about that now. It didn't make any difference, it wouldn't change. I thought of calling home to talk to my wife. Heart-broken, would be waiting for my call. I had informed her that I have reached the campus and am proceeding to the hill. The last call was four hours ago, time for the next.

I took the cab late last night from the Delhi airport, the driver was a good fellow, drove through the night. He didn't sleep or stop over anywhere. He was aware why I was travelling, the friend who arranged the cabbie to pick me at the airport had appraised him.

By morning I stopped at my friend's sisters house, only for a quick wash and rush to the campus. My friend's sister had coordinated everything like the authorities and the formalities that were required. Her husband said, Sir, please allow yourself time to stand in the new place. It was a good advice I thought, though I had to get going without delay.

I looked at the two students who'd stayed back to accompany. I looked at them gratefully. They smiled the helpless smile which they tried to wipe off. The kind of smile that comes involuntarily and disappears on occasions like this.

The tall one said, the hill was all green before lively from the rains, now the greenery has disappeared. He said he would never set his foot on the hill again.

The other student with him said, students generally trek up to see the other side of the hill. Copper mines spread out the other side, green like out of the world he said. Different green, not the green of foliage he said.

Blue I say, not green, the tall one corrected. He is color blind the tall one said pointing to the other fellow. They were about to get into an argument. The professor overheard this and wanted to prove his authority, he asked why would anyone want to see a copper mine or any mine. One thing was clear was what the tall student had meant, that the hill was green with vegetation with rains, not blue. If the colors could make any difference, I thought.

I looked up once again, the hill had turned blue and showed signs of disappearing. I could see the wall of the old fortress and the ruins through the holes in the feeble light. Wrecked arches and misshapen crenellations, the old fort waiting to crumble and be again part of the natural boulders from which they were built. The cannon at one of the sentry towers showed against the last rays of the day. Who had ordered its construction, and why was it important for the king. These are forts on every hill in India, it had taken generations to build. The cannon was the only object to bear geometric shape anywhere in the near vicinity. I hoped it meant things should eventually turn out alright.

While driving down from the campus, the temperature burst the mercury chart, the road appeared to float the entire distance, the mirages steaming off the earth. I expected the hill to be a mound of water. By the time we reached, the day had slipped, the red sun of evening burned behind the hill. The image of water had disappeared as though some demon had drunk it all.

I looked at my mobile to see if there was reception from the tower. The screen showed the reception bars lying like knocked down cricket stumps, the instrument was alright because the screen showed the time. 5.50 PM. Once you get used to using mobile, the absence of it puts you at a clear disadvantage. You begin to feel like an orphan. I navigated the screen and found no missed calls, its nearly been four hours since the time we'd left the campus.

I felt it was alright, sometime in life you need to be alone. I hate anxiety and could do without, stress caused me to yawn and yawn. Yawns brought tears to my eyes which were

bleary due to lack of sleep, it hadn't occurred to me to wipe the tears. Wiping would have freed me yawns.

The tea-shop fellow offered water from the Aluminum kettle. A small courtesy, he knew what was the issue and why we were there. I took a few gulps and said thanks. The police guys had too, and then the students. The Professor asked the car driver to bring water from the car and he drank from it.

The tall student had a talisman kind of thing that hung from the neck, it was supposed to be tiger teeth. Tiger teeth is rare, expensive, difficult to get and sort after. Brings good luck, it is believed. Those may not be of the tiger, perhaps belong to some dead wolf roaming in Kutch desert. It's not a good sign to see the teeth of a wolf, teeth of all carnivores look the same.

A bandicoot came out of the burrow somewhere under and ran between the legs of the policeman with two strips in the arms. He behaved as if it's a prank played on him. He apprehended like that. The young cop said it was a rabbit not a bandicoot. It ran into the bramble where the waste water from the tea shop wash collected. The thicket didn't have any other water source. If it was a rabbit they could catch and make a meal of it, someone said. I think it was the other student who didn't speak much.

Do rabbits inhabit this dry land, I asked waiting for an argument as if arguments would change the course of the future. We argue when our back is against the wall, argument buys time we think.

What if we needed a van to take him back, I asked the inspector? If it turned out to be my son. I paused between each syllable like you do when you didn't want to utter those words. I had to ask, so I asked. When you are not in your place, you need to ask for everything.

The inspector looked at the tea-shop guy, lifted his brow without asking. The tea-shop guy waved in the direction of the road which turned at right angle, perpendicular to the road we'd come. The road at the crossing bore tire marks which we could see in the thin light. How far, the police inspector asked the tea-shop guy. This time the inspector spoke, voice coming from his throat sounded guttural. Whether the policemen are born with this voice or they acquire during the training. This is not the time to let mind drift.

The tea shop guy stretched his hand long as if it would touch the end of the world before Copernicus found the world was spherical. His gesture gave out the obvious, it meant quite far. The inspector instructed him to bring the van anyway.

I said, let me first see if it was my son.

Whoever it is, I have to carry to the hospital in the town for post-mortem. It doesn't matter, the inspector said and plucked a twig from the tree. It's a relief that the inspector avoided using pronouns like 'it' to indicate the person lying over the top.

Tiredness wore on my heels, the nerves begged rest. Felt like blacking out. The nerves at the feet are far more sensitive than those near the brain. I told this to one of the students. They moved away pretending to go for the kettle again. Their faces were ashen. The inspector picked his tooth with the sharp end of the twig.

Let the van come I said again because the tea shop guy hesitated. His hesitation was on account of who would pay. He gave a half smile relieved at my clarifying and nodded. I wanted someone to tell me everything is going to be okay, things are going to be solved without having to go up. Everything would be as before. The tea shop guy scratched the side of his head for some time, then he asked the Professor if he could use his car to reach the van driver.

My son or someone out there in the ravine. I have to keep my wife informed; my dad would be pestering her for the news about the son. The mobile might have reception at the top, I told myself. Before I left, I'd requested my dad not to trouble her for information but knew he wouldn't listen. That's how we started the trek uphill.