

Beyond the Hills
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Leaned back on a cushion and legs stretched on the bed the Father asked, 'What shall we do?' She was arranging things in the rest house room. She came there and asked him, 'About what?'

'A month's longer period. The treatment will take only three hours. How shall we pass the whole day?'

'Live' was the brief answer of Nishtha. The Father looked worried.

'Right now aren't we....'

'Not this way....' Nishtha interrupted.

'Then...?'

'The way you lived happily when little Nishtha was with you. A full life.'

'A full life.' He uttered the word with no logic and that hovered in the emptiness of the room and then flew out. The wind pushed the back window and closed it down but Nishtha reopened and hooked it.

'Niku.' His pain grew and his thin voice turned very heavy.

'Yes, Father.'

'Leave this effort. If not today then tomorrow....'

'There's much left in between today and tomorrow.' She sat right before him.

'Don't know how much's left. Many things gone. What's up, no idea. But you are very much troubled because of me. You have your home, children, and your job...' Deep concern sat in his eyes.

'Everything's arranged. Nothing to worry. Had you carried on the treatment as the elder brother wished, I shouldn't have taken decision to come over here. Now already here, will only leave when the treatment's over.'

Her firm will gave him a half smile. 'The same childhood stuff you have even today.'

'Now take rest for a while' said she and rose up. The Father stretched himself again and closed eyes. The face revealed fatigue – of his illness and of the responsibilities that he alone had shouldered throughout the life. The shoulders that always remained strong had lost strength and leant down on the chest. The eyes were swollen and had dark rings. Lines on the forehead were blackened. The pink face had gone little pale. He was trapped into all sorts of problems that the disease of cancer can bring. His rhythmic breathing became louder. So that the Father can sleep peacefully he stopped arranging the things and she too rested on the bed adjacent to the opposite wall. Constant work for the treatment had made her restless. It was so heavy that she soon slept.

The rest house rooms were spacious as they were part of the royal house. High ceiling, artistic carving on the windows, and doors: was the intact splendour of the royal

house. Even newly arranged furniture had the glory of the old one. As the place was away from the hustle and bustle of the city quietness was settled there. Only natural sounds could be heard on a close attention. A few visitors stayed there. Hardly anything happened. Gentle wind that entered through a big window brushed with fan-pushed room-air. She remained on the bed with closed eyes. Night was still far away.

On an evening the elder brother had rung up. It was a troubled tone. 'Nishtha, Father has stopped taking medicines. Health has worsened. Refuses for the operation. Even the doctors have no clear opinions. It's better if we take him to another hospital out of the city. He's adamant for further treatment. Will have to do something before we lose control over the situation. And it's only you that can do it.'

She was speechless for a while. She took a long breath and said, 'Leave it on me now.'

The elder brother felt removal of a blow before its striking down. Nishtha had to walk with open eyes against haze storm. The elder brother and the father had arguments over the issue of the treatment. The brother couldn't find out the reason of the father's refusal but she knew it very well. As the father fell ill all responsibilities came upon the brother and the father didn't wish to add any more to him. On the other side passing more time meant inviting more troubles. It required immediate decision.

The father had ultimately bowed down to Nishtha's firm determination. She took leaves for a long period and gave responsibilities of both the children to her husband Nilay and came to the mega city for the treatment. Looking to the health of the father and his need for peace, this remote rest house was all the way suitable for a month long stay. She brought her car to avoid inconveniency.

She met the doctor after his check up and asked, 'What are the chances, Sir?'

'Can't say anything. We shall make all the possible efforts.'

'Operation?'

'For that he is too old and weak. We shall begin with chemotherapy and radiation. We'll have to see whether he can bear. If his health deteriorates more problems may come. Let's see the result of initial treatment.'

'Any care to be taken for food or other things?' She was worried much after the doctor's opinions.

'He can take any food he like but due to chemotherapy he may have diarrhoea and vomiting. Won't be able to take enough food. Pains will grow. In such a condition a patient may break down mentally. You'll have to care very much. His will may play a vital role. You have to make it stronger. The rest leave on the God.'

'Okay' said she and rose from her seat but the heaviness of the heart fell on the feet.

Knocks at the door awakened her. She opened the door. 'Will you take dinner?' asked a man.

'Yes, we will.'

'Whenever you wish to have, let us know in advance. We prepare food on guest orders. Well, right now there's no one here except you.'

'Well.'

'Want to have tea or coffee right now?'

The talk woke up the father. Her eyes asked him for the same. He nodded and she ordered for tea. That man went away. The father refreshed him. With a comb that always remained in his pocket he made his hair. He pulled a chair to the back window and sat there. Open land there stretched his eyes and after that there were scattered hills. He enjoyed a piece of relaxation that came through that window. He was silent and looked beyond the hills.

Tea was served but there was only a cup. He asked, 'Won't you take?'

Her hands shook on the question. The cup was filled and tea flowed into the saucer. 'Did you forget? I take tea only once in the morning.'

He shook his head but she couldn't decide what it meant. Fifteen years had been slid in between them. He tried to search them from the time-made chasm. 'Niku, because of your service you may have formed a new habit.'

'No father. Not any new one. All's the same. Only I severed from you.'

'But that takes away many things.'

One more pain rose up. Both of them looked outside. The emptiness of within spread high up to the sky. The green hills seen through the window stood quite far.

For the father she was a darling daughter. Once he had put his fingers in her hand. In her soft grip affection was fixed. The same fingers were shaken deeply when on her marriage he gave hers to Nilay's hands. His eyes always remained on the way that took her away and he looked at his empty hand. Nishtha was unaware of his emptiness. She had her family life in which she was completely absorbed. The elder brother's call suddenly brought a storm in her life. Before something's lost into darkness it was necessary to bring a little light. 'His will' the words of the doctor again rang to her ears and the father had already let it go.

She stood nearer to him. With her hands she uncombed his hair that he had made some time before.

'Niku, what are you doing?'

'Bring it to your memory what I'm doing.'

The father laughed and said, 'So easily can I forget your childhood fun?'

Outer bright sky was turning pale slowly. Descending night had brought its shadow into the father's eyes. As Nishtha switched on the light the room shone brightly.

At the late night Nishtha's sleep broke as she listened to the slight groans in pain. She looked at the father's bed and found his pain wrapped face under the dim light of the night lamp. First week chemotherapy had affected his health in the following week. Diarrhoea and vomiting had grown and because of that he complained body-ache and burning sensation. His body often turned one side to the other restlessly. She went near to him. She arranged again the mattress that had come off from his body. It woke him up and he asked, 'Didn't you sleep, Niku?'

'Just now awoke. How do you feel?'

'Body-ache. Hands and legs feel very much.'

'Chemo effect. You try to sleep again. Let me massage your legs. You'll have relaxation.'

'Oh no. Niku, how much will you care.....?' he couldn't speak more.

'O father, why do you say so? It's not that. You too had devoted yourself to me when I had typhoid.'

Dim memories once again glowed. In those days her illness took days after days. The nights passed half slept and half awoke condition. Everything moved but the father never moved from her eyes. He was always there taking care. His loving touch was always there when he placed wet cloth piece on her forehead to soothe her or on the hand where pipe of the bottle was fitted. Biting pain writhed her body. Until she slept he rubbed her forehead or feet. Bitter medicine taste resided in the mouth. She felt only a taste of his love and affection remained.

As she did massage on his feet he was eased. He slept again. She stared at his colourless week face. In those days of my illness he might have waited of me to return to health again, she thought. With the moving hands of the clock time too had changed very much.

Every day after routine treatment, they returned to the rest house and he rested after lunch. Food intake had lowered very much. Nothing he liked to eat. Sometimes vomited soon after lunch. Juice or fruit too won't stay for long. Even little walking was difficult. Felt giddiness. Though these things happened, Nishtha took him out for a walk around the rest house. Fresh evening air filled a little energy in him and then it was marked in his talks. The rest house courtyard possessed plenty of flowers and a few

trees. The mornings always began with chirping of birds and the evenings descended with the returning of those birds to nests. His hands gripped those childhood fingers of Nishtha and then a lot of talks flowed. When he got tired both of them set on a swing and swayed. From the window the hills looked large but from this swing they looked larger. Till the sun went down behind the hills it spread its glow in the father's eyes. The swaying took him to the childhood home. His faltering time would get support and take him to a memory. 'Niku, after you left there was no wish to sit on the swing and sway. Do you remember when we last swayed together?'

She tried but remembered nothing. She turned her face to a neem tree branch and said nothing. The wind shook the branch and dropped few leaves. How much was dropped with the moving time! The wind moved the dropped leaves to father's feet. With his feet the father pushed those yellow leaves away.

'The next day evening of your engagement we swayed last together. You turned talkative. It was the first time that I couldn't pay attention to your words. For you plenty of happiness were to come and to me loneliness without you. Whenever I was troubled and confused I sat and swayed with you. We didn't talk much. Even if I talked about my troubles you were too young to understand. But you were my great support. You were beside me that was enough. Since the day of your engagement I was getting detached of my own self. After your marriage the swing became still.'

Constant talk brought coughing. Nishtha opened the water bottle and offered to him. He drank a little. The father she had seen all the time looked different then. She always felt she was a child in his presence but today she felt grown up suddenly. For a while silence swam in the gentle air flow. The father saw that the broad day-light perhaps wanted to hid behind those hills. He remained seated and spoke nothing then. Nishtha looked at him and asked, 'Aren't they lovely hills, Father?' He simply nodded.

'I too like them very much. In those days of my typhoid illness I was stuck in the home. Energy had gone. My feet were not strong enough to bear my own self. So that I walk you perhaps took me almost such a place, isn't it?'

The father could notice that other hills showed their existence behind the first row of hills. He caressed her head. 'After your illness you had grown very weak. No energy to attend the school. Boring were the days for you. From our old house some hills were seen to a nearby village. We went there. The ascent was tough. You breathed heavily. You liked to fly gas balloons. I brought them with us. Rather than my hands, those balloons pulled you up the hills. Once on the hill, you let loose them and watched them disappearing. I said, 'Look Niku, your illness is also disappearing with the balloons.' And finally a day came, without my help you ran and came down from the hills.'

Nishtha was looking in the sky above the hills as if to find out a balloon! 'Father, these hills too look like them. Shall we go there tomorrow?'

'They are far away. Don't know whether I'll be able to go up.'

'Let's try.'

'Whole the life lifted the burden of this body. But now it weighs much, Niku.'

'We will share the burden, Father.' He didn't say anything.

After returning the hospital they took lunch. Nishtha laid herself on the bed. Because of the father's vomiting her sleep was intermittent. Last night she couldn't sleep well and so she slept immediately. When she woke up the father was sitting his legs stretched. Didn't you take rest?'

'Just before sometime got up. It's almost evening time. Get ready.'

'Why?'

'Why you ask me? Yesterday evening you decided and you forgot?'

'Hills?'

'Yes.'

The last evening stood still in his eyes. She quickly got ready. Kept a water bottle in the car and left for the hills. The way to up the top was rough and patched. Even small bumps for him were painful to bear. With her support he got off the car. Soon he began to go up the slope he panted heavily. Coughing too accompanied it. She had to stop. 'Getting troubles, no?'

'May vomit.'

And he vomited after a few steps. Drank little water that Nishtha gave and sat away. She caressed his back. His condition had worsened more than expectation. She remembered the doctor's words 'If his health deteriorates more problems may come.' For a while darkness spread before her. Controlling her own emotions she said, 'Shouldn't we return, Father?'

He looked back. The rest house from where they came was standing far away. The road was taking turn from his feet and extended up to the top of the hill. The sky above the hills was shining bright. As the father didn't respond she again asked, 'Don't want to return?'

'Niku, after so many days it has pleased me.' He was eased a bit now. Held her hand and got up. Weakness faltered his steps. She began to worry. 'Will you be able to walk up?'

'As much as possible. But won't you take me there?'

'I will but...'

'But...?'

'You are growing weaker. What shall we do?'

'The father firmly gripped her hand and said, 'We shall live. Live the way we lived earlier.'

He took a long breath and stepped forward. The sun that set beyond the hills moved up above the sky along with him and looked more brighter today.

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