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Creative Writing- Short Story
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Upon That Mountain

In another place and another time, Oliver would have known what to do. But he was left dazed and confused now. His broad, masculine forehead was furrowed as he ran his earnest hands through his shoulder-length golden brown hair - as if the act provided some kind of consolation to his twenty-four year old heart.

This was his fourth visit to India and he had completed almost twelve months cumulatively in these last couple of years staying here for three months at a stretch. And this pretty Indian girl had made his heart swirl like no German girl had. His own introversion welcomed her open laughter and his beautiful grey eyes longed to meet her expressive, smiley eyes.

It all began when he met a group of trekkers in Yuksom, Sikkim. He had been going all around Sikkim since the last two months and he had currently stationed himself in this quiet remote place since Yuksom is a base for many mountaineering expeditions. His job as a carpenter in Germany allowed him long breaks and on his holidays he would support himself by working as a trekking guide.

This was exactly what he was doing right now. He, along with some locals, was acting as a mountain guide for a group of trekkers from New Delhi on their way to Goehala - the most popular trekking destination in Sikkim after Dzungri. They had sketched a simple route beginning from Yuksom. But Oliver had never imagined that this straightforward route would lead to sites and situations he would not know how to negotiate.

He had always been good with his hands. He lit a huge fire collecting dry wood from around the campsite. It reflected a warm glow of golden yellow flame on his face. And the more the fire grew in size and intensity, the more pride he felt - like the primeval man who could not believe he had mastered the art of making fire. Yes, there was some primitiveness about Oliver, something raw and basic about him. He was completely at home in the wild, and looked happy with himself for company. Many mistook this aloofness for arrogance but it was only a reservation, a distance, he maintained to cover up his shyness.

And this shyness was what came in between him and the pretty Indian girl. He wanted to talk to her, listen to her crystalline laugh, and exchange the mountaineering stories they had heard. But he could never summon up enough courage to do anything. If he ever initiated conversation, it was always in the presence of other group members. Even as they trekked through the twelve days, he would always be the rear guard trailing behind everyone and helping the slower ones. But once in a while he would meander around the spot where she was walking and then return to his original position.

At nights, under a million twinkling stars, Oliver would wonder how he could possibly feel so much attraction for a person he barely knew and who had such diverse background and life from him: he lived in the German countryside while she was a city girl. It was as divergent as it could get.

It had been the eighth day of trekking today and a particularly tough stretch of climbing through Samiti. Everyone sat around the fire enjoying warm dinner and discussing the day. Oliver sat with his plate close to the makeshift dining table as he usually did and listened to the conversation from a distance, responding occasionally. He felt someone approach him and as he looked up, he realised he was looking at the pretty Indian girl standing close to him. She took a helping of vegetables from the table and sat down softly next to him.

‘Today’s trail was beautiful, wasn’t it? Pretty rhododendron glades on the way,’ she said to Oliver munching her salad.

And after a minute of silenced crunching of cucumber, ‘You know, there’s something extremely fascinating about Sikkim but I can’t seem to figure out what,’ she said with a slight furrow on her delicate forehead.

‘Yes, I know exactly what you mean,’ he replied. ‘I have felt the same so often. That is why I keep coming back here. Perhaps it’s the mountains, the enigmatic presence of the snow-covered Kanchendzonga standing authoritatively and solemnly - so close and yet so far.’

‘Hmmm...that’s true. But I think it’s also the little things - the people, the little houses on the edge of mountains with sloping roofs, the children playing outside in their compact garden filled with bright red roses. I love it all,’ she said with a slight smile. She was now working on the carrots and the crunching noise returned.

And then, ‘It’s funny isn’t it. Such varied people from different corners of the world come together to climb a mountain and suddenly all differences disappear. Climbing, in that sense, is a great equaliser,’ said Oliver. ‘I mean, look at us, for instance. We come from different places and cultures; we have different lives. But one thing that binds us together and puts us on the same plane is the love for adventure and mountaineering.’

She was looking at Oliver with awe now, resting her eyes lazily on the contours of his face, the fair skin was now a light red because of a slight tan.

‘Yes, you’re right,’ she said and at that point she had to break away from the conversation to answer somebody’s question. Oliver saw her slowly walk away towards the rest of the group. It was only now that he realised that he had managed to answer the question that was boggling him down all these days. She and Oliver shared a common

ground that they stood on; they both were adventurers. Not thrill-seekers but adventurers looking for some purpose, some beauty in life.

He suddenly remembered the unforgettable lines from Jon Krakauer's *'Into Thin Air'*, a book that is read and re-read by every passionate climber, that had now been etched into his mind: "What makes climbing great for me, strangely enough, is this life and death aspect. It sounds trite to say but climbing isn't just another game. It isn't just another sport. It is life itself."

So true, he thought to himself. Nothing could give him more pleasure than being on the mountains. For Oliver, bare, rocky mountains were an endless source of inspiration. He derived strength from them - immense mental strength - because mountains are unsurmountable, they do not yield to anyone. They stand dignified, withstanding every strong wind and every biting blizzard.

One day he would climb the Everest, he thought. It was his childhood fantasy ever since he had seen the picture of Tenzing Norgay atop Jomolungma - as the Tibetans called it - waving the Indian and the Nepali flag standing nimbly on a sheet of white ice in a newspaper article. 'One day', he said to himself.

Oliver was in his 'happy place' after a glass of rum that gave his head a light buzz on the last night of the camp back in Yuksom. Everyone was sitting around the fire to protect themselves from the winter cold, sitting huddled in the warm comfort of each other. They were laughing and drinking and enjoying their final moments together as a team.

He stared at the contents of his glass admiring the curious play of light inside it as he rotated it. He could not understand why this feeling of sadness had overshadowed everything today. He was feeling melancholic, something he had not felt ever since his first trekking experience ten years ago. He had assumed that the feeling would never

return; that it had died within him. But the biting feeling was there again. The journey was over and it was time to say goodbye again. That was always the hardest part. It was not the occasional leech, not the steep incline, not even the biting cold, but bidding goodbye. But he was to remain in Sikkim to continue trekking further north and would be returning home only after a month.

He looked for her among the others and sat down next to her. 'So, you're leaving tomorrow morning,' he said gravely.

'Yes, we'll be leaving by five early morning. We have to drive back to Darjeeling.'

The voice was sweet but the words that they formed did not make Oliver happy. They sat in silence for a few minutes.

'I hope we can stay in touch, Oliver. I would like that a lot.'

'But of course,' Oliver said with a faint smile and removed a sheet of paper.

He continued looking up at her with a seriousness that alarmed her, 'It's a crazy story, isn't it?'

'Which story?'

'Our story. It's crazy. I mean, we just met a few days ago. So what do we do now?'

She seemed to think this over in her head and said, 'Oliver, I know what you mean. But there's nothing we can do really.'

And before he could reply to this, she had moved her hand to his shoulder gently resting on it. 'We'll write to each other, okay?' and saying that she stood up and began to walk towards the others who were now retiring to their tents. It was past midnight on the last

night of the trekking expedition. Everyone was now a little emotional, saying goodbye to the rest of the team, the locals and their guides who had become like a part of their extended family. Oliver wished everyone good luck but stayed back near the fire.

He seemed to be contemplating something. He lit a cigarette and began to hum a Pearl Jam song, *'Please don't go out on me, don't go out on me now, never acted up before, don't go on me now...'*

He was wondering whether they would meet again someday. He could not understand why God had made their paths cross like this when there was nothing that could be done to help the situation. Perhaps it was the last time he would ever see her. And in a few hours she would be gone. Forever. The thought pained him and he lit another cigarette to distract himself.

A climb or a trek of just a few days alters so many things within oneself, Oliver thought. But it is difficult to say why the psychological gearshift happens so abruptly after a short tryst with the mountains. Pictures of the trip paint a strange melancholy and the memory of distant drumming sounds of glaciers and rivers space out the faculties like nothing else on earth.

And then it gradually descended on him: one of the rules for mountain manners is to leave things the way one finds them - 'Leave open gates open, closed gates closed.' It was simple, really. Life itself is an adventure and when it is time to leave one must leave all things as they were. Leave no trace of your presence, and these days, they say not even your footprints. She had understood this and she had known this all along. They were both adventurers who were looking for adventure. Not thrill but adventure. They must leave the open gates open. Because there can never be a conclusion to their story.

That night the entry in Oliver's diary read: 'There will be paths through this forest and you and I will lose ourselves in the soft curves and folds of the ground. We will come to the water's edge and lie on the grass.'

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