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The Mountain

by Vandana Singh | Sep 19, 2017 | Fiction

They had been climbing all afternoon. First it was a game of hide-and-seek in the underbrush and over rocky outcrops. But by accident or design their game had taken them higher up the slope until the roof of the guest house was lost among the trees below, and the forest had closed around them, dimming the afternoon light. It was only the first day, and the girl had a moment when she thought of herself in the unimaginable future, looking back and thinking, *yes, this was the best holiday ever*. She had been making such mental time-leaps with increasing frequency, and sometimes they would suffuse her with melancholy, because her brother was still so little, still incapable of thinking of the abstract future as something that became real as you grew up. Now he heaved himself atop a great slab of rock and looked back at her in triumph – he was the greatest explorer in the world, and he was going to climb to the top of the mountain.

“Maybe we’ll see Everest,” she said, gently mocking.

“We’ll find the *sun*,” he declared. “The sun has gone out of the world and we’ll find it.”

She wiped the sweat off her brow and grinned at him, and they pulled themselves up the now steep slope with the help of a tree-trunk here, a boulder there, startling a flock of finches in a bush, or silencing a sonorous chorus of crickets. There was the sense that the woods around them were filled with friendly presences – no leopards here, they had been told when the family had come to stay at the guest house halfway up the mountain. It was a good thing to escape from the inexplicable world of the adults, with their strange obsessions and peculiar anxieties, to leave them to their gossip and drinks and the hope of getting the TV to work. But oh! She had forgotten her phone, which she had left on top of the stone wall surrounding the guest house. Her mother had

made her promise to take it with her at all times. Maybe they should go back and get it. But her brother was already quite a bit ahead of her, calling to her and laughing – her greater responsibility was to him. So she climbed on after him. It had become darker under the trees. Surely the afternoon was still there, waiting for them at the top of the mountain, with the sun in the blue sky, golden as an egg yolk, a prize waiting to be retrieved for the world by a pair of young heroes. So up they went.

But after a while it was dark enough, with the trees bending close and conspiratorial, that she began to worry. On one of their stops for water (the bottles were still half full) they finished the last of the hardboiled eggs and the plums. Her brother remarked how the plums tasted of eggs, and the eggs of plums. She put the empty brown bag in her pocket and looked worriedly down the slope, thinking of the abandoned phone and the prospect of scoldings. They had best return. It was her responsibility as the elder sibling to make that declaration, but even as she opened her mouth she was startled by a cry from her brother. “Look!”

They were close to the top. Up behind a cluster of trees was a solid gray wall, smooth, curving up, and at the top of a short flight of cement stairs was a door tasseled with fern-like climbing plants. A strange, round ruin of a building lay held in the tangle of greenery. This she could not resist. She swallowed her reluctance and her responsibility; they went up the steps, pushed aside the vegetation with a stout stick she had found on the way, and turned the door handle.

To their surprise it opened, although with a creak that startled them. The sound echoed in the interior, hinting of a grand emptiness. They stepped in. The roof was a curved ceiling far above their heads, and a great slanting column rose up toward it. The floor was littered with dirt, twigs, and there was an animal smell, faint and pungent. They stood under the dome, looking around in the dim light, which came from cracks in the walls as well as the half-open door. Something tugged at the edge of her consciousness – a memory of a picture in a book. An encyclopedia opened to a certain page, the two of them looking. He had been sucking his thumb – she’d promised to show him something special if he stopped – a picture in a book about stars – an observatory. Yes, that’s what it was, an abandoned observatory, gone to rust, enveloped by the jungle and time.

She told him.

“It looks like a howling dog,” he said of the telescope. “Stars – I want to see stars!”

But neither of them knew how to use a telescope, and besides, it was daytime. She looked around. Her eyes had now adjusted to the darkness and structures were making their shapes apparent, stepping out of the shadows as though shyly introducing themselves – there was a large desk or platform, there was – yes – a stairway, a spiral stairway going up – up to a balcony near the mouth of the howling dog! They saw it at the same time – together they stepped toward it. She said, conscious of her responsibility – “Let me go first,” because who knew what unseen dangers lurked up there, but he was already climbing. She followed close behind. The steel stairway marked their progress with muffled clangs, and at last they were on a balcony, and there was another door, and that opened with some effort, and they were – surely they were finally at the very top of the mountain.

They were surprised into silence. Certainly they were at the top of *something* – if it was the mountain, then the mountain had become the world, because there seemed nothing below them but the balcony door and darkness – and above them was a vast space filled with stars. It seemed to the girl that the stars were different, somehow, and that there were rivers of light running between them, forming an interstellar web so faint you had to look very hard to see it. But it was there. Under this sky it was cold, and there was no sun after all. Instinctively they held hands, looking up at the vista, where even the darkness seemed to be filled with hints of shape and movement, as though winged beasts the color of night were engaged in epic journeys. It occurred to her that perhaps this was a false ceiling, and that somewhere nearby was another spiral stairway that led to another balcony where they would find the real sky, with the sun in it – but if that were the case, how could this false ceiling be so large? She had never seen a sky so wide, so alive with possibilities.

But it was cold, and she was beginning to be a little afraid. She wanted to be back in the guest house, reading a book, half-listening to the adults. She wanted dinner and lights and conversation. “Let’s go home,” she said, and he nodded wordlessly and held tightly to her as they edged inside the door. Inside, she was relieved to see light from the door below them illuminating the stairs faintly – they came down in a rush, out the main door, which she clanged shut. Down under the trees was the mellow green light of sun through leaves, and the sleepy chirping of birds. Somewhere, very faint, was the sound of water flowing. How had they missed that before? They smiled in relief at each other

and began the long descent.

When they finally burst out of the forest into the clearing where the guest house stood, the sun had nearly tired of waiting for them – it lay low in the space between two mountains, red and sleepy. There was her phone, on the stone wall where she had left it, but there were no worried messages from her mother, only an inadvertent photo taken of the empty sky. The adults had got the TV to work and had been having such a fine time that they had not missed the children.

Later, when she was reading her book on the sofa, replete with a dinner of parathas and chana dal, she found herself staring at the page without comprehension, thinking of what they had discovered up on the mountain. The two of them had agreed without needing to say it in words that this was not a thing one shared with adults. She had one of those moments again, when she saw herself in the future, growing up so fast she was afraid she would leave her brother behind. Time was a strange thing – in childhood it was an invisible playmate, making night and day and dinnertime, and birthdays, but growing up it became a tyrant – it promised pain, and partings, and ultimately death. She had discovered this when her grandmother passed away a year ago – that time had teeth – and now in the warm room she shivered. But still, there was the fact of the discovery of whatever it was they had found – a new sky? A false ceiling? Another universe? A secret the world had breathed to them: *things are not as they seem*.

She thought that she would return here, maybe six or seven years later, with someone – not her brother – to whom she would have recounted the story of the first visit. They would climb up to the ruined observatory with breathless anticipation, but the door at the top of the spiral stairway would be sealed shut. The secret safe. The thought pleased her.

There was the faintest sense of a faultline opening within her, a tenuous, barely discernible line, a crack in her conception of the world. *Things are not as they seem*. She had the revelation that grownups, in their stolid practicality, their obsession with the stuff around them they called reality – were in truth as innocent, as ignorant as little children. Look at them, with their eyes glued to the TV, hardly different from her brother engrossed in a game on their father's phone! She felt strangely set apart from everyone. Setting aside her book, she slipped out of the room to the verandah in front of the guest house.

In the night sky the stars were out in their millions. The sky was so much darker here than in the city! She had never seen so many stars. But this night, if not familiar, was at least not strange. She had seen such a sky on TV and in books. There seemed no hint of a silver web between the points of light, or dark, winged creatures swooping across the night on strange odysseys. And yet – all those stars, all those worlds! A night-bird called out from the forest, a long, low, quavering cry that made her shiver with an understanding she could not put in words. Could it be possible that this universe was, at some times and places, as strange, as unfamiliar, as the other? *There's so much I don't know*, she thought, turning back toward the house. The partly open door was limned with light – laughter and conversation wafted out. She thought of herself in the nebulous future, grown up and looking back at this very moment, thinking – *That's where it all began.*

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