

Fiction:

Saurav Kumar Chaliha

(Translated from the original in Assamese, 'Xihoteu Pahar Bogale', by Rituparna Borah)

"What's that light, over there?"

"That's the light from torch flames. That's a Khasi village; Smit or something akin to that name. Or perhaps it's Laitkor or else LumSiem."

"You don't know for sure?"

"It has been a long time now; I have forgotten."

"What's happening there?"

"Tonight's a festive night."

"Nongkrem Dance?"

"No, I suppose it's not yet time for Nongkrem dance. Perhaps it's Shad Suk Mynsiem or some other festival."

"And what's that sound?"

"That's dhols' drumming- and the flute, and listen, that's a song. Listening? Those are guitar chords. It may be the Duitara: the Khasi musical instrument. It's like the Spanish guitar."

"From a distance, it feels so pleasant to the ears."

"From a distance, even the tiny lights of the torches look so beautiful! Just go a bit more uphill and you'll see, down on the plains, numerous tiny lights, millions and millions of lights twinkling."

"What would that be?"

"That would be Shillong."

"You know every place on this hill? You know the way to that village?"

"I don't know every place, but of course, a few."

"Is this the hill you wrote to me about? The same one you came to climb alone?"



around the hill."

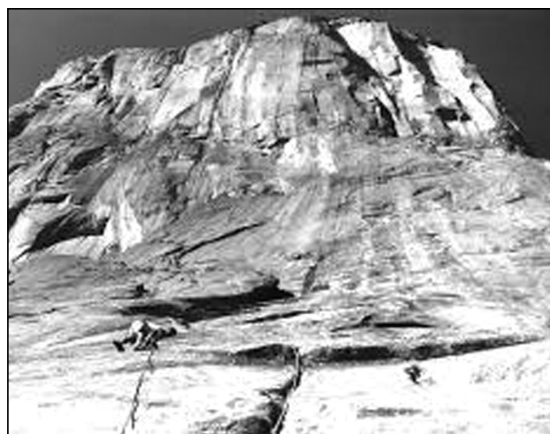
"Bibha and Nibha were kids then, weren't they?"

"Six years and eight years. Now they are grown up girls. It was five years ago. Tired?"

"No; not at all."

"Can you climb some more?"

"Sure. Sure. I don't want to miss out on your lights of Shillong."



"This is the hill I wrote to you about. The same one I came to climb at times; times when I thought about you. Initially I didn't come by myself. Initially I used to accompany Bibha and Nibha here, for a morning walk; early in the mornings. Later I grew familiar with the ways

"Whenever I visit this hill I am reminded of a story I once read. I can't recall the story but I remember the name of the story- They climbed the hill."

"They climbed the hill. What a lovely name!"

"I thought of you. I thought, you and

me, we will climb the hill, the tallest, the friendliest hill. But never considered it would be possible."

"But today I am climbing the hill alongside you-"

"Hmm, still I can't believe it; still I don't believe we will be climbing the hill. Climbing the hill is not my only purpose; I don't simply want the hill. I want the hill along with you on it, just like I want its rocks and springs with it, its grasses and oaks."

"The hill is yours; its springs and its oaks are yours."

"One of my wishes has been fulfilled today."

"And what about the other wish?"

"I don't have any more courage left to wish for the other. I wished for it five years back. Even today I would like to wish for it, but now a day I don't have any courage, any right. Can you see something?"

"I don't see anything. What is it?"

"Hmm, it's already dark. Nothing is visible. After some time the mist shall approach. Do you hear the stones jiggle along with your footsteps?"

"I hear."

"And the wind whistling amidst the oaks?"

"Yes."

"Do you hear the crickets chirping?"

"That's the crickets' chirp?"

"I am not sure but I think it is."

"I hear that."

"I am reminded of a book. Japanese poetry. Stars, Moon and the Crickets Chirp. There's no moon tonight in the sky but there are the stars."

"Stars and the Crickets' Chirp. Lovely name. The amount you have read!"

"I wrote as well. Can you remember the letters I wrote to you five years back? The way I came to Shillong using the

visit to aunt's home as an excuse and then spent the time thinking about you?"

"I remember. You wrote- just before dusk, you came and sat upon a rock on this hill. Faraway downhill a brook, like one hefty rope, cascaded; its gurgle invading the darkness of the serene hill. Hour after hour you sat alone, without a man in sight but now and then and out of the blue a Khasi wood cutter would appear from one end of the hill with a bundle of firewood on his shoulder, descending the hill and passing you by, through the pathway, disappearing from sight- and the whistling wind continued to blow over this hill, the springs, the oaks, your thoughts and your desires, tossing your hair and unsettling the muffler on your neck, time and again."

"You remember word to word. Those thoughts and those desires are not yet gone, but for those I am neither left with any courage, nor any right. Are you cold?"

"No. The breeze is not chilly; in fact, I feel good. Have you brought your muffler?"

"Yes. You want my overcoat?"

"No. Thanks. I can also hear the sound of the stones and grasses below your shoes. When the grass is wet with mist at night, will it make sounds like this?"

"No, you won't hear such sounds at night. Have you ever heard of the name U SosoTham?"

"SosoTham? Never heard before. Is it a Khasi name?"

"A Khasi poet; he lives no more. You remind me of one of his poems; 'The dew drops sparkle in the morning light. In search of pearls I take the road, leading away from home. Away from home

my heart would hurt. But then, the drops of tears I treasure shall turn into my pearls.' In the last few years I too have travelled a lot; away from home...you slipped again. Hold my hand. Only two more steps and then you'll catch sight of something very beautiful."

"The lights of Shillong?"

"No, another light. A light from years ago. May be it's there even today."

"What? What is it?"

"You'll come to know after a few moments. Come, hold my hand, you'll just have to climb a little more. Come."

"I really want to know about the light. I am curious."

"Almost there."

"Why don't you hope for the other wish to come true? In the last few years I sent you back four-five times; I had to send you back. But look; now I am here with you. Today I am climbing your hill with you."

"Correct. And at the end of those four-five years you told me to shed that wish; a wish that had no hope of coming true, no assurance of being fulfilled, must be left behind. I told you, I'll do as you wish."

"True. Circumstances demanded me to tell you so. Circumstances."

"Yes, I am not denying that."

"And you are going to stick to what I asked of you?"

"Would you like it if I don't stick to it? After all I gave you my word!"

"Yes. You gave me your word. You must stick to it...how far is it? What light, I really want to know."

"A little more. Meanwhile why don't you listen to these again; the music of dhols and the guitar from the distant Khasi village, our stories and their songs and the crickets' chirp, twinkling flames of the torches and those calm constellations of stars...look, we finally arrived...climb to this peak, look between these two oaks-can you see?"

"Yes, I can see. A star. A beautiful star."

"Look, how it is standing, inclined between the oaks. There are times when the star moves away from that spot, then



I have to climb another rock, or peek from somewhere else, then I can again capture the star in this position, between the oaks. Sometimes the star moves upward or downward, on those nights it is impossible to bring it to this spot."

"Do you feel very sad then?"

"Yes, I feel very sad then."

"It's such a beautiful star!"

"My star, my light, my essence. Your star."

"My star?"

"It was always your star. I give it to you."

"Thank you. Now onwards it's my property. Can I use it anyway I want to? Would it listen to me?"

"Why not?" If necessary it'll lay down its life for you."

"Yes. After all you have given me the star. Definitely it'll listen to me, definitely. If necessary, it'll lay down its life for me."

"You gifted me my hill. I gifted you your star. Tonight is a festive night in

the Khasi village. The chirping of the crickets, the gurgle of the spring, the whistling wind amidst the oaks-get pale in comparison to the songs of the young boys and girls and the triad of the guitar and the dhol, echoing through the heart of the hill; tonight is a night of happiness for the Khasis, a night of contentment for them. Tonight, thousands and thousands of torches obscure the starlit sky and the splendour of the city; every part of the young bodies dance with pas-

see that hope? What can assure you of the thing you want?"

"I can't tell; I don't know."

"Isn't that assurance me, myself?"

"No, you can't be the assurance, because it's your assurance I want. Something else, something else."

"Something else? Okay, something else then. After a while we'll be climbing the highest peak of the hill, the lights of Shillong would become visible and we'll return to our life in the city once again.



sion and excitement, their arms and feet spontaneously following the rhythm; tonight, now, the beats of the dhol are getting faster and faster; tonight, now, I give you the star I had treasured for so long, my wish of giving you is now fulfilled."

"And what about the wish of taking from me? Why don't you fulfil that wish too?"

"I told you already, I can't wish for that anymore, for that I need some kind of a promise of certainty, some kind of hope of seeing my wish coming true; I want a definite hope."

"What needs to happen for you to

While we are here, why don't we look at the festive lights once more, listen to the rhythmic beats of the dance once more, the music of fulfilment of wish- this is the music of fulfilment of your wish and I am its assurance. It's me who can give you the hope you want- you believe, don't you, that if you see a falling star, your wish comes true? Look, look, how my star is falling between those two oaks, how it is laying down its life for me..."

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