

SHORT STORY

# The Crossing

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THE stars still shone out of the navy blue sky when Sandip woke them. Anuradha awoke at once, sensing rather than hearing his call. There was an electric, urgent impulse, which made her spring out of bed — even though she wasn't fully awake.

"Yes," she muttered, foggily aware of the shape at the window.

"I'm awake." Her heartbeat, uneven, was trying to adjust its rhythm from slumber to sudden wakefulness.

The stars looked biting cold, embedded in a dull, cellophane translucence. She lingered at the window even after Sandip drifted away, seeking out the hill they were going to climb. With its sharp, twisted peak, it was usually quite distinct from the other, more gently moulded hilltops. Right now, though, it looked vague, indefinite, almost a part of the sky.

That's where I'm going, she thought, feeling an acid tingling in her belly.

"Do you want to use the loo first?" Coming out of the dark, Poonam's sleep-thickened voice startled her. It sounded oracular, anonymous as a stranger's.

"All right," she said, smiling a little. Poonam hated getting up early; she savoured those extra precious minutes in bed. Now as she turned, she became painfully aware of a crick in her neck and felt irritated. Of all the days to wake up with a stiff neck!

Clumsily, she made her way to the bathroom and sluiced herself with tepid water. She dressed, tugged a comb through her short coarse hair, her body going through the

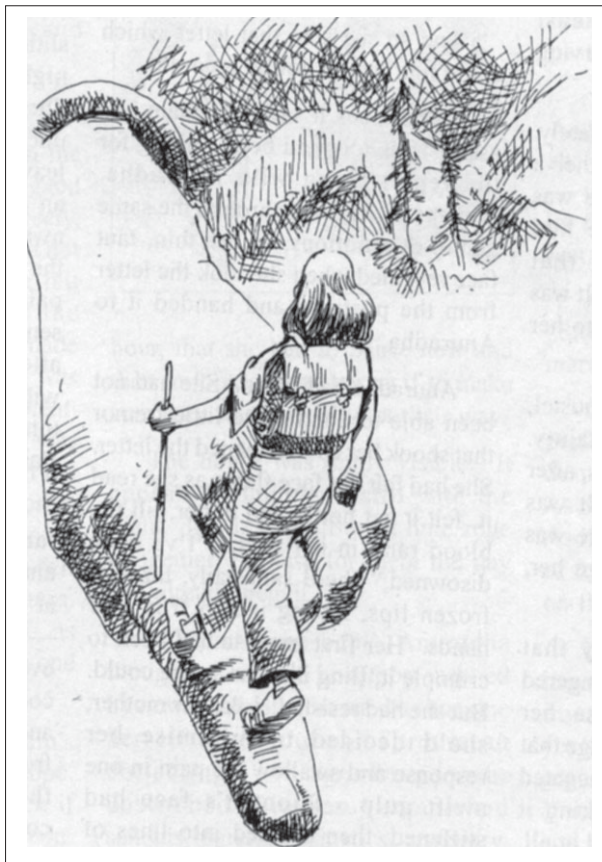
motions like a correctly programmed robot. But her mind kept veering around to the hill — that unreal, improbable destination. On those smooth, soft evenings when they sat outside, faintly curtained by the darkness, a little befuddled by the chilly, oversweet scent of the *raat ki rani*, the lights from that hill had twinkled a secret, alluring message at her. Of a life remote, magical — removed from everything she had ever

known and experienced. Of an existence high, safe and snugly secluded.

So when Sandip had suggested the trek, she'd been the one who'd first cried out, "Yes, let's go there!" her round, normally placid face aglow, even though she'd never done that sort of thing before.

But she hadn't done this sort of thing before either — walked away from home. Or rather not returned. Her very presence here was an act of rebellion, an open defiance of her mother's wishes. So much so, that she often forgot what she had done. She'd always been a good daughter, eager to please, obedient, never rocking the boat. So removed was this course of action, so alien to her nature, that she forgot that this wasn't just a holiday visit to a friend. But when she remembered, as she did right now, a tiny needle began to bore into her, deeper and deeper, diffusing a horrible, tingling uncertainty. What had she done? Where was she headed?

Perhaps she hadn't expected it to turn out like this. She'd expected her mother to pursue, threaten



or coax her back. Mollify her by announcing an immediate cancellation of the marriage arranged for her against her wishes — which had provided the provocation. She had hoped that her mother would realise that she was tired of being led by the nose — that she had wishes and desires of her own too.

But more likely, deep down, she'd known that Amma would not respond in such a manner. It was not like her to coax, wheedle. She ordered and people obeyed — particularly Anuradha.

And yet how could anyone react like that, when a daughter whose marriage date has been finalised decides not to return home — to acknowledge the event with a hollow, echoing silence? A silence like a still, dark well, that goaded one to throw stones into it, so at least you could see movement, ripples — at least something to disturb that unnerving depth.

And she had achieved it ultimately. There had been a ripple, or rather a tremendous wave. Maybe she was prepared for that too. She had certainly invited it with that provocative, challenging letter. It was the second letter she'd written to her mother.

The first, written from the hostel, probably betrayed her uncertainty. Made her mother smile, perhaps, after her initial fury had abated. It was possible that at first her silence was calculated, designed to unhinge her, bring her to heel.

She had been shaken by that silence but not frightened. Angered rather, by the lack of response, her mother did not even acknowledge that she'd left home. The silence negated the reality of her action, making it appear as if it hadn't happened at all.

It was as if she did not exist, had no connection with her mother.

How impatiently she had waited for her reply after she left the hostel and went home with Poonam! She had been apprehensive, of course. Suppose Amma decided to come and haul her back bodily? What would she do? When it didn't happen, self-recrimination took over. Had she wounded her mother so much, that she was shattered, laid low? She had spent many days wondering if she might even have fallen ill. But as the arid, unresponding days trickled by, silent and inexorable as sand flowing through an hourglass, she had felt confused. A burgeoning knot of pain had replaced the confusion. Was this all it deserved — this momentous decision of hers — from her own mother? Did she mean so little that she could be totally ignored, her existence erased?

And so she sent that letter which could not, would not be ignored.

“What does it say?” Poonam had asked. She too, had been waiting for the reply, along with Anuradha. Perhaps she had run through the same gamut of emotions, as her thin, taut face revealed when she took the letter from the postman and handed it to Anuradha.

Anuradha had paled. She had not been able to control the little tremor that shook her as she opened the letter. She had felt her face flame as she read it, felt it get hotter and hotter, till the blood rang in her ears. “I've been disowned,” she'd said gaily, through frozen lips, letting it slip from her hands. Her first impulse had been to crumple it, fling it as far as she could. But she had resisted. Like her mother, she'd decided to minimise her response and swallow the pain in one swift gulp. Poonam's face had stiffened, then creased into lines of

sympathy. “Don't worry,” she'd said, her slender frame bending forward comfortingly.

Anuradha had shrugged again, though a huge black space was opening up inside, expanding so fast that she was afraid that she'd disintegrate any minute.

And if Poonam's cousins Pratap and Nikki hadn't appeared just then and suggested a walk down to town, who knows what might have happened? Even now, though it was a whole week since she received the letter, an awful chill numbed her whenever she remembered. In the midst of conversation she would freeze, conscious that things were different now that she had been abandoned. There was no solid supportive presence behind her. She was all on her own, stumbling off into the dark to some unknown place.

Sometimes an insidious fear slithered over her in the middle of the night, crawling out of her dreams. She'd wake up with a start, shaken by uncontrollable rigors, which would leave her feeling raw, vulnerable as an open wound. And she would lie awake, thinking and thinking, until the darkness dissolved and the hard, pale light stung her eyeballs. In a sense, the second letter had been an attempt to reaffirm her connection with her mother. So she had been totally unprepared for that relentless slashing of bonds.

But these moments were becoming rarer. If her mother could be unrelenting, so could she. Although at times she could hate herself for it — there was also an exhilaration, an evanescent fluttering, as though she could take off from one of these hills and fly to another at will. Float. Fall free like the wheeling birds that rode the currents all day. Take off confidently knowing the air, however

unsubstantial it might appear, would hold her up.

The trek had become even more important to her since she received the letter. She could not understand why. But she felt an almost uncontrollable restlessness urging her on, away from this scene, this place where pain still hung around her, its scent fresh and raw, to the challenge of something new. "Ready, Anu?" Poonam's voice was nasal, obstructed — as though she had a cold. "I'm getting the food."

"All right." Hurriedly, Anuradha pulled the covers over the bed, tightened her shoelaces, picked up her knapsack and walked out.

Sandip and Nikki and Pratap waited outside, looming hazily through the darkness.

"Shall we start?" Without waiting for an answer, Sandip began to trudge up the dirt track that led away from the house towards the town, and ultimately the hill.

They followed.

It felt strange, padding off in the wispy darkness. Her knapsack tugged painfully at her neck. But perversely, she nursed that discomfort, would not adjust it to ease the ache. She felt nothing right now. None of the urgency, the need for haste that made Sandip stride so briskly. There was no sense of adventure, no excitement. Only the muzzy dullness which was the result of waking up at 4:30 in the morning. A kind of disorientation at being on the move when she should have been snug in bed. She felt distant, removed from the others. They seemed alien, strangers — as they trudged along, insulated from one another by the greyness.

Vaguely she took note of Sandip's stocky figure higher up on the slope. He halted briefly, turned to check if they were following, and then went on.

He had insisted that they leave early so they could complete most of the climb before the sun grew too strong. He was the only experienced trekker among them. Neither Nikki, skinny but with a wiry resilience, nor Pratap, exuberant, articulate, but oddly silent right now, had trekked that far before. Nor had Poonam. And Anuradha, of course, was a complete novice.

She tried to quicken her step, and keep to a regular pace, in spite of Poonam, who walked erratically beside her. She felt so wonderstruck at the thought of setting off at this



hour, that she had to pause now and then to look around her as if to make sure they were actually on their way.

The house was dimly visible. It appeared somnolent, still with the night. It was in a different time zone altogether, because for them the day had already begun.

If I had gone back, Anuradha thought — I would be almost married by now. Almost. She tried to imagine herself in the throes of trousseau collecting — agonising over unstitched blouses, unmatched sandals, purses, cosmetics, jewellery,

household apparatus. Floating atop that feverish effervescence weddings seemed to produce. The centre of it all.

What had made her balk, refuse what she should have accepted calmly — joyfully rather, as her inevitable fate?

The man's photograph floated up before her eyes — a bland, inoffensive face. Anonymous, a stranger's face. Odd that she should have a stronger recollection of the photograph, than the actual person whom she'd met. The grave, perhaps tense young man who had asked her all the expected questions, in a somewhat mechanical manner, as if they had been learned by rote. To which she had given dull, truthful answers, feeling herself thicken by degrees. Turn dense, so dense that she could not respond to the sudden smile that ended the interrogation; which perhaps signaled that a test had been successfully passed.

"No! No!" she had cried out when Amma had smilingly confirmed what she'd suspected. "I can't live with that — that person!" Because that's what he felt like — someone nameless — just a person.

Amma's face had chilled her. "Stop being childish! You have to get married."

Granted, it had appeared to be the perfect match. But she had sensed a desperation in her mother's insistence. As if this might be her last chance. As if she were perishable, like a piece of fruit, that might rot if left too long on the branch...

They were walking through the town now — past shuttered shop fronts, through grubby streets where yesterday's garbage rotted on the ground. The stench of decay hung around them, like the dark — faint and cloudy.

Suddenly, street dogs appeared in a clamorous pack. The sound of their barking cut painfully through the cottony stillness. Pratap stooped to fling a stone at them. They retreated — some yelped, though none of them had been hit. They continued to bark from a safer distance. She found it hard to control the desire to run.

It was a relief to descend into a pine forest again after that. They filed after Sandip, who still marched ahead, important, full of purpose. The leader who knew the way.

“Isn’t it wonderful, being out at this time,” Poonam whispered. Her sleep-rumpled face was still ecstatic.

“Yes!” Anuradha began to nod but the crick in her neck stopped her short. Was it the darkness that made them speak in whispers? As if their voices might disturb someone who still slept? Or perhaps it was the pines which stood around them, wrapped in their private silences. Suddenly she was reminded of her mother again. Would it have been better if she had maintained that silence? Or sent a letter as subdued as a whisper, not one like an outraged yell? At least it would not have led to that break, she thought, feeling the soft pine needles, damp with the morning dew, squishing beneath her feet. The silence itself implied a break. No, her own action was the break. The silence was merely its consequence. The nothingness that remained when bonds were severed.

She had always been aware that a daughter’s links are tenuous. And once she left, she could not return. As a guest perhaps, but not with the same freedom, the same sense of belonging. But a daughter who flouted her mother’s wishes, what chance did she have to return, even as a guest?

Still, she had felt the need to fill that silence with something. Even if

it were her suppurating grievances. Or had she felt the need to explain, to justify her actions?

“...And since I am a burden to you —” ( she had written in that letter, the second one). “I have decided to remove myself and carry that weight on my own. Thanks to you (and what a double edged statement that was) I am now capable of doing it. The law recognises my ability to make my own decisions — why can’t you? Is it so essential that I tie myself to someone you have picked out, when I don’t want it? Are my own wishes so unimportant?...” How stilted it sounded—but it was true, so true.

She had known she was not being educated for any particular purpose. Only because it was socially required. It also helped to use up that uncomfortable period of time during which a suitable match was being arranged. And it was convenient for her mother that she remain at the hostel, leaving her without the problems a grown up daughter can entail. The constant watching and guarding, keeping her spotless and pure, till she could be passed on to the person to whom she properly belonged. And how neatly everything had fallen into place. Within the last six months that remained for her to complete her M.A., the perfect match had been located and approved of. And actually nothing remained after that but to complete the ceremony which would allow her to wash her hands of her. Free of her maternal duties which were particularly pressing in Amma’s case since her father wasn’t there to share the burden.

But she had spoiled it all. No doubt she was already being reviled as an unnatural, thoughtless daughter. Her mother was receiving the sympathy that was her due as the

abandoned parent. Perhaps she had been selfish, she had thought of herself rather than her mother. But why was it demanded of her — that she offer herself up as the sacrifice?

They were out of the forest now, walking down a broad, paved road that sloped downwards. An incongruity in that remote forest setting. Who could have cobbled that road — and when? It was an ancient piece of work—the stones worn slippery smooth, making descent tricky. She could hear the regular, monotonous murmur of flowing water, and she realised that the road sloped down to a river.

The sky had lightened considerably. There was a tea shop close by and Sandip had already stopped there. “We’ll have tea here,” he called out.

Anuradha slipped off her knapsack. Pratap stopped, stretched and yawned, then sat down on the low stone wall that ran along the edge of the road. Poonam pulled out the sandwiches they’d brought. They sat there munching, sipping hot tea while the water foamed and tumbled below them.

“The tough part begins now,” Sandip said, frowning at the river.

Anuradha looked at the hill. It rose sheer and high, straight up from the river. Shrubs and trees crowded its flanks in an untidy jumble. There was nothing of that matt blueness she’d glimpsed day after day. One of the illusions distance created. What would it be like on top, she wondered?

“Okay, let’s start,” Sandip said, putting his glass down with a pronounced `ting`.

“Are we supposed to cross the river — like that?” Poonam asked.

“Yes,” Nikki nodded. His grin held a hint of malice. “There was a

bridge of sorts, but I believe it was washed away last year.”

Anuradha stared at the narrow plank of wood spanning the gushing rivulet. She felt a harsh chill settle on her. The excitement ebbed, and then vanished in one swift moment.

“I don’t think I can,” she heard Poonam say, her voice dwindling in her throat, eaten up by terror.

Suddenly her own fear seemed to vanish, confronted with Poonam’s greater distress.” Of course you can,” her own voice rang out uncomfortably smug. “It’s nothing, nothing at all.”

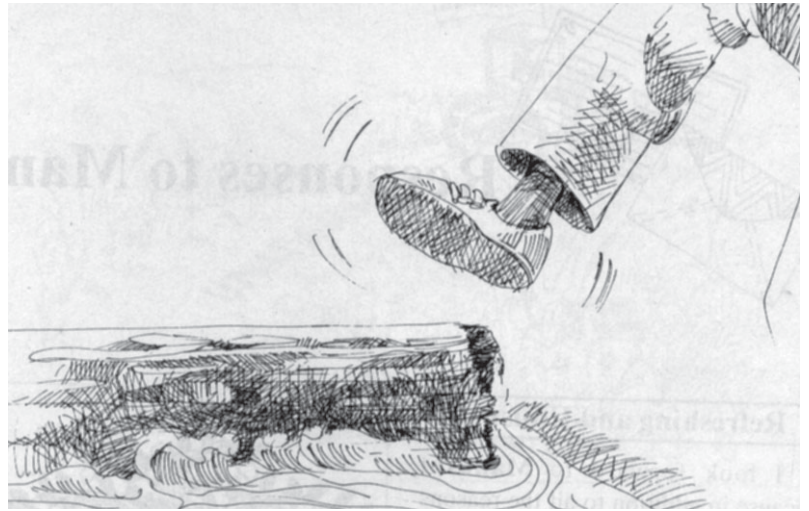
“No — I can’t,” Poonam quavered. “Isn’t there any other way?”

She looked at them again, the rushing river, the narrow plank, and felt a sudden exhilaration.

“No, there isn’t,” Sandip said with dispassionate finality.

She saw the hill again with its beckoning lights. Her longing to go forward was so strong, blotting out the streaky dawn that grew above the river.

“Come on!” she urged Poonam. She rose, walked down like a sleepwalker. She walked down to the river and stepped on to the plank. She could feel that first unsteady step. The plank swayed and she felt a nauseous sweat cool her brow, sick and clammy. She stepped on, her insides molten, shapeless. Suddenly a sliver of sunlight pierced her eyes — unnervingly bright — she felt her foot slide off the plank. A moment of pure fear — vivid and sudden as a flash of lightning — engulfed her, dimming the cries from the bank behind her as she came down hard astride the plank. Felt a numb, paralysing terror as she gazed into the water boiling beneath her... then... an overpowering urge to succumb, pour herself away into the



swift torrent, let it carry her off of its own volition.

Sandip’s voice broke the spell. But she had already pulled herself up by the time he had stepped on to the plank to help. Edged her way to solid ground...

A flutter still pulsed in her chest, a memory, a faint remnant of her fear as she sat on the bank, shaking her head at Poonam’s anxious queries. She’d come across in a trice — anxiety erasing her terror.

And something like the calm she had felt when she was on the train en route to Poonam’s house, came over her as she gazed at the foaming water, distant now, no longer magnetic, mesmerising. Would Amma have cared if she had succumbed to its

allure? What a beautiful revenge it could have been! What a perfect escape!

The impulse seemed infantile now, ridiculous as she glanced up at the hill that towered above her. She could see the road, steep, rocky, visible for a short distance — then losing itself among the shrubs and the sharply scented evergreens.

She thought of the hills behind it, layer upon layer upon layer. If she walked and walked, she could traverse them all, perhaps. And what lay beyond — who knew?

Breathing in the tangy air she thought of Amma — alone. Anuradha knew what lay beyond those hills... She’d find it one day, the way home, find Amma again. But only after she’d traversed all those hills. □

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