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Dorothy Dancer Has Had Enough



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She imagined impaling her husband on the molasses-stained tusk of that elephant. “It should’ve been you,” she said.

Dorothy Dancer hated the hills. The incessant rain drumming up a demon rhythm on the tin roof; that smell of wet mud on her body, like a second skin, always around; even the whistling thrush that arrived every morning, comical at

first, now sounded like her dead sister who just wouldn't shut up. She stared at the bird from her window, as the rain cleared for a moment, and wanted nothing more than to wring its skinny neck.

She stretched her long legs, and the sound of her knees cracking was lost in a roll of thunder. The clouds were sagging, and the morning mist wrapped itself around tree trunks: rotting brown bodies floating toward her. She held the cup of tea to her forehead, shut her eyes, and longed for it all to end. For a landslide to arrive from above and sweep them all off this mountain into the tea gardens below. Instead, she felt Albie rub his damp nose up against her thigh. She saw her reflection in his light brown eyes: an old lady with disheveled hair and two different earrings hanging from her ears, the only part of her body that the wrinkles had spared.

Her bungalow, once humming with diversions, had arrived confidently into disrepair. Why fix the bottle-green threshold gnawed away by blind mice? Why change the beige curtains brittle with dust and silverfish? There was a certain pleasure, the only kind she experienced nowadays, in watching it all wither away.

The only thing she wished she had control over were her memories: the kind that arrived in full-blown technicolour, unannounced and uninvited, from a different age. A sea of mulligatawny soup, garlands of handmade sausages, slabs of salted beef, and a steady flow of rhododendron wine and Superfine No. 25. Just the thought of all that food made her want to vomit. Connie Francis singing about unrequited love from a gramophone as the laughter grew louder, tumblers clinking, her husband's broad palm on the small of her back pressing her against his familiar body, dancing; the sweet aroma of Charminar smoke drifting to the chandelier ceiling. Dorothy wanted to forget, but unlike her sagging skin and pockmarked face, her mind was sharper than ever. She wanted to remove it from her skull and bury it among the azaleas growing wild in her garden. But the memories kept arriving, one on top of another, reminding her of a life so far in the background that it surely must have happened to someone else.

It was half past eight when Dorothy poured four fingers of chhaang into her empty teacup. The dregs swirled to the top and stuck to her cracked lips as she downed the local beer in one gulp, barely letting the sourness register on her tongue. Four cups, one after another, hoping to dull the weather and the reminiscing, but Peter and Paul were playing football (as her husband used to say), and, as if to mock her, the bullet rain turned to hailstones the size of tennis balls. She heard them fall—*thock, thock, thock*—in her flower bed, sending up a spray of fine mud that settled on her windowsill.

“I’ve had enough, Albie,” she said, scratching the knotted hair under his chin. She pulled on her gum boots, fastened the belt of her housecoat, took a long swig of chhaang straight from the bottle, and stepped out into her garden.

The houses and the trees were all penciled in. She could hear the hailstones smash like china on the road. One bounced off her gum boot and flew into the hedge. She walked to the center of her garden near the lime trees and looked up at the blistering clouds. Her housecoat was soaked in no time and her gum boots grew heavy with rain. She stood there, shivering uncontrollably, pleading with the clouds, but not a single hailstone touched her. She tried to anticipate their trajectory, but these hailstones didn’t hit the same spot twice. The ague sent her staggering back inside, where Albie pressed his warm body up against her spindly shins.

Dorothy stood naked in front of the heater, her palms facing the orange embers. It took her body a while to feel the warmth return, and by then the cloudburst had passed on. She felt calm as a centipede in the grass. Her lips turned upward into a smile that turned into a grin, baring her gray teeth. She felt an urge to put on a dress and makeup, dye her hair red with henna, and whistle at the Nepali boys who lived in the settlement behind her bungalow. The day was soaking with promise and Dorothy vowed to squeeze it all out. An invisible force, the kind that made her wish the hill-station caved in on itself, now seemed to be pushing her toward an afternoon of rare device. This sudden injection of happiness was confusing, and Dorothy, still naked, delirious, made her way to the bedroom that she had not entered for fifteen years.

She settled the collar of her pinafore and walked on her toes around the bedroom divan. She ran her fingers along the low pelmets and she didn't mind the dust.

"Little Sylvia, little Sylvia," she called out.

The memories kept arriving, one on top of another, reminding her of a life so far in the background that it surely must have happened to someone else.

*

Sylvia giggles from behind the divan. Mummy's gone blind, she says, and Dorothy grabs her by the hips and pins her to the floor, where they wrestle like schoolchildren. Their laughter bouncing off the walls forever.

Dorothy hides twenty-five paisa coins in the garden at the base of the sangria lilies, the roses, the drooping marigolds and chrysanthemums. Sylvia comes home from school and digs her hands deep into the mud and collects all the coins that she then washes under the tap in the kitchen, humming the nursery rhyme of the day.

*

A wild elephant, drunk on molasses, comes tearing down Dowhill Road and crashes through the wicker fence of the bungalow. He collapses in the courtyard, his fat arse flattening the orchids in full bloom. Stop whinging, says her husband, and get the camera quick.

*

Dorothy spent the afternoon turning the bedroom upside down until she held that chipped frame in her hands. What the photograph failed to capture was the wind lashing Dorothy's Tricel skirt and the elephant's ears—making them flap in unison. She recognized her frown though.

“I didn't want to stand next to that filthy animal,” she told Albie.

She dropped the frame on the table and stared at the photograph. She imagined impaling her husband, the camera still round his neck, on the molasses-stained tusk of that elephant.

“It should've been you,” she said, “not my little Sylvia.”

*

The Gypsy rolls out onto Monteviot Road. Dorothy tries to rub the throbbing hangover from her forehead as she watches the jeep kick up dust, her husband leaning back, one hand on the steering wheel, the other around Sylvia in the passenger seat.

Hold tight, shouts Dorothy.

Sylvia turns around and smiles her nearly toothless grin. She blows a kiss in Dorothy's direction.

Charcoal-gray clouds are frowning in the sky. No barriers, just a single winding kutchra road that her husband is going to be speeding up all the way to the pines of Dowhill. She watches the Gypsy disappear around the bend and she hears Sylvia laugh in delight. Dorothy leans against the cherry tree.

In two hours, her hangover will be gone, and she'll be stumbling to the main gate where the local policemen will be standing in khaki raincoats to give her the news that will rob the good life of all its immortality.

*

And then, like a silent switch, the anger came rolling back to greet her.

Albie had pissed himself on the balding green carpet. It reminded her of the time, right before he died, when her husband was peeing through a tube and some of it would trickle onto the white linen.

“I don’t even know why you’re still alive,” she told Albie.

She stood up, steadied herself as the chhaang went to her head, and dragged Albie to the bathroom behind the house. She plugged the moss-covered bathtub and began filling it with water. Albie curled up panting beside her, his eyes staring at an invisible point beyond the damp, peeling bathroom wall.

“It’ll be quick, for the best,” whispered Dorothy. “You won’t even know what’s happening.”

She carried Albie and lowered him into the cold water. Her hands pushing gently on the back of his neck.

Dorothy heard the gate rattle. She ignored it and tightened her grip on Albie’s neck. Bubbles began to rise from the murky water. But then she heard the gate rattle again and a small voice shouting something unintelligible. She let go of Albie and wiped her hands on the front of her pinafore and walked around the house, cursing whoever it was.

“What do you want?”

“Good morning, boju. My name is Thendup Lama. I’m here to—”

“I’m not your grandmother, young man. The name is Mrs. Dancer.”

Dorothy frowned at the bespectacled boy in his school uniform, trying to make him disappear.

“Isn’t it Sunday,” she asked him.

Thendup’s smile grew wider. “It’s Tuesday. School bus didn’t come.” He pointed to the sky.

“Go home, then.”

“Ma says old Anglo lady teach me English, so—”

Right at that moment, Albie came waddling from behind the house, coat dripping wet, paws caked in mud.

“Laaa,” said Thendup, “kukur lai chiso lagcha.”

“Don’t talk to me in Nepali.”

“Towel, Mrs. Dancer, towel quickly.”

Thendup climbed the gate, rushed past her, and guided Albie toward the house. Dorothy followed slowly behind. Inside, she turned the heater on and Thendup rubbed Albie dry with an old blanket.

“Coconut-oil massage,” said Thendup.

“I don’t have any.”

“I’ll get some in the evening.”

They stood at the table staring at each other as Albie walked shakily toward Dorothy and rubbed his wet nose behind her knee.

The weak sun skimmed across the Kanchenjunga, making it look like it was made of glass, and the leaves moved with a peculiar green. Dorothy recognized the cockroach that scurried from under the warped floorboard. It was the same

one from the kitchen that had laid its eggs in her favorite porcelain bowl.

The weak sun skimmed across the
Kanchenjunga, making it look like it
was made of glass.

“All right, pull that chair over,” said Dorothy.

She picked up a year-old newspaper and squinted at the serifs until they aligned on the cream-colored page. They began slowly, and Dorothy corrected Thendup’s pronunciation every now and then. They read an article about endangered species in the eastern Himalayas; another about why it was unsafe to eat fish because they were feeding on dead bodies in the Teesta; and the government’s grand plan to privatize the Kanchenjunga.

“Everyone in the village thinks you iscrew phuskeko,” said Thendup.

“Do I look mad to you?”

Thendup stared at Dorothy and then around the disheveled room. At the photos of Sylvia hanging from every wall. “A little bit, yes, Mrs. Dancer,” he said.

Dorothy narrowed her eyes. “You little whippersnapper, I’m old enough to be your grandmother.”

“But you said not to call you boju.”

And their laughter filled the living room as a pale sunbeam fell sideways on the windowsill and the evening slowly began to creep in on Kurseong.

Profile Photo



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The Most Memorable Annual Pig Parade of Kharagpur (/stories/the-most-memorable-annual-pig-parade-of-kharagpur-short-story-by-nicholas-rixon)

“Devilish,” said all of Kharagpur, after the Rosarios and their pig walked in the annual parade. “No pig’s supposed to jump backwards. Or laugh.”



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