SUMITRA MUKERJI/Short Story – Chapter 1 of memoir novel (work in progress)

BAPI

A year after my father died, I came across him sitting in the garden of my old childhood home in Simla. He was sitting on a tree stump swinging his legs, wearing his funny blue knitted cap and laughing like mad.

"Bapi!" I cried in astonishment. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," he replied, casting me a half-shy, half-sly glance from the corner of his eye. "Just sitting." And he burst out laughing again, this time so hard that he almost slipped off his perch.

I was quite astounded. My father had been the grimmest of men as far back as I could remember him, and especially during his last years had rarely smiled, let alone laugh. He had, in fact, been prone to be depressively melancholic, lamenting his fortune, his loneliness, his deprivation to anyone who would care to listen. To be sure, once in a while when he heard a good joke or watched something amusing on TV, he would chuckle faintly, his face creasing into a semblance of the good-natured young man he was reputed to have been. Such moments had, however, been few and far between and I'd certainly never seen him laugh the way he was doing now. It was hard to believe.

I tried again. "Bapi, I'm glad to see you look so well, so happy. But tell me, what *are* you doing here?"

"Why, didn't we live here many, many years ago, when you were a child? And such a sweet little girl you were then, I don't know what happened to you on the way up."

This was most aggravating. “Yes, that's all very well,” I said impatiently. “But it doesn’t answer my question. I mean....” I hesitated, at a loss how to put it.

“Yes?” my father enquired. “What do you mean?”

How do you tell someone they have no business sitting on a tree stump laughing themselves silly when they’re supposed to be dead? I mean *dead*, goddammit.

I decided to come right out with it. “Bapi, you died last year. We did the cremation, *shraddha*, everything. We even took your *asthi* to Haridwar, like we’d done with Ma, and sent you on your final journey down the river Ganga. Have you forgotten?”

“How could I forget, my dear, when I wasn’t alive to remember?”

This logic from him left me briefly tongue-tied. I didn’t remember my father being particularly logical either. What on earth was going on? Was I going crazy after all? Seeing ghosts, or what?

“Bapi,” I sighed, determined to get to the truth of the matter. “Tell me, how do you come to be sitting here and why are you laughing like this?”

The old man got off the tree stump and ambled towards the corner of the garden, to the edge where our terraced flowerbeds used to begin 25 years ago and where there was now only rubble and then a sheer drop to the cliff below. I stared at his stooped back in dismay. He had aged. He had been upright even though pulled down when I had last seen him alive. At the same time, the thought flashed through my mind that he might be about to jump off, this was another of his teasing tricks. I moved towards him in panic. But before I could reach him he had turned around, with an incredibly self-satisfied smirk on his face.

“There is nothing much to tell,” he said. “Your mother has forgiven me and I'm happy.”

"What?" I sat down on one of the large slabs of stone that framed the pathway, my legs suddenly feeling weak. What had he just said? How could my mother have forgiven him when she had died, poor dear, fourteen years ago as a result of this man's illtreatment? Had she then gained no perspective, even after all her suffering, even after that tragic death? What was wrong with us Indian women that we nurtured our Sati-Savitri images all the way to the after-life.

I was so caught up with the aggrieved feelings that swamped over me by his pronouncement, I just sat there staring at the stones for a few minutes, lost in thought. When I looked up a while later, he was gone. Just like that, vanished into thin air.

Oh, no! I hope he didn't jump off after all, I cried to myself and went running to the spot where he'd been standing.

Beyond the rubble, the hills rolled away in shades from verdant green to misty grey, dotted with the occasional red and white of the old cottages, mixed with the harsher tones of the modern highrises that stood out jarringly against the pines below. In the clear blue sky of that sunny spring afternoon, the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas were glimmering in the distant horizon; the mystery of the universe swished through the trees in a gentle breeze. The beauty of this place was infinitely wondrous, wonderfully soothing in spite of all the ugly changes the years had wrought. The sounds of car horns, fumes from trucks, buses, the constant stream of traffic on the once-peaceful Cart Road and Mall, the blaring Hindi film music and dish antennas that were always and everywhere to be found in the Indian hills these days – all seemed to have momentarily receded back to the plains. But there was no sign of my father, even when I clambered down the rubble to the bit of slope beneath the edge of the house for a better view of the hillside.

Sadly, I climbed back to the garden and began tracing my steps to the little wicker gate which gave onto the dangerously steep path that led from the main road above, first to the house which used to be ours a quarter of a century ago, and then to the four or five other cottages that stretched in irregular intervals for about half a mile down the hillside before the path came abruptly to an end. It had been somebody's idea of a joke to name this path "Sudden Death" a long, long time ago and, probably because no one remembered its official name, not even the residents of the houses that branched off from it, and probably because over the years it had been the fate of many hapless couples to fall off it on dark and foggy evenings to meet their sudden end, the name had stuck.

It's likely that it was these aforementioned couples who were more to blame for their demise – being too busy smooching, necking, making love, or otherwise wrapped in clouds of bliss to look where they were going – than the path itself was, but there was no denying that it was an inordinately nasty path, being full of unexpected boulders, craggy crevices, and sharp twists and turns that could make you lose your footing and at least sprain an ankle or stub a toe, if not go hurtling down the mountain while you were traipsing *down* it, besides being horribly steep to climb *up*. And I remember from when I was little, whenever we used to return home to Kristen Hall (as our house used to be called in those days) from the main town through Chhota Simla, the road above would get really dark and shadowy just at the point where we would have to descend to this path to get to our gate. There were no street lamps at that point and wayfarers were forced to rely on torchlight. All in all, a distinctly creepy path; I used to hate it.

Nonetheless, this time I was making haste to get to the gate and onto Sudden Death for I didn't want to be seen by any of Kristen Hall's present occupants. It had struck me belatedly that I was trespassing on someone else's private property. There were curtains at the windows and clothes hanging in the yard at the far end of the verandah which curved around the hillside front of the house. Evidently, the house was not empty, people still lived there. I had dawdled long enough, it would be embarrassing to have to explain a whimsical nostalgia trip to complete strangers. However, I had barely reached the gate and placed my hand on its latch when a strange rustling sound followed by a series of alarming bangings and crashings above my head forced me to stop in my tracks.

The gate was at one end of the garden, adjacent to the point where the cliff-hang from the road above levelled out to provide space for the large house and garden, before terracing off into cliff and hillslope again. In our time, that is, twenty-five years ago, there had been many little terraces carved like giant steps into the cliff behind the house, stretching all the way from the flat garden up the hillside to a few yards below the top road. On those earth terraces, my mother had planted all kinds of vegetables, and grown marvelously colourful herbaceous borders in between layers of rockery. These plants and vegetables had been shaded by several cherry trees already growing along the hill long before we had lived there, and in the summer their pretty pink and white blossoms would drift down to the riot of colour at the bottom, sort of adding froth to a delicious, sparkling concoction. Today, those neat garden-terraces had disappeared, swallowed up by unruly shrubs, weeds and dense undergrowth, and the trees, though still standing and full, were not flowering. In fact, that entire area was so overgrown and messy, it cast a strange heaviness upon the spot by the gate, despite the bright and sunny day. Looking up, I

could hardly see through the shrubbery, where at one time the road with all the people passing up and down it had been clearly visible.

It was through this dense, dark, ugly overgrowth that my father suddenly came sliding down, accompanied by much crashing and thrashing and horrible noises, to land in a heap somewhere near my feet as I stopped at the gate.

Oh, lord. Of course something like this had to happen. “Bapi, are you alright?” I enquired anxiously, stooping with my hand extended to help him up. For a moment there was no sound or movement from him, he simply lay there, a dishevelled bundle of limbs. Then he began to groan and moan, rolling about on the ground feebly trying to extricate himself from all the branches and twigs and dry leaves that had accompanied his precipitous decline.

“No, of course I’m not alright,” snapped my father, furiously shaking off my outstretched arm, kicking the air with his legs. “I’ve broken my back, aah, oh, oh, no-o-o . . . [agonized moan] . . . how it hurts! Oh, damn you, why did you have to come here, I was having such a good time, and then . . . *this* had to happen. Oohh! Aah, don’t go away, here give me your hand . . .aargh! That hurts!”

Somehow I managed to pull him up, and helped him shake the foliage off, peering worriedly over my shoulder towards the house all the while. But there was no need to worry, the windows and doors remained silent, no one came rushing out to demand what we were doing there.

He hadn’t broken his back, hadn’t broken anything as far as I could tell. Still, just to make sure, once his groans subsided I gingerly made him sit down against the slope and said I would go and get a doctor. Whereupon he burst out laughing again.

"Hoo, hoo, hoo, you'll get a doctor! Ho, ho, hoo, ha, ha, ha ha, oh, that's funny, hoo, hoo, oh, my ribs, ouch, ho, ha, hoo . . . No, don't get a doctor, oh my, ha, ha, oh . . ." Wheezing and wincing, my father laughed till tears streamed down his cheeks; doubled up by the hillside he reminded me of a strange wizened old monkey.

I couldn't help laughing a bit, too; I guess one had to see the funny side of it. Here he was, dead, and I was planning to get a doctor for him. Then that thought immediately sobered me up. I'd had enough, I had to get out of there. This was crazy, he was crazy, maybe *I* was going crazy, whatever. There was no point in hanging around.

So I turned around and headed towards the gate again, leaving the old man still chuckling and cackling to himself. He didn't seem to notice me go, I realized as I opened the gate, which only added to my annoyance. Really, there was a giddy limit. And he hadn't answered any of my questions!

Curiosity getting the better of me, "Bapi!" I yelled from the gate, looking back at him on the way out. "What were you doing up there? How come you fell down like that?"

Appearing very small and wizened in the distance, my father smiled at me from his little niche in the hillslope and waved his hand as if to say goodbye. And then answered, "I was climbing the cherry tree, darling, to get flowers for my little girl."

SUMITRA MUKERJI
1996