

A TRIP

WRITTEN BY

TO THE

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BOWRI

Special Edition

There are far more interesting things to do in a day than a trip to the *bowri*.

The natural beauty of the Himalayas is unmatched, but one can get used to it. But Ujjwala was no ordinary 10 year old, she had an imagination that could turn chores into playtime. So on her daily 4 pm trip to the *bowri*, romance was Ujjwala's escape. She carried an oil-can, repurposed as a water container, to fetch water from the little reservoir on the mountain stream- the *bowri*. Often on this two minute errand, she would fantasize about fighting battles with enemy bushes, relying on her stick sword and her canister shield. She would take down uptight conifer-generals plotting against her, with dexterous maneuvers that only a child of that age could pull off. She would assign life histories to all things living and dead on that gravel trail. Meticulous observation and spirited imagination were her specialties. The trip to the *bowri* to fetch fresh water, was her favorite.

The path to the *bowri* was not a busy one, the most she had to socialize was an occasional *Namaste* if she saw one of her neighbors also going to fetch water at the same time as her. It was only a few meters from the town, connected via a little *pagdandi* (trail). The *bowri* was a scenic place, especially in the monsoons when green moss covered its concrete exteriors. The thin mountain stream that fed the *bowri*, was gushing with rainwater and the little boulders that usually peep their rounded heads from within the stream were rendered invisible. Ujjwala had witnessed surreal sunsets and auroras during her trip to the *bowri* and the most majestic of the cumulonimbus. The trip always packed surprises.

Ujjwala lived with her mother, who was a book editor. She always wanted her daughter to grow independent and self-reliant. In line with this objective, she assigned her a lot of chores. Ujjwala never seemed to mind those for there is a lot of room for creativity to blossom when one is engaged in monotonous routine tasks. Folding laundry was a chance for her to come up with silly song verses, the weekend dusting of their rustic cedar house served inspiration for her super-spy adventures and she came up with her knock-knock jokes running her afternoon errands.

Ujjwala really knew how to entertain herself. Moreover, they lived in *Deodarah*- a beautiful valley enwreathed within the lofty Himalayas. There was always something to look at. The valley blossomed in the monsoons- fluffy clouds hugged the snow peaked mountains, the rain fed several sparkling streams and lent a damp piny aroma to the whole world.

Ujjwala was a small, square faced, pale girl with green inquisitive eyes. Her cheeks had the rosy glow of the sunsets, her eyes the healthy green foliage and she had a sparkly way about her like the mountain stream. She was a little shy of 11 and an avid reader. She never succumbed to mindless entertainment and since her school was off for the monsoon break, she heavily relied on books and her imaginative faculty to pass time. She had recently begun diversifying her reading choices from exclusively short stories and her children's books to an occasional glance at the newspaper or flipping through the pictures

in her mother's encyclopedia collection. She was growing up and that feeling was an empowering one, it made her try new things although she did draw a line at broccoli!

Scheduling was always a little tricky during the monsoons, but it was the best time of the year at *Deodarah!* Only when the persistent monsoon clouds thinned out and the deep blue sky gave a peep, could Ujjwala embark on her trip to the *bowri*. Her mother didn't like her getting wet in the rain.

The rain had stopped and Ujjwala stepped out to deep blues and vibrant greens of the valley that looked like a freshly painted canvas. The sweet, earthy post-pour aroma, the soothing hiss of the meandering stream, the racing icy breeze and the dancing pines - *oh what a time to be alive!* There were only a few things as interesting to her as fiction and the wonders of the rain soaked *Deodarah* made the top of that list.

The *bowri* was galloping, full of water it glistened gold in the glow of the setting sun. Ujjwala could hear the stream from a few feet away, loud as a bustling market. The birds darted across the clear sky eager to reach their homes and they made the most harmonious of melodies. The rain had washed everything clean and distant trees and villages on far away mountains were clearly visible. Ujjwala was mesmerized. She let cold water run over her hands and closed her eyes to listen to the song of the stream, the insects and the birds *hummm...* She sat in this beauty but she wasn't the only one there today.

A few feet away from her sat an old lady, crouched on the algae covered rocks that served as stairs to the *bowri*, with the most angelic expression. Ujjwala had almost missed the old lady, awestruck by the wonderfulness nature had showered upon her, but now she looked carefully at that wizened face. She had never seen her before but next to the background of the freshly washed majestic blue Himalayas, the old lady looked like a Goddess. She seemed to be in a meditation, mesmerized by the nature. There was an air of nonchalance about how she sat on the dewy moss, her legs crossed, her feet naked and cracked.

Could she be the old lady of the mysterious cottage? Ujjwala wondered.

The mysterious cottage was not so far from the *bowri*, just on the edge of the forest. It was the talk of the town, at least among the children- horror stories, conspiracy theories and other tales were often derived or set at this mysterious location. It was a small shack rendered almost invisible to the eye by the growth of thick unattended shrubbery and wild flowers in the front yard. Tall blades of grass, algae and all sorts of climbers flourished in there and a tiny gate was the only portal of access to its mysteries and it was seldom open to any town's people.

The old lady Ujjwala was seeing in front of her now, was a seasoned elder she had never seen before. She looked as old as the Himalayas- snowy peaked and folded over. So Ujjwala quickly pieced together that she might be the old lady, the owner of the mysterious little cottage.

Ujjwala wanted to make her acquaintance and her mind was going over every possible greeting she could use to break the ice while also switching between how fun it must be to be living all alone in a cottage like hers. *I could get to see the inside of the mysterious cottage, oh how fun!*

She got lost in musing how magical and mysterious the old lady's abode would be, what it would be like to grow up and have her own one day- all of life's drama and its serenity were

waiting for her. She had envisioned almost a dozen narratives but as she turned back she saw the old lady had already begun retreating to her incognito abode.

I am all gown now. I should just go over and talk to the old lady.

She wrote down her agenda for the week in her diary- primarily finding out more about the old lady she had seen the other day. Ujjwala carefully placed her diary and a little yellow pencil into the pocket of her raincoat and grabbed her water container. *Mom! I'm off to the bowri. Bye...* She walked the trail self-possessed, determined to at least say *Namaste* to the old lady and make her acquaintance. *Maybe be invited into the mysterious cottage and unravel all its mysteries?*

The initial euphoria of trying to execute a new idea had started to fade away and many practical questions began racing in Ujjwala's mind as she slowly trailed the path to the *bowri*. *What if she never answers the door?* She was used to her mind wandering but this time it was a little different. Intrusive.

As she was growing older, apparently what people thought of her was starting to be of a little concern to her.

Ujjwala reached the *bowri*, slowly descended the moss-green stairs and began filling up the container, her eyes fixated at the trail to the old lady's cottage. She noticed a quiet, almost eerie stillness about the cottage covered thickly in green. The trees, haphazardly placed were caught in webs of vines and myriad shrubs and climbers engulfed the entirety of the cottage fence. *Maybe I shouldn't go.* She was nearing the cottage. She tried to look through the gaps in the shrubbery but the old lady was not in sight. She began walking up to fence but this trail, rarely used, was greener and more slippery. She had to walk slowly. Growing up was making her more careful and vigilant.

Ujjwala remembered always being intrigued by the old lady and it was only today she had made it this far along the mossy trail to her cottage. Her mother had always forbidden her to go towards the forest alone. She was entering forbidden territory heading up to the mysterious cottage which was at the cusp of the forest. *Growing up...*

The cottage looked bigger and more exciting as she got nearer. Covered in all shades of green with occasional purple and white color pops of wild Himalayan flowers, it looked like an old, abandoned bungalow.

Ujjwala reached the tiny green gate to the cottage but did not enter, she first decided to take a quick look around and put her mind to work to come up with a convincing icebreaker. *Namaste Aunt, I'm Ujjwala and I wanted to say hi.* That felt a little bland, so Ujjwala's mind kept coming up with more as she cleared the shrubs and drooping branches with her arms making her way round the cottage. Good thing she had worn her yellow raincoat and her mud boots because the rain had turned the whole place into a damp rainforest. She walked through the swamp and wondered if *Namaste Aunt, I really like your cottage and want to be invited in* was a little too direct.

As Ujjwala completed a full circle round the old lady's house and reached the gate, she saw a silhouette. *Oh, it's the old lady!* Ujjwala saw her standing at the front door, stoic as if human emotions cost her money, staring back at her. Somehow the first thing Ujjwala could think of at the moment was to simply flee. She ran through the bushes, onto the slippery trail and down to the *bowri*. *Oh my God, oh my god I am a trespasser!* Her hands mechanically grabbed the container and without halting she was already on her way home, worrying if the old lady would come over and complain to her mom about her mischief.

Maybe I should have stayed and talked; why am I running anyway? Ujjwala's mind began to clear as she neared her house.

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Ujjwala hadn't anticipated that seeing the old lady would be as intimidating as it was. Now that she was back home nestled in her bed, she could go over the details of what went wrong. First off she had to get her mommy on her side in case a very angry old lady showed up at their door sometime soon. Ujjwala was lost in dissecting the events of the day, as her mother walked in.

"Long day hon?," her mother inquired as she dotingly caressed her daughter's cheek, "you seem worried."

I wanted to talk to you about something.

"Found an interesting cloud somewhere? I know you like to marvel at those!" Ujjwala's mother remarked while signaling her to get ready for bed.

I had a weird day.

"Oh, that's unusual. Tell me about it," her mother got up and began tidying up the bed.

Don't be mad but I went to the mysterious cottage by the forest.

"Oh dear! How many times have I told you to not go near the forest alone- there could be bears there, hon" her mother shook her head in disapproval.

I wanted to see the cottage is all insisted Ujjwala as they both snuggled into their blankets.

"I know you're an inquisitive little kiddo but honey you can't go on disturbing other people's privacy. Ms. Shayamala is a very old lady and she likes to not be disturbed" her mother politely added.

Do you know the old lady? Ujjwala asked coyly.

"Well, yes honey" her mother looked surprised, "what did you do?" she raised her left brow and gave Ujjwala a look full of meaning.

Nothing mother, believe me. I I just... I just went in her yard and I don't know just ran off as she saw me, I didn't want to be a menace I just wanted to see the mysterious cottage all children talk about.

"Oh dear!" her mother let out a patient sigh. "These children!", she thought.

"Honey there is nothing mysterious about it, you kids come up with all sorts of stories, don't you?" she couldn't help but smile at these childish tendencies to sensationalize and imaginatively turn a monotonous reality into a super adventure.

Ujjwala felt a little coy about her childish belief of a mysterious magical place.

Her mother told her more about Ms. Shayamala- how her old age prevented her from properly being able to maintain her yard and how in a few months she'd be off to USA to live with her son who is settled overseas. *Oh!* Reality could rarely keep up with Ujjwala's mind. She felt a little bummed. Her mother could see that and so she added, "You can go in and say hi, I am sure she'll appreciate the company. Just don't have to lurk around, okay?"

Oh yay! Adventure tomorrow

Ujjwala had a pep in her step as she embarked to her trip to the *bowri* today. She had her mothers approval to go and meet the old lady- Ms. Shayamala, as she now knew her. Loaded with new arsenal of stories and information, she was as happy as ever fantasizing about the meeting on the way over. She had rehearsed her lines. She was confident and prepared.

Namaste Aunty, I am Ujjwala. How are you?

Ujjwala filled up her container and carefully placed them aside so no one would knock them over. She began walking up to the cottage. As she neared the cottage, she saw the shrubbery

was a little less dense today. It looked like it was cleared up. *Maybe Ms. Shayamala figured out the dense shrubbery was making her house less approachable and more scary...?* Ujjwala let herself into the gate, surprisingly not moss covered anymore. The cottage looked inviting. Clean. As she stepped into the old lady's garden, she thought it looked a lot bigger. Without the grass and climbers, the flowers looked intentionally planted and made the garden beautiful.

She hurried to her front door and knocked. *No answer.* She knocked again. *No answer, maybe I should look in through the window.* She jumped and peeped through the old foggy window. Ms. Shayamala was nowhere in sight.

Ujjwala shared a close camaraderie with her mother and shared wonderful stories of her day's adventures with her at night, who listened closely and gazed at her intently. Cuddled with her mother on that cold monsoon night, Ujjwala shared what had happened earlier- *the tidied up garden...but she wasn't there.*

"I am sure she must have been busy or running errands, dear", her mother said soothingly, "Tomorrow I'll come with you and then you can befriend the nice lady". Her mother always had a way of easing Ujjwala and *making things right.* Nothing could go wrong when she was next to her. No request was too wild, no desire was too ambitious and no adventure was worthless- Ujjwala's mother always had her back and tonight, more than ever, she felt it deep in her heart. She hugged her tight and went to sleep in her arms.

Rain came down with a rumbling vengeance that night. It was the heaviest monsoon *Deodarah* had experienced in years. Ujjwala's mother was woken up by the ground shaking lightning storm. She checked on Ujjwala who was twitching in her sleep, so she drew the quilt on her. *Deodarah* usually got a lot of rain in August but that night the heavy precipitation coupled with howling winds were aggressive- threatening to blow off any windows accidentally left open, wrestling the light posts and the lamps and uprooting the fragile crops and flowers.

In the morning, Ujjwala was woken up by the sound of the radio playing news from the living room- *incessant rain.....red alert....non-stop monsoon rain wreaks havoc...cloudburst.* She got up to look for her mother who was busy on her phone, calling people frantically enquiring about their safety.

What's happened mom?

"There has been a cloudburst nearby, the rivers have swollen up and highways are blocked due to landslides. I just called up *Nonna* and your Uncle, they are all safe" her mother reassured her.

This is going to be a day in then.

Ujjwala decided to sleep in, they could go over to Ms. Shayamala's cottage some other day her mother had promised. When she woke up for breakfast, she looked out the window - it was so foggy as if the clouds had descended onto the valley and shrouded it. It was continuously pouring but the rain had lost most of its aggression.

She saw the uprooted maize crops and the roses in her garden which had turned to a muddy swamp. She could see thin white lines of new streams formed on the mountains, the higher ranges were covered in fresh snow. Although the cloudburst had happened several kilometers away from where they lived, its effects could be seen all around. They had their breakfast in bed that morning and listened to the radio, the rain had submerged the bridges and the connecting roads and the wind had blown off roofs and towers at several places.

For Ujjwala, it was a very first lesson in the impermanence of life.

Ujjwala had been inside for two days and finally one morning the weather had started to clear up. During these nesting days, she couldn't stop thinking about them meeting Ms. Shayamala. She was very excited. The rain had finally cleared and today she couldn't wait till it was afternoon for then the sun would go down and she and her mother would make that trip to the *bowri*. Her mother said it'd be easier to go during the mellow afternoon sun and the Himalayan sunsets were an added bonus they'd get to enjoy on this adventure.

Ujjwala wasn't a fan of afternoon naps but she had a queasy feeling that day. "Monsoons can have that effect on you", her mother had told her, "take a little nap and you'll be good to go". Much time hadn't passed since Ujjwala lay down, when she was jolted out of her sleep. It was her mother and it was a bad news, she could tell by her mother's face.

Clouds began melting from the heaven into strings of thick beady rainfall once again. "I just got to know that Ms. Shayamala has passed away", words coming out of her mother's mouth were forming little by little in her half asleep mind. *Died two days ago maybe over-exerted herself the flash floods.... help couldn't reach her in time.* The winds began racing outside and became the sad harmony to the devastating news her mother was trying to deliver to her 10 year old. Ujjwala could make very little sense of it all, she could only focus on the loud downpour and the hissing winds.

She didn't know the old lady- she had never talked to her. She was going to, but she never. And yet, she was sad. Maybe it was the loss of an expectation she was mourning. Maybe the strange knot in her throat were her shattered expectations or maybe it was just the seasonal cold, she was still too young to know. Maybe it was the worst monsoon of the year or maybe the world was joining Ujjwala in her mourning, she was still too young to know. But *she was growing up* and in that she found solace.

Thank you
for reading

~ Vanshika