



The Deodar That Remembered

— A short story —

Nobody believed me when I said the tree had spoken. My teacher offered a sympathetic smile and suggested I had been tired that morning; my classmates laughed until their eyes watered and christened me “the boy who talks to trees.” Even now, years later, I don't blame them. If someone had come to me with the same story, I might have laughed too. But I know what I heard that grey morning above Darjeeling, and I have never once doubted it since.

It began, as most reckless things do, with a dare.

Our class had travelled up into the hills of North Bengal for our winter excursion. For most of us it was the first time we had left the flat, dust-coloured plains, and the journey itself felt like a slow initiation into another world. The toy train wheezed and clattered its way up the mountain, doubling back on itself through banks of cloud, so close to the roadside shops that we could almost have reached out and taken a biscuit from a shelf. Tea gardens spilled in green terraces down the slopes, combed into neat rows by hands we never saw. And on the second morning, when the mist briefly lifted, Kanchenjunga caught fire at dawn, blushing pink and gold against a colourless sky, so enormous and so silent that the whole compartment fell quiet at once.

There is a particular stillness in the mountains that the plains never know. It is not the mere absence of noise; it is a presence, a held breath. It presses gently on you, as though the land itself is waiting for you to notice something you have been too busy to see. I felt it the moment we stepped off the train, though I had no words for it then.

On the third day, our teachers took us walking through a village on the outskirts of the town, where the houses leaned into the hillside and prayer flags snapped in the wind. While the others gathered around the tea stalls, thawing their fingers on chipped clay cups and haggling cheerfully over roasted corn, Rishi nudged me and pointed toward the ridge above the pine forest.

“The villagers won't go up there,” he said, lowering his voice for effect. “I asked the old man at the shop. He says there's a Deodar at the very top — older than the town itself, older than anyone can remember. Some of them think it's cursed. Others say it's holy. Either way, nobody climbs to it.” He grinned at me, the particular grin that had gotten me into trouble a hundred times before. “I dare you to climb up and touch it.”

I have always found it easier to be brave than to be sensible. And so, while the others argued over corn and the teachers counted heads in the wrong direction, I slipped away from the group and began to climb.

The path was faint, half swallowed by ferns, switching back and forth between the pines. The mist closed behind me like a curtain, and within a few minutes the voices of my friends had dissolved into nothing at all. There was only the crunch of my own footsteps on the wet needles, the



sharp resinous smell of the pines, and that strange listening silence growing deeper with every step. Once, a bird burst out of the undergrowth beside me and I nearly cried out. Twice I told myself to turn back. Both times something — pride, curiosity, or something I still cannot name — pushed me on.

And then the trees thinned, the ground levelled, and at the crest of the ridge I saw it.

The Deodar was immense. Silver-trunked and impossibly old, it stood entirely alone in a small clearing, as though the forest had drawn back out of respect and left it a circle of its own. Its branches were flung wide, layered like the tiers of a great green temple, and they moved very slightly in the wind with a sound like a long, slow breath. It made me feel very small, and somehow very honest, the way one feels small and honest in a place of worship. For a long moment I only stood and looked. Then, hardly knowing why, I crossed the last few steps and laid my palm flat against its cold, furrowed bark.

A voice unfolded in my mind. It did not come through my ears; it seemed to rise up from the wood beneath my hand and spread through me like warmth through cold fingers — deep and unhurried, like water moving beneath ice.

“So. You climbed. I have waited a long while for a child who would bother to listen.”

I did not run, though every instinct in my body screamed that I should. I simply stood there, my hand fused to the trunk as if the bark had grown around it, my breath caught somewhere in my chest and refusing to move.

“Sit,” the voice said, almost amused by my terror. “I mean you no harm. I have carried a secret far too long, and I would set it down in younger hands before mine, at last, turn to dust.”

My legs folded under me almost on their own, and I sat among the great gnarled roots. The fear did not leave me, but curiosity crept in beside it, and slowly the second grew larger than the first. The tree seemed to gather itself. And then it began to speak, and I forgot to be afraid.

“When I was young,” it said, “these hills wore an unbroken green from valley to summit. My kind stood together for miles in every direction, holding the soil the way a mother steadies a stumbling child. Our roots drank the monsoon when it came down in torrents and gave the water back to the world slowly, drop by patient drop, so that the streams ran clear and cold even through the driest weeks of summer. Birds raised their young in our branches. Bees drank from our flowers and carried life from slope to slope. Deer slept in our shade, and leopards passed through it like grey smoke. Soil, water, root, wing, hoof — we were all threads in a single cloth, and the name your books have given that cloth is ecology.”

“Understand this, child, for it is the beginning of everything else. That cloth is far more fragile than it looks. It seems endless. It seems as though it could never be undone. But loosen one thread — take away the trees, and the soil follows; take away the soil, and the water follows; take away the



water, and everything that lives follows after — and the fabric does not tear all at once with a sound you might notice and mend. It unravels quietly, one thread at a time, until one day you reach for it and find there is nothing left in your hands to hold.”

I listened, unmoving, hardly daring to breathe.

“We asked nothing of your people,” the tree went on, “yet we have given you everything, freely, for as long as there have been people to receive it. Medicine sleeps within our bark and our leaves — half the remedies in your hospitals were first discovered in forests like this one, and half of those we have not yet had the chance to teach you. Your food grows only because trees guard the soil from washing away and call the rain down out of the sky. The very breath now moving in your lungs passed first through leaves like mine, which drank the poison from it and returned it to you clean and sweet. And in the heat of the day, when your grandfathers were weary, we gave them shade and asked for no payment at all.”

Then its voice thickened and dropped, low as thunder folded far back into the hills.

“But the world has changed, and this is the secret you must carry down the mountain with you.”

The mist around the clearing thickened and began to move, coiling and turning, and within it — I swear this is true — I saw images take shape, as vivid and as painful as my own memories. I saw forests falling beneath bright axes and screaming saws, whole hillsides that had taken a thousand years to grow stripped bare in a single afternoon. I saw those naked slopes, with nothing left to hold them, give way in the rains and slide down in roaring landslides that swallowed houses, roads, and the small sleeping lives inside them. I saw the ancient snows of the high peaks, which the tree had watched all its life, thinning and retreating and weeping themselves away into silence. I saw the very air above the cities turn grey and thick and feverish.

“You have a name for the fever,” the tree said heavily, and the images faded back into ordinary mist. “Global warming, you call it. I have watched a thousand winters come and go across these mountains, and never — never — have the snows fled as quickly as they do now. When you cut too many of us, the rains lose their way. The seasons forget the order they have kept since the beginning; the monsoon comes too early or too late or not at all; the rivers rise in sudden fury and drown what they once nourished, or shrink into cracked mud and leave the land gasping. I heal what I can. A severed branch will sprout anew. A burnt grove will return, given time and left in peace. Nature forgives with a patience you can scarcely imagine. But even patience has a floor beneath it. Wound the world past a certain depth, and there will come a season that no season after it can undo.”

“Why tell me?” I whispered at last, and my voice cracked in the cold air. “I’m only a student. I have no power to change anything. I can’t stop the axes. I can’t cool the sky. What good is a secret in the hands of someone as small as me?”



For a moment the tree was silent, and I felt the great trunk seem to warm beneath my palm, as if it were smiling.

“Because the largest changes in this world are always seeded by the smallest hands,” it said gently. “Forests do not begin as forests. They begin as a single seed, dropped by a single bird, in a single crack of earth. Your own species has grown dangerously clever — you have learned to prise open the atom itself and draw out of it a power so vast it can light a million homes through the winter, or erase those same million homes in the space of a single heartbeat. Such fire must be guarded with the deepest wisdom and preserved with the greatest restraint, never surrendered to greed, never handed over to anger. And what is true of that terrible fire is true of every gift you have been given, down to the smallest: power without care is simply ruin wearing a brighter coat.”

“But do not mistake me,” it continued, and now there was something almost fierce in the voice. “I do not tell you these things to crush you with despair. I tell you because a child who plants a single tree, and tends it, has already begun to reweave the cloth. A child who spares one river, who refuses to waste one bucket of clean water, who teaches even one friend to love the earth instead of merely using it — that child tilts the whole vast future, by however small an angle, toward mercy. And enough small angles, child, will bend the longest road home.”

The mist began to lift. Pale sunlight slid down through the layered branches and fell warm across my upturned face, and for the first time since I had touched the bark I felt the fear go entirely out of me, leaving something quieter and steadier in its place.

“Go now,” the tree murmured, and its voice was already growing faint, sinking back down into the wood. “Carry my secret down the mountain. Tell them the forest is not their servant but their mother — patient beyond all measure, generous beyond all counting, but never, ever to be mistaken for endless.”

Then it was silent. However long I sat there afterward, my hand pressed to the bark and my questions tumbling over one another, no further word came. There was only the wind, threading softly through the needles, and the ordinary cries of ordinary birds, and the long grey light of the afternoon beginning to slant across the ridge.

At last I rose, stiff and cold, and pressed my palm once more to the trunk in something between a promise and a farewell. Then I turned and made my way back down through the pines.

I stumbled into the tea stall just as the teachers were beginning, at last, to notice that I was missing. Breathless and wild-eyed, I spilled out the whole of it — the climb, the clearing, the great Deodar, the voice, the visions in the mist, the warning I had been given. Rishi laughed until he nearly fell backward off the bench. “A talking tree!” he crowed, wiping his eyes. “Marvellous. The best story yet. Go on, then — prove it. Where's your talking tree now?”



I couldn't prove it. I had no photograph, no recording, no witness, nothing at all but a certainty lodged so deep in my chest that no amount of laughter could shake it loose. The teachers decided the thin air and the excitement had gotten the better of me, gave me a warm drink and a scolding for wandering off, and by evening the whole affair had become a joke that followed me all the way home to the plains.

But that same evening, before we boarded the train down, I did one small thing. In the corner of the guest-house garden I found a young Deodar sapling, no taller than my knee, struggling for light beneath a wall. I asked the caretaker if I might take a seedling like it home, and he, amused, gave me one wrapped in wet cloth.

I planted it in the corner of our school garden the week we returned. That was years ago now. I have watered it in every dry season since, cleared the weeds from around its feet, and defended it more than once from a careless football. It is taller than I am now, and still climbing, season by season, toward a sky it will one day help to keep clean. And to anyone patient enough to sit beneath it and listen, I have repeated, word for word, the old Deodar's secret.

Perhaps you don't believe me. That is entirely fair; I have made my peace with the laughter long ago, and I would not blame you for adding your own.

But the next time you find yourself standing before some ancient, weathered tree — in a forest, in a field, or on a lonely ridge above the clouds — I ask only this of you. Lay your hand against its bark. Close your eyes. And truly, patiently listen.

You may find, as I did on that grey morning above Darjeeling, that the oldest things in the world have been trying to speak to us all along — and that they are waiting, still, for someone at last to hold still, and hear.

— *The End* —

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