

## **Home, Sweet Home – after 7 days in the mountains!**

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It happened last year. I was a class 8 student in Jawaharlal Nehru Vidyalaya, Hawaii, which is located in the mountainous Anjaw district of Arunachal Pradesh. Located 1500 mts above sea level it is perhaps the most remote public school on the Indo-Chinese border!

Our summer holidays had just been announced and we were allowed to leave the hostel the very next day. The mighty river Lohit flowing below looked like a small stream from our dormitory for now. But it had started raining hard and now the whole hill side was looking foggy- an ominous sign! I dislike the rain very much in this place, because when it rains, it rains for many days, causing many landslides and road blocks and people travelling face terrible hardships. It takes many days thereafter to clear the road for vehicles to ply. The whole night I prayed my journey homeward would be safe. It was 158 kms of winding hilly roads. I did not know when I slept.

Next morning, rain had grown in its intensity and I heard that our madams were not looking forward to escort us home. A batch of boys, despite the rains, climbed on a tata mobile and left ahead of us. It was then that our music teacher, seeing our hearts soggy with rain and tears, encouraged us to start. At last in the heavy rain, we, a group of eight girls, boarded an open vehicle with a lot of uncertainty and fear. Visibility was very poor. The driver was steering on the narrow road very slowly, and with much difficulty. After travelling about twenty one kilometres our vehicle halted. We saw the first batch of boys from our school waiting there. “Rrrooaahhr!” Suddenly a stream burst out on the road and the whole patch of road was washed out! We could hear the rolling down of boulders from mountain with water very clearly. The stream looked violent and it was impossible to cross.

We were fully drenched and shivering. The umbrella had turned into pieces. I could not even lift my bag because the contents were fully sodden. In our eight member- team, there was also an eighty year old grandma - our school nurse’s mother- who could walk only with great difficulty. She was shivering badly. Still we waited in a false hope that water would subside. Most people

turned back. Even the boys rode back to school. It was getting dark and there was no male member in our team. At last we decided to return. The nearest village was six kilometres far. When we reached there, it was almost dark and grandma was shivering so much that madam decided to give her a cup of tea before proceeding further. It was in a small tea-shop that we learnt that the road towards our school had also been blocked by several heavy landslides. The lady at the teashop was very kind to spare us a small room with a fire place at the centre which was continuously fed by our hosts' collection of firewood. We had nothing to eat as we had expected to reach the nearest town by now. The kind host offered us two packets of noodles, the last thing in her shop, for our supper. I looked at grandma. She was shivering and her teeth were chattering. When a little noodle was offered she shook her head. When nurse madam forced her, she pointed towards me and said in a feeble voice "Give it to this small girl".

The shopkeeper lady had nothing to offer for the next morning except a cup of red tea. I was feeling hungry. Not only me, the whole of us... We could not buy anything because nothing was there. The mood of rain did not change in the second day. Our madam decided to shift to some other house because we needed a little more space for grandma. There we were offered maize to eat. You put a pod on hot charcoal and after a few seconds, it puffed up. We all heartily shared it. There was no light the whole day, only the pitter-patter of the rain blackening our spirits. In a hope against hope five of us went walking till the block point to see the situation. It was even more horrible than previous day! Boulders as high as the mountain were strewn across the road and the stream now like a river, was gushing away carrying more boulders and trees. I felt crying. I longed to see my mother. The thought of warm bed and mom's food caused another flood run down my cheeks. My senior patted me on my shoulder and tried consoling me. With a heavy heart we turned back.

Our lady host was very kind. She tried to console us, fed us with whatever was available with her. Inside the room, it was dark and smoky. The only light was the fire glowing from fire place. In that darkness we would sit silently brooding over our own thoughts. I was feeling sorry for grandma. She was eating nothing. Her petite body was getting weaker by the day. I was also hungry all the time. Our host had nothing more to offer us I could understand that she had run out of every stock of eatables. I could feel their reluctance to keep us further but we had nowhere else to go. Rain was still splashing without care. Everywhere the sight was grim. You could see rarely anyone moving on the road. It looked so desolate and lonely. I cried silently alone and I felt everyone amongst us was doing the same.

On the seventh day, our house master came with exciting news: two persons had crossed the channel ! Though we could not believe it, we were encouraged by the possibility. Our madams at last decided to leave the place where there was nothing to eat. Grandma's condition was deteriorating fast. She was in need of care, food and warmth.

We packed our bags and carried to the spot. My bag was so heavy that I could hardly carry. Big boulders had popped out of stream here and there and some people had placed bamboo pieces on

it to make a makeshift bridge. It looked so dangerous. A small slip could end our journey. “Can you cross it?” a young man asked me in a challenging tone. I could feel fear inside him. Without a second thought I replied, “yes”. He held my hand tightly staying at my back. He carried my bag. I slowly put my foot on the bamboo. Very slowly, inch by inch, I covered the distance. The roar of the stream and the water almost touching my feet frightened me. But all I could remember was my mother’s face. I saw nothing else. Those few minutes seemed like ages to me. Ha! Finally I felt my feet touch the ground and my joy knew no bounds. One by one, inching away at snail’s pace all my friends made it to this end. But grandma, she could not cross. She had neither strength nor spirit left in her. It appeared to me that grandma would be left behind, till the road is restored, which could take many months. I felt very bad. Our nurse madam started crying, seeing no possibility of her mother to cross.....

At last a strong young man invented an idea. By using creepers and bamboo he prepared a basket and put Grandma in that. He put it on his back and slowly, but very carefully, he crossed over. What a great relief! We danced hugging each other tightly! On this other side a truck was waiting. The driver took us all on its open back and drove us to Hayuliang, the nearest town. We reached there at about 7.30. From here, we hired a vehicle to take us directly back to Tezu, where my parents lived. All of us were shivering with cold, our belongings wet and we drenched to our skin. Still there was great happiness. The happiness of conquering the wild stream! At about 11.30 night we reached Tezu. Our parents came running to take us caring the least for darkness. Ah! What a joy! Once we reached home, we were showered with food, food and more food..! The whole night passed away narrating our adventure to my parents.

Next morning bidding farewell to grandma, I could not check back my tears. In her frail voice she said, “Take care, Rinky, and remember me: I may not come next time”. I felt her thin hands on my forehead as if searching a reply from me.

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