

## In the Lap of the Hills

It is often scary for a tourist to walk on the tricky terrain of a hilly area. But for those who have grown up in these high-altitude, mountainous regions, it's almost a daily adventure, sometimes even a game. The same holds true for Mily, who was born in the lap of these mountains.

Every day, Mily travelled through the uneven, winding paths that led to a charcoal road still under construction. With a jute bag in hand, she would walk to fetch a packet of milk. But today was different, she had unknowingly taken a new route. A quieter one. A path that seemed to cradle solace itself, where the silence felt familiar and comforting.

On the right side of the road, trees stretched out, home to birds that chirped in a slow, melodic rhythm. The left side, too, was lined with trees, though sparser, allowing brief glimpses of the valley beyond.

There were no shops in sight. Still, Mily walked on, her blue full-sleeved gown fluttering gently, the jute bag swinging in harmony with her unhurried steps. The charcoal road beneath her glistened with a thin sheen of rain, reflecting her like a mirror—soft, surreal, and quietly poetic.

In the distance, she saw a small tea stall. An old man was making tea in a saucepan that had small burnt marks on it. In front of the stall, there was a wooden bench. A young man, probably in his twenties, was sitting on it, looking relaxed.

Mily took each step towards the tea stall. “Do you have milk?” She asked the tea vendor.

“Can't you see, it is a tea stall?” said the boy sitting on the bench.

Mily's eyes got towards the man, "Isn't tea made up of milk?" There was no guile in her gaze, only quiet innocence.

The old man looked at Mily for a moment and then smiled. Without saying anything, he poured some milk from a steel container into a small tin can and handed it to her.

Mily quietly opened her jute bag and took out a crumpled twenty-rupee note. She placed it on the wooden counter.

The boy on the bench watched her carefully. He had expected a sharp reply, but instead, her calm words and innocent eyes stayed in his mind.

"Where are you from?" he asked, a little curious now.

Mily pointed back to the hills. "From that side. Near the pine trees. I took a wrong turn today."

He nodded slowly. "You come alone?"

"Yes," she said gently. "I go to buy milk every morning."

The old man looked at her kindly. "Come this way whenever you want, child," he said. "This road is quieter."

Mily smiled, took the tin can filled with milk, placed it carefully in her jute bag, and turned to leave.

As she walked back, her steps were slow, not in a hurry. The sound of birds, the soft wind, and the peaceful path made her feel calm. From that day onwards, she began taking the same route every morning.

The boy would see her often. Sometimes they would talk, sometimes not. But slowly, a quiet friendship grew between them. He started waiting for her, and she, too, would look for the wooden bench near the tea stall.

She liked the way the trees leaned in from the sides as if they were listening to her thoughts. The birds greeted her with soft chirps, and the charcoal road, still damp from the rain, glistened like glass under her bare steps.

“Why don’t you wear shoes?” he asked one day.

“They get wet and take too long to dry,” she replied. “But my feet know the road now. They don’t mind.”

Another morning, he asked, “Why do you carry the same jute bag every day? Doesn’t it get boring?”

Mily held it up. “It still holds the milk. Why should I change it?”

Raju chuckled. She wasn’t trying to be funny, but her words always carried a strange kind of wisdom, the kind that children have before the world teaches them otherwise.

Sometimes, they’d sit silently for a few minutes before she left with her milk. Sometimes, she’d hum an old folk song as the old tea vendor poured milk into her tin can.

But one cloudy morning, things changed, not for Mily, but for Raju.

He looked tense, fidgeting with the loose thread on his sleeve. As Mily approached, he stood up and spoke before she could say anything.

“Mily... I have a problem,” he said, his voice uneven. “My uncle... he’s very sick. I need to go buy him medicine in the next town. I don’t have money. Can I take yours today? Just for today. I’ll return it tomorrow.”

Mily looked at him with wide eyes.

“Your uncle... will he be okay?” she asked, worried.

“I think so, if he gets the medicine quickly,” Raju said.

She reached into her jute bag without hesitation and handed him the crumpled twenty-rupee note. “Then you should go now. The tea uncle will give me the milk tomorrow, I think.”

He took the money with a shaky hand.

“You trust me that easily?” he asked, surprised.

Mily smiled faintly. “Yes. Why wouldn’t I?”

Raju nodded, then slowly walked away. His steps were unsure. He had planned to go straight to the liquor shop, buy a bottle of cheap alcohol, and disappear for the day.

But something stopped him.

Halfway down the road, he slowed. Then he stopped.

He remembered the look in Mily’s eyes, not just trust, but concern. She wasn’t worried about the money. She was worried about *him*.

He turned around.

Climbing the slope to where she once pointed, near the tall pine trees , he found her house. It was small and old. A frail woman sat on the porch, coughing lightly, and a little boy, barefoot and smiling, played in the dust with a broken toy.

Raju stood quietly under the shade of a gulmohar tree and watched.

He didn't knock. He didn't speak. He just stood there... until the wind picked up and made him feel colder than he had ever felt before.

That evening, as Mily came out to wash the tin can by the side of her house, she found Raju standing near the fence.

“You’re back?” she asked.

He nodded and gently handed the note back to her.

She blinked in surprise. “Didn’t you buy the medicine?”

“I did,” he said softly.

“Oh... then why are you returning this?”

He looked at her. She genuinely didn’t understand.

“Maybe I didn’t need it as much as you do,” he said.

She tilted her head, puzzled. “Your uncle is better now?”

He smiled gently. “He will be.”

Mily looked down at the note in her hand. “You’re a good person,” she said.  
“Some people don’t return money.”

Raju didn't reply. He just looked at her one last time , the girl in the blue gown, with muddy feet, a tin can, and eyes so pure they could untangle the tightest knots in the heart.

Without another word, he turned and walked away.

Mily stood there, watching his figure grow smaller, and then disappear into the misty bend of the charcoal road.

She didn't know why her heart felt a little heavier that evening.

But the next morning, she still took the same path. The trees still whispered. The birds still sang. And the bench near the tea stall was empty.

But Mily smiled anyway, holding her jute bag tight, humming softly as she walked.