

# THE HAPPY VALLEY

By

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*...the desire to travel and the desire to write spring from the same instinct, and he who has it cannot follow one without the other.*

- SYBILLE BEDFORD

Once upon a time a traveler got lost among some mountains. For many days and nights she made her slow way up and down their unmapped slopes. She was a distinguished traveler and well-provisioned, although because her needs were few she travelled light. Without a guide, because she disliked preconceptions, she had set out not to map but to explore and cross these mountains. When her calculations told her that the peak on which she stood ought to have disclosed a view of plains, undulant plains unspooling to a smog-banked horizon, broken here and there by wild verdures and patches of cultivated earth and elsewhere by a shallow sparkling river with herds of cattle and their drovers in it to their grateful knees—and instead she saw mountains, more mountains, ranges of peaks making icy pleats to a vanishing distance; then she knew she was lost. She looked carefully to see if she would spot the unmapped lake she'd half been searching for. Then she turned back the way she'd come and she descended. It was an exceptionally high mountain with a single safe trail. Halfway down she decided that retracing her steps made her too glum, she wouldn't do it again. At the bottom she made camp at the remains of the camp she'd made before, and in the morning she set off at an angle to her former route into unfamiliar mountains where she climbed and camped for many days and nights.

Quite lost, she was not unhappy. Her head was filled with many snatches of remembered conversations which she savored and some she wove into new conversations which brought her great delight. She took joy in the beauty around her, the boldness and subtlety of its coloration, always in harmony but ever-changing as the planet spun; the tracks of animals, the appearances of birds delighted her. She sketched details and pressed the leaves of unfamiliar plants in one notebook. In another she kept a travel journal so her thoughts could keep her company in camp. She slept with ease and by every dawn woke up refreshed.

Yet however few her needs or keen her resourcefulness in meeting some by stealth (a snare, a blade) or science (a filling sort of Brussels sprout, hitherto unknown), the traveler was reliant on the contents of her pack and these were dwindling. “My pack seemed light today”: the voice of cheer within the opening pages of her travel journal, gained an edge of worry. “Pack light” followed, grim. Tea, flour, salt, rice, soap, medicine, matches: all too clearly she pictured concavities where plump abundance had been, and where its weight had raised her muscles now she started shrinking back.

One hard climb with canisters jostling, the traveler heard her pack become marimba-like. If she stepped lightly, she could discern an elusive melody which seemed to be a string of questions constantly rephrased. She didn’t want to stop before she learned the words but finally, the summit of the peak in sight, the answer still delayed, she had to.

Silence. Distance. Hunger.

The traveler dreamt that she was writing a description of the qualities of dreaming at great heights. The trick was to appeal to popular curiosity with the least sacrifice of scholarly tone. In her dream she knew she’d struck the perfect balance. To write this way was effortless: her pen was speeding to the ends of lines while the reading world read along, monstrous and rapt. “There is no sign so small it doesn’t loom before us. There is no sign that we recover our ability to change. And yet—”

The traveler sneezed. She was warm and inches from her face a flood of unfamiliar flowers was passing. She registered the situation with surprise—such discovery as it implied had seemed unlikely—along with some dismay, for she had hoped to live. The mourners were most to be pitied, of course. They sounded numerous; she felt gratified and had just begun to wonder who—who—who was crying hardest at her coffin when she sneezed again. The unfamiliar voices surged around her but in terror-stricken cries or cheers or briskly unrelated chanting, which it was impossible to tell. The traveler was, it appeared, being conveyed on a litter or some kind of roofless palanquin, or possibly on the roof of a palanquin, through a forest of flowering trees which might be

an orchard, to a destination favored for the occasion by a host of highly emotional people whose language she did not recognize.

*In the Happy Valley, there is a very old story.  
One day, when our favorite orchard is in bloom, you will find us.  
You will almost find us.  
If we listen very closely, we will hear you coming;  
we will hear your magic drum asking us from afar:  
“Have we been patient? Have we been good?  
Are we still waiting as we should?”  
But however well we listen, we will only hear you very faintly  
and some of us won’t hear a thing—or so the story goes.  
We would never, ever, disappoint you.  
So each day while our favorite orchard is in bloom we gather  
with its blossoms at our backs.  
We gather at the last flat place before the highest peak we know  
begins.  
We put our blindfolds on and turn our faces to the broken sky.  
We wait so silently for you to almost find us that we’ve heard  
the eagles being born.  
We’ve heard a river start to change its course.  
We’ve heard the mountains shifting in their sleep.  
We’ve heard the motion of the sun.  
We hear the unregarded blossoms fall and when the last has  
fallen, we return  
to an old story—our true story now!  
But the old one was wrong: for we all of us heard you,  
each and every one of us up to the ancient of days  
who started, and called for assistance in standing:  
Hail, ancient of days!*

The traveler tasted flowers on her lips; pollen grains like sweetened pepper warmed her tongue. Nectar or mead, barley water or Lethe: her breath was honeyed by something spilled from rough, portentous beakers in a hundred thousands lines she’d read, yet she could be no more specific. She was not in any pain; she was deliciously warm. Her limbs were bound as well as swaddled but she could wiggle every part and digit, too, at will. Nowhere was she

sore where she had not been sore while climbing to what must have been her death, averted: her noisy saviors hadn't interfered too much. She hoped they're brought her notebooks.

Presently the flood of unfamiliar flowering branches broke among the shallows of a lemon-colored sky. A final bunch of blossoms drooped to share its sticky kiss. Somewhat further on, the traveler's escorts halted. A general taking of seats or positions ensued, a melee of excited murmurs until one old voice barked some equivalent of "Places," twice. Beneath a trembling cloak of small bells, breath, and infant commentary, the host fell still. Again the old voice rose, this time at length, to lash the limits of the primrose sky with peroration; while the traveler, determined to endure all, felt the infinite tedium of ritual pierce her like a spearhead.

*We have been waiting.  
We have been waiting and waiting.  
While we were choosing the moment to wait for  
we waited.  
We took a long time to choose.  
For many years we discarded other endings,  
some with regret; we have regretted  
but only the hopes raised, not our labors:  
Praise our forebears—the scholars!  
Who with their rigors divined and their rigors discarded  
while their exactitudes chased out the moment to wait for  
and ran it to ground;  
finally we had it.  
Many years passed and we kept it in chains  
as we learned to deserve it; we have improved  
enough to feel blessed if not over-bold:  
Praise our late ones—the skeptic survivors,  
who had the strength to keep doubting themselves  
while the moment to wait for escaped them.  
Then one day it stood there before us, free to occur.  
We started waiting anew.  
We have been waiting.  
We have been caught in a time loop at the end of time.  
A moment starts and passes and begins again*

*yet never happens; hope has borne us  
as in two cupped hands.  
Praise this safe deliverance!*

Diverted from her efforts to unravel the meanings of glottal and guttural by a horrid many-throated roar, the traveler felt a momentary faintness. Then her head spoke more plainly: still aloft, she was being tilted upright. But how slowly! She would have to revise her assumptions, if this was a mechanical litter she lay on; hydraulic seemed likeliest; had Daedalus been here? The loud voice ground on while she pictured the subtitle and cover art.

*Infinite care! Infinite care!  
Stay your strength at the molten pitch of imperceptibly slow  
motion!  
Bearers, chosen through trials, remember the boulders that gave  
up their weight in your arms—  
remember those dawns and the first hours of leaning, the last  
hours of stooping—  
remember how the great rock took her children from you with  
her grateful and merciful kiss—  
now you bear the kiss.  
And you hoisters!  
You who on springy green poles raised and balanced when last  
you competed, between you, four cats and a goat while they  
littered and nursed on two dripping platforms—  
remember that roiling life born at the furthest reaches of your  
arms—  
remember how it fattened—  
and the father almost seemed to hold his children safe—  
he almost holds you still.  
Infinite care! Remember.  
This is our last waiting  
before our new condition.*

Flutes, of wood, and horns of horn, perhaps, tootling; something stringed, loosely; another something gong-like and buzzing; drums and rattles; more small bells; clapping and chanting: the traveler scanned the ensuing sonance for signs of melody in

vain. The flute lines leaked air into a setting nasal as the voices. Three rhythms seemed to quarrel in peevish senility while a fourth menaced: who could dance to this? Yet there were footfalls all around and the discordant voices shook with exertion. Just then the corner of the litter at her right foot fluttered; a nearby smattering of cries and gasps was quickly stifled. This was no machine. With a sinking feeling, she slept.

A low sun prying at her eyelids woke the thirsty traveler to a sky like butter melting through the dotted outlines of a jagged, coppery horizon. She was hungry, too, and stiff-limbed. The music had stopped, but she did not immediately perceive the next speaker: some lines or bars of notes had passed before she distinguished a voice from what could have been a creaking bed or ambient birdsong. Cindered by sunlight, shredded by air, pure persistence piped in from old beyond old—maybe even interplanetary—and quite genderless, this voice was. Faster, now, she floated upright, as it may have commanded.

A lush valley, its prow buried in distant peaks, spilled into view. Waterways, meandering or ruler straight, gleamed through a patchwork of crops, copses and golden greens; a system of footbridges and paths was apparent; small livestock gamboled in generous pens near the outlines of shelter. Then, there, towers—low ones—and were those mud-brick battlements? Sunlight filled her eyes again.

*At last  
let us be kinder to our weaker ones.  
At last  
let us taste sweet sights together;  
This story  
was never for the weak minded.  
None of the good ones are.*

The final syllables trailed from a labored exhalation like prayer flags stuttering in an icy wind. As silence fell, and echoed, a skull eclipsed the sun. The traveler's eyes widened to discern its human features, if any; two wide eyes widened even further with her own.

An affliction. A mirror. A cruel joke.

But these were not the thoughts inside the wondering and delighted eyes she saw, although she'd made no effort to dissimulate. This mirror theory, she realized, was out, when from an eye not hers a large tear spilled.