

THE EYES ARE NOT HERE

I had the compartment to myself up to Rohana, and then a girl got in. The couple who saw her off were probably her parents; they seemed very anxious about her comfort, and the woman gave the girl detailed instructions as to where to keep her things, when not to lean out of the windows, and how to avoid speaking to strangers. They said their good-byes; the train pulled out of the station.

As I was totally blind at the time, my eyes sensitive only to light and darkness, I was unable to tell what the girl looked like; but I knew she wore slippers from the way they slapped against her heels.

It would take me some time to discover something about her looks, and perhaps I never would. But I liked the sound of her voice, and even the sound of her slippers.

‘Are you going all the way to Dehra?’ I asked.

I must have been sitting in a dark corner, because my voice startled her. She gave a little exclamation and said, ‘I didn’t know anyone else was here.’

Well, it often happens that people with good eyesight fail to see what is right in front of them. They have too much to take in, I suppose. Whereas people who cannot see (or see very little) have to take in only the essentials, whatever registers most tellingly on their remaining senses.

‘I didn’t see you either,’ I said. ‘But I heard you come in.’

I wondered if I would be able to prevent her from discovering that I was blind, I thought. Provided I keep to my seat, it shouldn’t be too difficult.

The girl said, ‘I’m getting down at Saharanpur. My aunt is meeting me there.’

‘Then I had better not be too familiar,’ I said. ‘Aunts are usually formidable creatures.’

‘Where are you going?’ she asked.

‘To Dehra, and then to Mussoorie.’

‘Oh, how lucky you are, I wish I were going to Mussoorie. I love the hills. Especially in October.’

‘Yes, this is the best time,’ I said, calling on my memories. ‘The hills are covered with wild dahlias, the sun is delicious, and at night you can sit in front of a log-fire and enjoy yourself. Most of the tourists have gone, and the roads are quiet and almost deserted. Yes, October is the best time.’

She was silent, and I wondered if my words had touched her, or whether she thought me a romantic fool. Then I made a mistake.

‘What is it like?’ I asked.

She seemed to find nothing strange in the question. Had she noticed already that I could not see? But her next question removed my doubts.

‘Why don’t you look out of the window?’ she asked.

I moved easily along the berth and felt for the window-ledge. The window was open, and I faced it, making a pretence, of studying the landscape. I heard the panting of the engine, the rumble of the wheels, and in my mind’s eye, I could see the telegraph-posts flashing by.

‘Have you noticed,’ I ventured, ‘that trees seem to be moving while we seem to be standing still?’

‘That always happens,’ she said. ‘Do you see any animals? Hardly any animals left in the forests near Dehra.’

I turned from the window and faced the girl, and for a while we sat in silence.

‘You have an interesting face,’ I remarked. I was becoming quite daring, but it was a safe remark. Few girls can resist flattery.

She laughed pleasantly, a clear, ringing laugh.

‘It’s nice to be told I have an interesting face. I’m tired of people telling me I have a pretty face.’

Oh, so you do have a pretty face, thought I, and aloud said: ‘Well, an interesting face can also be pretty.’

‘You are a very gallant young man,’ she said. ‘But why are you so serious?’

I thought then, that I would try to laugh for her; but the thought of laughter only made me feel troubled and lonely.

‘We’ll soon be at your station,’ I said.

‘Thank goodness it’s a short journey. I can’t bear to sit in a train for more than two or three hours.’

Yet I was prepared to sit there for almost any length of time, just to listen to her talking. Her voice had the sparkle of a mountain stream. As soon as she left the train, she would forget our brief encounter; but it would stay with me for the rest of the journey, and for some time after.

The engine’s whistle shrieked, the carriage wheels changed their sound and rhythm.

The girl got up and began to collect her things. I wondered if she wore her hair in a bun, or if it was plaited, or if it hung loose over her shoulders, or if it was cut very short.

The train drew slowly into the station. Outside, there was the shouting of porters and vendors and a high-pitched female voice near the carriage door which must have belonged to the girl's aunt.

'Good-bye,' said the girl.

She was standing very close to me, so close that the perfume from her hair was tantalising. I wanted to raise my hand and touch her hair; but she moved away, and only the perfume still lingered where she had stood.

You may break, you may shatter the vase if you will, but the scent of the roses will linger there still...

There was some confusion in the doorway. A man, getting into the compartment, stammered an apology. Then the door banged shut, and the world was shut out again. I returned to my berth. The guard blew his whistle and we moved off. Once again, I had a game to play and a new fellow-traveller.

The train gathered speed, the wheels took up their song, the carriage groaned and shook. I found the window and sat in front of it, staring into the daylight that was darkness for me.

So many things were happening outside the window. It could be a fascinating game, guessing what went on out there.

The man, who had entered the compartment, broke into my reverie.

'You must be disappointed,' he said, 'I'm sorry I'm not as attractive a travelling companion as the one who just left'

'She was an interesting girl,' I said. 'Can you tell me—did she keep her hair long or short?'

'I don't remember,' he said, sounding puzzled. 'It was her eyes I noticed, not her hair. She had beautiful eyes—but they were of no use to her, she was completely blind. Didn't you notice?'

- Ruskin Bond

About the Story

'The Eyes are Not Here' (also known as 'The Girl on the Train' and 'The Eyes Have It') is a deeply touching story about two co-passengers in a train who are both blind and do not realise that the other is also blind. The irony lies the fact that the narrator of the story learns that his co-passenger was blind only after she had got off the train. There is pathos and irony in the situation and Bond offers us the irony in the ending, adding to the effect of the whole story on the reader. It was only after she left and another passenger came into the compartment that the narrator realises that the girl was blind.

The author Ruskin born in Kasauli (Himachal Pradesh) and grew up in Jamnagar (Gujarat), Dehradun and Shimla, is a short story writer and novelist, and has also written more than thirty books for children.

Glossary

anxious: worried, concerned

instructions: directions, information on what to do, advice
 strangers: unknown or unfamiliar persons
 sensitive: responsive
 exclamation: utterance in amazement
 tellingly: Powerfully, forcefully, effectively, significantly.
 to see off : to go to an airport, station, etc, with someone who is beginning a journey and to bid goodbye
 startle : to cause someone to be suddenly surprised, sometimes making them jump
 register on: to have an effect (on a person), to be noticed or remembered
 formidable: causing anxiety/fearful respect
 dahlia: a garden flower with a lot of brightly coloured petals
 a romantic fool: highly imaginative person
 pretence: an action or way of behaving that is intended to make people believe something that is not true
 panting: a condition of being out of breath, though here, the sound made by the train's engine is compared to the sound made by a person if he/she were out of breath
 venture: to venture a question or statement is to say it in an uncertain or hesitant manner .
 gallant: a man politely attentive to women
 a brief: a short unexpected meeting
 tantalising: causing temptation or to appear promising
 linger: to remain, stay on
 stammer: to speak with difficulty, hesitating and repeating words or sounds
 reverie: a state of imagining or thinking about pleasant things, as in a dream
 apology: a word or statement saying sorry for something that has been done wrong

COMPREHENSION

(A) Tick the correct alternative:

- Where was the narrator going to?
 (a) Saharanpur (b) Delhi (c) Dehra (d) Rohana
- Who came to see the girl off at the station of Rohana?
 (a) Aunt (b) Uncle (c) Parents (d) Father
- “She had beautiful eyes – but they were no use to her.” Who spoke these words:
 (a) narrator (b) aunt (c) a man (d) uncle

(B) Answer the following questions in 10-15 words each:

- Why were the girl's parents very much anxious about her comfort?
- What was the narrator's very first clue about his fellow traveller in the train?

3. Why was the narrator unable to tell anything about the look of the girl?
4. What was the girl tired of?
5. "Oh, now lucky you are." Who said this and about whom?

(C) Answer the following questions in 20-30 words each:

1. What did the girl say about Mussoorie?
2. How did the narrator compare the girl's voice?
3. What did the narrator want to play once again?
4. What did the new passenger say about the girl?

(D) Answer the following questions in 60-80 words each:

1. How did the narrator try to impress the girl?
2. Comment on the appropriateness of the title.

(E) Say whether the following statements are True or False. Write 'T' for True and 'F' for False in the bracket:

1. According to the narrator of the story October is the right time to visit Mussoorie. []
2. The narrator in the story was aware that the girl whom he was talking to was blind. []
3. The narrator was ready to play the game with his next fellow traveller. []
4. Ruskin Bond is primarily an Essayist. []