

The Meeting with Hemingway

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The man was not very old and seemed to be waiting. He had a great presence. A stand-out guy. Raw and appealing. You could sense power emanating—a resting sinewy cheetah. Alone, brooding, yet untouchable. The face, in profile, was weather-beaten and ruddy. Hypnotic, thought the viewer, watching the man.

Otherwise, it was a regular, mundane scene. Typical of tourist spots. It was noon and the harsh African sun—the Kenyan sun to be precise—was shining mercilessly on a road that seemed to be lost in the steaming jungle ahead. The old corpulent man, in his late fifties with frizzled hair and red eyes, was sitting in the shade of a red umbrella, in the open courtyard of the modest restaurant called the Safari, drinking chilled beer in a large mug and smoking a cigar. He was wearing a Panama hat and a cotton shirt that stuck to his broad muscular back and cotton shorts that were crumpled and dirty, revealing two heavy and hairy legs. The man was quietly watching the road and the far-off jungle, slowly sipping and exhaling the rich smoke through his wide nostrils—a typical hunter, or, a rich Yankee tourist, lost in his own private world, slightly aloof and formidable, on a mandatory visit of exploration of the dark Africa. Most came in groups, fascinated by the African soul, colonial masters on a routine discovery of the primitive there.

The young waiter looked at the old white man from his vantage corner, near the tin shed, admiring his stern profile; his sun-lit broad face and deeply-lined forehead slightly tilted in his direction, reminding the viewer of old Biblical prophets. *Tough man*. He always admired such strong types—rough, barrel-chested, determined in the mouth and exuding the raw energy of a slumbering jungle cat. The old man looked like a trained hunter. Focussed and cool. Perfectly oblivious to the diverting presence of other human beings or other distractions. Occasionally, he wrote something in a fat diary, some key detail. His concentration was supreme. He was watching the jungle far ahead and the peaks that jutted out of the swaying tree tops, *as if in a trance*. Very occasionally, he would look at the road. The hotel business was not good this season. The last rains were over. The tourist season was to start soon. The old man was their first customer of the day who had arrived a bit early, *as usual*. He had plopped down on a wicker chair, spreading his legs wide apart and taken out a box of Havana cigars, *as usual*. Then, he had ordered a chilled beer and some salted munchies. And turned around his chair and faced the road with the patience of a Zen monk, *as if expecting a lion to come out suddenly from the hills beyond, for a dialogue with him*. He was the only client so far, drinking his beer slowly; eyes focussed; probing the dull countryside. The hot August sun and the flies did not bother him either. He just sat, waiting. *He may bring luck to them this season*.

‘More beer, Mister?’ asked the young waiter, afraid of disturbing the reverie that raw Africa often inspired in visitors.

The old man said, looking at him kindly: ‘Not right now, lad. Thanks for asking.’

He sure is a kind man, thought the lad. 'Reminds me of my dead maternal grandpa, a successful safari hunter, and favourite of white clients, thought the lad in yellow T-shirt and baggy black underpants that hung down his thin long legs.'

The safari was actually run from a large tin-n-wooden shack with a canvas awning. The uneven ground was cleared by the short owner and his fat wife. A fencing of barbed wires was strung to mark the territory and prevent stray dogs from entering. Some plants and creepers gave a green look to the dismal place and a couple of umbrellas were erected to give shade and colour to the run-down eatery. It was the only joint in the creeping wilderness where tourists stopped for a short rest before the start of a rough jeep ride over a pot-holed road and a drink or two and a fried chicken. The modest kitchen was managed by the woman, wearing a red scarf over her head, while her man attended to the white customers and the cash-box. The lean famished waiter took the orders. It was perfectly still.

'He is here right from morning,' the woman remarked in a low tone, rearranging the crockery, on the platform full of vegetables and other things.

'So what? The man is harmless. Quietly drinking his third beer now. Brings business for us. The serious type, not the boisterous arrogant type of tourist,' said the husband.

The woman nodded her agreement. 'A good customer, yeah.'

The young waiter now lurked in the long shadow of the small shack, watching the burning road, bored with the ritual of waiting on the only client, on a slow day. There was no vehicular traffic. The road stretched long and endless, merging with the green shadows in the distance. A warm breeze blew in, bringing dust also. It was *lovely* still.

The customer sipped his beer and glanced at his watch. Wiping his broad forehead, he called out in a gruff voice, 'A matchbox, please.'

The tall lean waiter ambled towards the shack, fished out a box from an overcrowded bamboo basket and then, reached the white man. He offered the item to the old man, saying nothing.

The man said, 'Thank you, my young lad.'

The waiter just nodded his head and said, 'Anything else, Mister?'

'No, thank you. You are a nice lad.'

The teenage waiter *now* smiled, opening up a bit, body a bit relaxed. 'What is your name?'

'David Mboto.'

'Good-sounding name!'

The waiter smiled, showing white teeth. *Happy to be talked to in the wilderness by a white man!*

'And yours?' the waiter asked.

'Hemingway. Ernest Hemingway.'

'Are you waiting for somebody?'

The bearded man smiled. 'Yes. For a close friend.'

'You waiting for three days now?'

'Yes. Full three days.'

'Do not you tire out?'

'No. For friends, I can wait for eternity. Even, in the jungle!'

The owner, noticing the sudden animated conversation, shouted at the waiter,

‘Hey, come here. Do not disturb the white man there by your silly talk, Mboto.’

Hemingway said in a booming voice, ‘Not at all. I want to talk to the boy. Can I, boss?’

The owner nodded indifferently.

‘What do you do, Mr. Hemingway?’ Mboto asked in his thin voice, eyes wide and clear, *a curious teenager now*, in the company of a new *caring* friend.

‘Oh! I am a writer.’

‘What is that?’ The boy asked.

‘Writer is a guy who creates things in his head. Things that do not *really* exist. Then he packs the whole wonderful stuff in words called stories that tell you a lot about this *real* world and life,’ said Hemingway to the wide-eyed boy Mboto.

‘Like a magician?’

‘Yes.’

‘Great! What do you write about?’

‘The big game. The Safari. The bull fight. The War. So many things that the world does not want to talk about these days.’

‘But all of them are real things? Like war.’

‘Yes. Magicians also pull off real things, out of their black hats.’

‘You must be a very brave man, Mr. Hemingway, doing all these tough things?’

‘I do not know.’

‘You fight the bulls?’

‘All of us have our own bulls to fight, Mboto.’

‘And you hunt also?’

‘Yes.’

‘Big game?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you have seen war also?’

‘Yes. I was an ambulance driver at the front.’

Mboto’s thin mouth fell open. He stared at the big bearded man with a ruddy face and kind eyes. ‘You are a great guy.’

Hemingway roared. ‘Naw. I am not. Ordinary guy like you but with extraordinary interests. I chase life. It is beautiful!’

The lad blushed. ‘But I do not do all these things.’

‘A time comes when, chased by bulls, a man has to stop and fight them. You will also do that. Already doing that only. Here, in this jungle, on your own. Do you know who is a real guy?’

‘No,’ said Mboto.

‘The one who stands up for a cause and gets counted. That makes a man, a real man,’ said the writer, looking at the lad, *as if he were his lost son*.

‘You are a brave person. I wish my old man was like you only.’

‘Where is he?’

‘He left us.’

‘When?’

‘Many years ago. I was just five. My mother brought me up.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘She is dead.’

‘Oh! I am sorry!’
Hemingway looked at the tall famished boy. ‘You are a nice little man.’
‘Thank you, Sir.’
‘Mboto, where did you pick up your English?’
‘In the church, where Ma worked as a kitchen help.’
‘Who taught you there?’
‘The Dutch priest. The kind Father Fernandez. In the missionary school there.’
Hemingway lit up his fat cigar. ‘What you doing here in this goddamn place?’
‘I came here to search for my father. Somebody said he was working in the town as a safari guide.’
‘Could you find him, that bastard?’
‘No. I searched the town. He had left two days ago. He is the only one left of my tiny family now. I want to find him out.’
‘Then?’
‘I decided to wait out here. This man took pity on me and gave me this job. I will wait.’
‘Do you expect to find and meet your father?’
‘I dunno. Ma said, waiting is important. Surprises may turn up in new places.’
Hemingway smiled and patted the boy on his thin back. ‘You are a brave young lad. Do not give up on your search. You may find something worthwhile. We all are searching for somebody in our life.’
‘Thank you, sir. You are nice being. Not seen your type. Others are very rude.’
Hemingway smiled. ‘Writers also are on a search. They cannot afford to be rude. If they get rude, they die young.’
‘What do they search?’
‘Characters.’
‘Who are they?’
‘Folks like you. Real people. With a lot of pain and hurt.’
‘You also feel pain and hurt, Mr. Hemingway?’
‘A lot, dear. I cry also. Real men are not afraid of crying.’
Mboto stared hard at the big white man. ‘You cry?’
‘Yes. The world is a wicked place. You can get hurt easily. You have to get around the dark things and find your own personal code.’
The lad said nothing.
‘You see, my boy, a writer is an ordinary person who can create beauty out of ugliness. Pain, hurt, humiliation. That gets transformed.’
‘You also depressed,’ asked David Mboto.
‘Yes. I often feel like committing suicide.’
‘But that is cowardice. Ma told me not to do that and to believe in God. Cowardice, she called it.’
‘No. When you cannot live on your terms, live no more. Pull the trigger. And exit the cruel world gracefully. On your terms only. Without being disgraced. It is courage of different kind.’
‘Surprising! Coming from a brave bloke like you!’
‘Those who live honourably, die honourably.’
‘Why you kill big game?’
‘Oh! Not again. I will tell you some other time. Not now, Mboto. Big game is

like facing death in the eyes. Facing the ultimate truth in life. The brave can attempt that. The beauty of Nada.'

'What is that?'

Just then, a jeep pulled over. A blonde shouted loudly, 'Papa Hemingway. I am here. Finally!'

'Coming, my dear,' said the man. He threw some dollars on the plate and stood up, 'Do not worry, my lad. You will sure find your father one day. We all do. He will teach you how to swim, fish and fight. Do not give up so easily on your noble quest. Meanwhile, try to live honourably in this mean world. You remind me of Nick Adams. Bye, Bye!' Then, he stopped, at the low gate. 'Mbotto, count me as your family.'

'How can I meet you again?' asked a happy Mbotto to the receding Hemingway.

The writer stopped again, spun around and said, 'do not worry. I will find you again. We will meet again. Bye.'

And he was gone.

Mbotto never met the great writer again in his short happy life as a young safari hunter, at least. But the world-famous writer of short clean well-lit fluorescent words and clipped elegant sentences and bare prose *did* find Mbotto. A few years down the line, Mbotto saw the famous face staring from a daily with the caption: 'Great Hunter Kills Himself'. Intrigued, he read on about the suicide committed by the bearded, masculine, pugilist Hemingway and then, clearly remembered the meeting with the great writer, on that memorable August day, many years ago in the tumble-down Safari hotel, as if it had happened only yesterday: a brief but unforgettable meeting that had changed his depressed sad orphan life forever and made him, a true *real* man, following the trade of a professional hunter and trekker of big game in the jungles of the brooding Africa. He had become one of the best trekkers of Kenya and much admired for his virtues of patience, calmness and courage and his eye for sharp details. Few could beat Mbotto for his talents in the jungle, and his photographic memory. He could face the herds of wild elephants and go even nearer to a tigress feeding her cubs. He courted danger but took all the precautions. The jungle was his backyard.

He had come to read all the works of Hemingway in English, understanding their import, developing tremendous respect for this celebrated big game hunter, a man in constant quest of extreme adventure, danger and challenge. Africa and Cuba calmed the great writer of the adventures of human soul. 'Nature tested the heroism of Papa Hemingway,' declared this simple tall man with an authority that could puzzle the well-read theory-driven Oxford dons!

This account of meeting with Hemingway was narrated to me by this remarkable man during my brief stay in Kenya, as an English high-school teacher from central India. Mbotto himself was a great story teller who could make things very vivid through his skills with words, situations and characters. I cannot confirm the authenticity of this gripping encounter between an accomplished writer and a young lad taught in a mission school, on a bare noon in a run-down hotel at the edge of the jungle but the way he narrated it, laying down all the details accurately about my all-time favourite writer, a master to many in the world, sounded very *convincing* and

real to me. And that counts for me, as a reader or listener. About finding his lost father again, Mbotto evaded direct answers but once famously said to me, 'all of us do find our fathers, somewhere, at some time! They teach us a lot about transcendental values. I did find mine, many years ago, on a lazy August noon. He lives on in my mind and heart.'