

Dehonn Park

When I was 10, the world was beautiful for then there was a green hill. It was a small thing, really, not even a hill; but to understand my story, I must take you back, some time back.

Thirty years ago, my father came to this country and then he called my mother. They ate, slept, and washed in one room. In the next room there was the same life; in the next and next and next. That was the way it all began. In the face of such humble beginnings it was quite a wonderful advancement when he purchased a hotel. The structure was wooden and housed about fifty laborers, most of them living off on pensions of one sort or another. Their checks came at the beginning of the month, and at that time they would hardly sleep at night and come banging at the door of the office to see if the checks had arrived. Because of slight variations in the government offices, they would bother papa not a few mornings in succession and get him very irritated. Sometimes he would pull out the bell wires at the beginning of the month.

What did they do with the money? After their rent had been drawn from the total sum and the minimum food supply bought, they would spend the remainder on drinks. The first few days of the month, the beer taverns across the street were full and the streets would be spotted with the men sitting and lying down.

Papa ~~did~~ did not like to have their drinking happen in the hotel. The men would practically shake down the wooden walls with their carousing and also make much additional cleaning up work for mama.

Imagine life narrowed to that scope--the tavern, the streets, the hotel room wherein there is a tin bed, a wash sink, a table, four thin walls to keep out the world. As for their mental world it was complete in pulp magazines and newspaper pages; or perhaps memories or in the imagination that accompanies drinking orgies. Here in this meagre world they let time pass. Here someday it would end.

But to get back to the green hill, there it was in the midst of all this greyness. It arose on a single city block which was surrounded by dim wooden hotels, taverns, brothels; eyed objectively it was nothing but a piece of elevated flat earth with naked clay sides sitting in the midst of very grey surroundings. Originally the surrounding ground too had been high but for building purposes the City Engineering Department had gradually washed away the land so that for some reason or another only this one block remained at its natural height. Fate it seemed had especially endowed this ~~plot~~ plot of earth with many unusual blessings.

One summer day, mama, my sister and I were standing by the window. It was the beginning of the month and we saw many men standing around, straggling out of the taverns, or simply sitting on the sidewalk. Across the street, upon the hill, there were many men drinking and having a very good time. In the summer time papa would not let them bring their bottles inside, and they would all go upon the hill and drink and stay all night. Mama gazed at the people a long time and said, "If their mothers were to see them now what would they say? What would they say?" Just then Papa happened to come by our windows and he asked, "What are you looking at?"

"We were wondering what their mothers would say if they could see their sons now," I said. Papa thought a moment and said, "It is a good thing human beings cannot see the future. They would not have the heart to go on. That hill is a regular 'dehorn park'" he said. We all laughed but remembered it for we always began to refer to the hill as "dehorn park."

It was a park in the truest sense. Both men and children might come to stretch, to rest, and to play. Here was an unobstructed view of one block, and beyond also over the gray rooftops to the bay. Here was enjoyment of space and grass and life.

The neighborhood kids and I used to live upon that hill, except in the winter time. Then the dismal rain and fog would make the ground slippery, and only the seagulls would strut upon the hill. Before and after the rain especially on winter mornings they would wheel and soar above the hill, screeching in their weird lonely way. But when the spring came, that was the time for us. After school we would vie with each other in making handsome kites and run wild over the hill trying to make them fly into the sunny windy heavens. When summer came, we would ride the trolleys in the afternoon to the beaches and at night play on the hill for it was much too warm and stuffy in the hotel rooms. How we regretted the coming of autumn for then the ground became too wet for enjoyment. Sometimes at night I would hear a huge slap on the cement. I would crawl out of bed and hurry barefoot to the window. Lifting up the corner of the shade and the curtain, I would be just in time to see another portion of the hill, heavy with rain, crumble and fall to

the street. With the street lamp casting a shimmering streamer on the wet pavement, and a few shadowy figures walking out of the taverns, the slow falling away of the hill seemed sad and weary in the cold wet night.

One summer at dusk, after supper mama and I went up to the hill. She seldom went up there partly because she was busy, partly because she said she preferred to sit by the window and watch. Beyond the rows and rows of black heated roofs of factories and office buildings one could see the purpled mountains against the pale green sky like melted jade. Sunset was over and the first star of evening appeared.

Slowly we walked up and down the length of the hill, in no particular path. Suddenly we came upon a man and a woman sleeping together. Perhaps they had drunk themselves to sleep, perhaps there were other reasons. To me there was nothing unusual about it but mama immediately took ~~home sister and me~~ ^{home} and me. Her only explanation was that the hill was bad for little children. We never went to the hill after that.

Everyday when we tired of listening to the radio or reading or playing indoor games or street games we would look up at the forbidden grounds, see the men and the children. "Mama, please please," little sister would beg, but to no avail.

A half year after that in the immigrant's language, we arose in the world. Having made enough money to invest in a better hotel, our family moved into a home. The status of our family advanced and as for my sister and I the hill was buried under many years and other joys. How we have grown! Now we go to college and no longer do we see crooked cold men but young healthy clean men with warm comfortable cars and beautiful

dreams of the future. Now for us there are blocks of green campus land with trees and beautiful buildings; there is music; there are picnics in the mountains. That hill has melted in the picture of far past childhood.

Sometimes, especially in the spring time, I remember the hill, the miserable little "Dehorn Park" with those kites blooming into the blue sky and bent filthy men and the naked gray sides of the hill. The man and the woman lying shamelessly in the grass at dusk especially remain with me. What my mother's concern was, I know now. Yet my understanding of that incident has enhanced its strange quality--the essence of the life on that hill. Whatever you may call it, the twisted quality that seemed to pervade all life in that part of town. I mean.....

I remember one drizzly day when I was 7 years old. My sister and I were walking home from school under one umbrella. It was a very wet dark day when cats creep under parked cars, people walk close to the building walls or pause under shop awnings. As we passed by an alley behind a bakery, we saw a shabby old man stooping over a garbage can. His comrade was a typical alley cat crouching on the garbage can edge. At the man's feet were puddles and birds, brown sparrows and gray pigeons feeding on wet bits of something. So there they were eating of the same refuse in the dark rainy alley. All dripping and wet.

"Big sister," said my sister, "Who is that man?"

As three years her senior I was expected to answer everything. "St. Francis of Assissi," I said.

"St Francis of Assisssi? Oh, my, what is he?"

"He is a great man," I explained just as I had learned from someone, "A great man who loves all men and all animals; a man who believed in the brotherhood of all men and all animals."

They were very big words, but my ~~sister~~ accepted my ~~ex~~planation with complete confidence, "I see, big sister," she answered and we walked home in the rain under our umbrella talking of other things.