

## Are hills like white elephants?

Sunil Sharma

‘Can hills be like white elephants?’

The teaser fails to disengage Sandip from his iPhone.

‘Can hills be like white elephants?’ Priya insists, fingering her curly mane, lower lip pouting, eyes wandering across the room and outside.

He is orbiting in another space, detached from the lunch-hour din in the McDonald’s in Colaba, Mumbai.

‘Why don’t you pay attention?’ she asks irritated. Sitting near the exit, Priya watches the Friday rush hour traffic with the bored expression of a regular.

‘OK.’

‘Can hills be like white elephants?’

‘What kind of nonsense is this?’ Sandip’s eyes are unfocussed. ‘How can they ever be?’

‘That’s my question, too. I asked my professor. He said they can be.’

‘But how?’

‘The professor says it’s a short fiction by a famous American.’

‘Do they write fiction?’

‘Who?’

‘The Yanks. Thought they just made dollars.’

‘You’re a nerd, Sandip!’

‘In love with a doll!’

Priya smiles. ‘Nada!’

‘What the hell!’

‘What?’

‘This nada stuff.’

‘Oh.’

Sandip is not yet disengaged. ‘Why do you drive me crazy with this stuff?’

‘Which stuff?’ asks Priya, rolling her eyes.

‘This literary stuff! Heavy-duty!’

‘Because I’m doing an MA in English Lit, that’s why.’

‘But I’m not into this.’

‘So what?! Ain’t you my BF?’

‘That doesn’t give you any right to ply me with this boring stuff!’

Priya flutters her long eyelashes. ‘Don’t be a mean nerd.’

‘I’m not a nerd. Do you know about programming, Java?’

‘Nada.’

‘My gawd!’ Sandip sips his Coke, fiddling with his iPhone again. The doors swing open, letting in traffic sounds. The outlet is fast filling up with a teen crowd: torn jeans and tees, and mohawks and undercut styles. American accents prevail.

Priya says, ‘Why are you being so nasty?’

‘I’m not. But don’t hand me your nada-nada thing.’

‘Nada.’

Sandip shrugs, lost in another realm.

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'Listen, lar. I love literature. What's wrong with that?'  
 'It's for morons.'  
 'Nada!'  
 'Hell with you!'  
 'Seems you're not interested in me.'  
 'Why?'  
 'Because you don't show any interest in my interests.'  
 'Do you in mine?'  
 Priya ignores the sullen accusation. Then she stands up. 'I'm leaving.'  
 Sandip is startled. 'Why?'  
 'Because you are...'  
 'A nerd. OK. I am. Tell me. I am serious now. Ask me. I am focused, real-time.'  
 Undecided, Priya lingers.  
 'Please! Honey!'  
 'OK.'  
 She sits. They sip Coke and crunch chips.  
 'Go ahead. Ask.' Sandip sounds eager. 'That thing about hills.'  
 'I asked if hills can look like white elephants.'  
 Sandip scratches his thick top knot. 'No idea.'  
 'Well, this is a home assignment: write a piece on the story "Hills like white elephants".'  
 'Go ahead and write.'  
 'But I can't figure it out. I need your help.'  
 'Show me.'  
 'Look at the circled dialogue on the tab. Or better, I'll read it out. It goes:

*'All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?'*  
*'That was bright.'*  
*'I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it – look at things and try new drinks?'*  
*'I guess so.' The girl looked across at the hills.*  
*'They're lovely hills,' she said.*  
*'They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the colouring of their skin through the trees.'*  
*'Should we have another drink?'*  
*'All right.'*

Tell me now.'  
 Sandip scratches his hair, a habit that annoys her, he knows, and grins. 'What the hell!'  
 'Is that all?'  
 'Does it matter?'  
 'Yeah, it does,' Priya says bitterly. 'You're like her American companion in the story.'  
 Sandip grins. 'If the hills look like elephants or not, what does it matter? It's fiction.'  
 She stands up. 'It doesn't matter. To you or to her companion. I'm leaving, walking out on you, in fact.' She takes her bag and leaves.  
 Sandip, hurt, looks around. Nobody is paying attention to this little drama. After a quick

bite, he too leaves. He mutters under his breath, ‘What the fuck! Just for a fictional character and an atrocious plot!’

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**Sunil Sharma** is a senior academic based in Mumbai who has published three collections of poetry, a collection of short fiction and one novel, and has co-edited five books of poetry, short fiction and literary criticism. In 2012 he was the winner of the UK-based *Destiny Poets’* inaugural *Poet of the Year* award, while in 2015 his poetry was published in the prestigious *UN* anthology *Happiness: The Delight-Tree*. He edits the English section of the monthly *Setu*, a bilingual journal from Pittsburgh.