

The Visit on the Hill

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Amir wandered about in the field behind his home enjoying the view. It was a typical Saturday of the end of a scorching summer. White clouds were scattered in the gleaming blue sky, insects hovered around the last of the summer flowers, and their humming only accentuated the stillness that prevailed all around. Amir sat down on the shore of the lake in his favorite place, and stared at the peaceful clear water. In a couple of days he will start his studies in the university and his heart was filled with sweet pride and excitement. Neither the beep of his watch, nor the voice of his mother reminding him not to be late for the family lunch, did not interrupt his daydreaming in which he fared into the fascinating future that awaited him.

Something over the hill, on the other side of the lake, drew his attention, but as much as he tried to look, he could not determine what it was. The only motion that he could discern was the flickering of the air mixed with the light of the sun above the top of the hill. Amir felt an unexplained desire and decided to go over to the hill. When he approached the top, he realized that the flickering airy screen remained in its place at the top of the hill, and did not retreat, as should be expected from the well-known phenomenon of light going through waves of hot air. Amir stopped by the shimmering screen and reached out with his hand towards it. Although he sensed nothing, he was swarmed by a strong urge to go through it. Amir took two steps forward and stopped still. The grass plane that covered the top of the hill seemed to have enlarged, and in a wide field a spaceship was parked. Its beauty was breathtaking. Amir turned his head back, and when he saw his home behind the lake, he calmed down a bit.

A man came out from the spaceship, smiled and said to Amir: "Hello Amir! I am glad that you came to see us."

Amir had to overcome his astonishment and shouted: "Who are you? How come I did not see the spaceship? Is it a new experiment of the Space Agency? Where did you come from?"

"My name is Elron," Answered the stranger, "We are visiting Earth, and we came from far away to carry out an important mission. I know that you are surprised to see me without pointed ears and that my skin is not green..."

Amir burst out with laughter but said nothing. Elron continued, "We are human beings like you and like the rest of the people of Earth. We live in a different world, and decided long time ago to come here in order to help you. We can say that we failed in our previous visits, but to some extent we learned from them a lot. Our mission is very vital for you, and therefore, we will not let go of it, no matter what."

Even though Amir did not understand exactly what Elron meant, he did not feel any anxiety. The quiet words of the stranger and the warmth that radiated from him filled Amir with calm and a sense of certainty that he had never before experienced.

“It is alright!” Continued Elron softly, “Before you will be able to fully understand what I said just now, you will have to pass a certain test.”

That sounded more familiar and fascinating. The calmness that blanketed Amir was replaced by the drive of adventure, a feeling that he liked most. “I wonder what the test will look like,” contemplated Amir, and when Elron invited him to enter the spacecraft he did not falter but stepped forward quickly and followed him, while his excitement increased with every step he made into the ship.

Contrary to all his expectations, Amir found out that the spaceship did not contain many instruments. “In our car we have more instrumentation than in this strange spaceship,” reflected Amir when he listened to Elron’s explanations that astonished him by their simplicity. “...Here is the starting key, and this is a knob for general direction, and this is the helm...” Said Elron while pointing at a silvery arrow that lied on top of a square smooth plate. They were standing in the front room of the craft. The front walls of the room were entirely transparent and through them Amir saw the familiar surroundings of his home. In the room there were two simple armchairs, and in the center of the room, on a rectangular stall, he could see all the instrumentation that Elron referred to in his explanations. Amir looked around in order to find clues for additional instruments. “The test certainly is concerned with operating sophisticated gadgets,” thought Amir, when he recalled the special psychometric examinations that he had to pass in order to be accepted to the university in spite of his premature age. But he could not find any sign for any additional instruments in the room. “Do you want to try your ability in flying this spaceship?” The unexpected question only reinforced Amir’s inner feeling, and he answered enthusiastically, “Yes!”

Elron instructed Amir to press the starting key, and when Amir did so, nothing happened except for the fact that the silvery arrow changed its color and started to glow with a deep golden hue. “And what do I have to do now?” asked Amir. “Lift up the arrow slowly, about five centimeters above the plate,” answered Elron with a smile of conspiracy smeared on his face. Amir followed the instructions with slightly shaking hands. “Now, with your left hand, turn the direction knob to the right until it locks up.” Amir did that and waited for further instructions. “Now you can let go of the arrow,” instructed Elron. Amir was surprised to see that the arrow stayed in its place in the air, and did not fall down back to the plate. “That is all,” said Elron. “You are pulling my leg!” exclaimed Amir. “Definitely not,” responded Elron, without changing his facial expression. “Look at the front window.” Amir could not stop himself and he screamed with wonder. Throughout the window the sky was black, sprinkled with sparkling stars. When he turned his head down he could see the blue Earth

covered with white clouds, and near it, not too far, the Moon floated. “Now we have to return you home. And don’t forget, you are expected there.” Said Elron showing him the way to the center of the room. “All you have to do is to release the general direction knob, to put back the arrow in its place on the plate, and to press again the starting key.” Amir did as told with an obvious lack of enthusiasm, and through the front windows he saw again his home in the familiar landscape. “This will be all for today,” said Elron crisply, “your lunch is waiting for you.” Amir was startled and he asked disappointedly: “So this was the whole test?” - “Of course not,” answered Elron, and his voice turned serious a bit. “This is still not the test. Go back home, and when we shall meet again I will explain it to you.”

Amir left the craft running, looking behind his back, occasionally, in order to see the glimmering light on top of the hill. When he reached the backyard entrance of his home he bumped into his friend Assaf. Amir told him in a hurry what happened to him on the hill, but Assaf did not let him finish his story and in a sneering voice said to Amir, “Come on! Do you really think that I believe you?” When he realized that Amir was not kidding at all, he added and said: “Listen! You must have dreamt it. Tell me, didn’t you lie down near the lake, as usual, and dose off a bit?” Amir was pissed off by Assaf meanness and when he remembered that his parents were waiting for him, he left Assaf without saying another word and entered his home. He was astonished to realize that he was not late for lunch.

“What happened to you Amir?” his mother asked him. “I find it hard to explain exactly,” answered Amir pensively, “I am glad that I am not late for lunch. So much happened since you called me, and yet I am not late.”

His mother looked at him with a question on her face, “Surely you dozed off by the lake, and you thought that a lot of time passed. I called you five minutes ago,” she said while putting the food on the table. Her words startled Amir and he lost his appetite. He forced himself to eat, and when all finished eating, his mother turned to him and asked: “Would you care to tell me what actually happened to you outside?” - “You will not believe me,” exclaimed Amir and then added quietly: “Frankly, I am not sure anymore if I know what happened.” His mother smiled, trying to hide her worry, and said: “Alright.” She gestured to him to come closer and added: “Would you nevertheless tell me?”

“Do you see the hill over there?” started Amir in an embarrassed voice, but soon enough he collected his courage and with increasing excitement he told his mother all that happened to him in one long sentence. His mother listened attentively, and when he ended his story with the question “Tell me mother, have I dreamt all this?” she answered: “It is very possible that you dreamt it. You must have read about all the stories about spaceships visiting Earth, and every time it was checked out, there was not a shred of evidence that these stories were not but hallucinations.” Amir jumped from his seat, pulled his mother by the hand and told her “come and see for yourself.” His mother turned her look towards the hill, looked back at her son and said to him: “I do

not see any glitter.” The flickering air screen had disappeared as if it never existed. “They must have left and will return tomorrow.” He said with a fallen spirit. “Elron told me that we would meet again. Tomorrow I will show you that it was not a dream.”

Later in the evening, Amir’s parents discussed his condition, and his mother complained: “This is what happens under the influence of all these science fiction stories. I told you several times already that we have to encourage Amir to read a better literature.” Her husband tried to calm her “Apparently Amir is excited about his admission to the university in such a young age. When he will enter his course of studies all this will be forgotten.” But he was not so sure. May be his wife was right this time in her criticism of Amir’s taste.

Next morning Amir woke up with a sore throat and a congested nose. “You must take better care of yourself,” his mother told him over breakfast, “you do not want to start your studies at the university being sick in bed.” Amir blew his nose and went out to the backyard. A few clouds cast their shadows over the hill, and apart from these nothing was seen on it.

The academic year started but Amir lost interest in his studies. Occasionally, whenever he returned to his parents’ home for the weekend, he would walk over to the field to see if the spaceship returned.

Two months passed and Amir began to recuperate. He repressed the memory of the spaceship into a dark corner of his heart, while putting all his efforts and stamina into his studies. When he visited his parents, he avoided walking to his favorite field, and in particular, he avoided looking at the hill. With his mother blessings he ignored science fiction entirely. Even academic books on space did not appeal to him anymore, especially after he had realized how much did they agree on the infinitesimally low probability of any encounter with extraterrestrial intelligence. Gradually, his interest in his studies rekindled, and he spent all his free time in reading the many textbooks that were available to him in the library. His scholastic achievements justified again his parents old hopes and expectations.

One day, unexpectedly, the issue of his encounter with the spaceship was aroused again. It happened in the middle of a lecture on the scientific method. When the lecturer repeated his explanations about the nature of scientific data, Amir felt again his disappointment in all of its weight, and he could not free himself from it. He understood well enough that what shocked him was that even if he had not dreamt about the spaceship, only he was present there, and as long as the spaceship would not return and be observed by others as well, he could not prove that it was not the result of his imagination. He felt rage against his impotence. **“Is it really impossible to determine about a single event,”** he reflected with sadness, **“an event that has not left any marks in the area and only one person has observed it, if it is reality or fiction?”**

Once Amir succeeded in formulating the problem for himself in this manner, he felt relieved a bit. In spite of the feeling of frustration that still nested in his heart, he decided to act and to examine all the knowledge that was available to

him in the university, in order to find a logical solution to his problem. He waited impatiently for the end of the lesson, and when the lecturer said the last word, Amir stormed towards the library. After hours of concentrated study in all the literature that he could reach through the library computer, Amir reached the conclusion that nobody before him had tried to confront the problem the way he formulated it. His impression from all the reading that he had done was that everyone who ever tried to deal with the problem added to it additional suppositions that changed the problem entirely. Therefore, all the solutions that were suggested only removed the problem and not solved it really. These were solutions that were supposed as basic assumptions, and not derived from the problem with the help of explicit and testable suppositions.

Amir neglected his regular studies and spent his days in long strolls along the lanes in the university campus, while thinking over his problem. **“What could, in fact, determine,”** Amir repeatedly asking himself, **“whether what I saw was a reality or a dream?”**

The spring midterm arrived and Amir just closed himself in his room in his parents’ home. From time to time he threw a sneak look at the empty hill, grinding his teeth. He yearned so much for the spaceship return. His memories flooded him, but he knew well enough that an additional visit of the ship would not resolve the problem that he set out to solve. Because, even if other people could see the spacecraft, the original problem would not be solved. The more he delved into the problem the more he realized that he could not find any clue that could help him solve it. He tried to apply different ideas, taken from all the sources he read and studied, but they all led him into blind alleys. Each time he tried a new idea, his thoughts carried him back to his starting point. He was not willing to give up and admit that this was an unsolvable problem. “What can, in fact, determine,” Amir went over his stubborn question, “if what I saw was reality or an hallucination?” and suddenly he realized that the question was not **“what** can determine,” but **“who** can determine”! He still felt some uneasiness, “does this not bring me again to the starting point?” and his mood took a steep dive like an airplane that lost its engines. “If I will assume that I dreamt the whole deal,” considered Amir the possibility, “the problem will not be solved but defused, on the other hand,” Amir tilted his head to the other side, “if I will assume that it all indeed happened in reality, I will only end in a blind alley.” – “There must be a hidden untruth in this somewhere!” Amir shouted at the walls in his room, and suddenly it all cleared up.

When his parents entered his room that night, worried because of the shouts that they had heard, they found him asleep and a big smile covering his face, a smile that they had not see on their son’s face for a very long time.

In the morning, Amir joined his parents at their breakfast, as they used to have every Saturday in a nice weather, on the wide porch facing the backyard. Amir told them in full details about all his reflections. “What I realized at the end,” said Amir enthusiastically, “was, that in any case, the person himself is who determines if what he knows as truth is true. Even when we deal with a

scientific truth, it starts with the researcher knowing that he is not hallucinating, and each one of us, that accepts it as truth, does it while he determines for himself to begin with, that he is not dreaming or hallucinating, when he - for instance – reads about it in a book or in a scientific paper. I do not need the spaceship for me to know that I saw it last summer, and that it was not a dream. Only I know what I know, and nobody else besides me can know anything about it, because nobody besides me was with me there!”

“You want to tell us that you will not stroll on the hill to look for your spaceship anymore?” his father asked him and his doubt was apparent when he pointed at the hill. “Precisely so,” answered Amir. “It does not change anything about what happened in the past.” He added smiling and turning his head towards the hill.

His smile froze on his face. The air on top of the hill was flickering. “They returned.” Amir said quietly and finished calmly his breakfast.

This time he knew what was waiting for him at the top of the hill. Amir walked in lane taking him to the lake and beyond it to the hill without any hesitation. And suddenly he also understood what was the test that was assigned to him, and he knew that he passed it well.

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