

CHASM LAKE

A Birthday Hike

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Rocky Mountain National Park

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A Morning with Other Plans

At 4:30 on the morning of my birthday, I woke up with a mountain in mind.

By 4:40, I had sent my friend a message: "Ready aa?"

I picked up my friend while the streets were still dark. As the morning slowly found its way into the car, I noticed her red headband. A small detail, but a cheerful one against the early light. The day was beginning to acquire its colours.

At 5:30, US-36 was already busy. Sunrise was not until 6:52, and yet the road seemed to have made an early start without consulting us.

"Inta poddunne enduku inta traffic?" my friend asked. Why so much traffic this early?

"Maybe they're all going to the Rocky Mountains too."

It was as good an explanation as my half-awake brain could offer. I usually say that it refuses to boot without coffee, so a Starbucks stop was inevitable. When I asked if she wanted anything, she said she couldn't have it on an empty stomach. Fair enough.

I ordered a matcha and held out my phone to scan my points. Before I could pay, the barista paused.

"Wait, it's your birthday? This one's free."

My first birthday gift had arrived across a counter, before the day had properly begun.

Boulder, meanwhile, had arranged a less generous welcome. Roads were blocked for a marathon due to begin at 7:30. We worked our way through a twenty-minute detour until Broadway finally let us out of the city.

Hammayya.

At 6:55, we reached the Rocky Mountain National Park entrance. I had my park pass ready and showed my timed-entry reservation. The ranger read my Indian name correctly, without pausing or asking me to repeat it. Such a small thing, and still it stayed with me. Some mornings collect their good moments quietly.

Our plan was Sky Pond, starting from the Bear Lake area. Throughout the drive, my friend had kept asking the same sensible question.

"Bear Lake parking pass undi kada?"

I had been supposed to book the two-dollar reservation the previous night.

I hadn't.

At the gate, that detail became the only detail that mattered.

"Take a U-turn."

I tried asking about the shuttle.

"Just. Take. A U-turn."

The conversation had reached its natural conclusion. My birthday had no administrative authority here.

We turned around.

"Ippudu emi chestam?" my friend asked. What now?

"Plan B undi," I said with the confidence of a man who had absolutely no Plan B.

A quick search brought up the Longs Peak trailhead. Chasm Lake. I had been there before; I could at least offer a destination I knew, even if I had found it only seconds after announcing that everything was under control.

"Chalo. Let's go."

Then the tire-pressure warning appeared on the dashboard.

My friend was talking. I was listening, nodding, and checking the light. It stayed on during the drive. It stayed on at the parking lot. Long after we left the car, a small version of it would remain lit somewhere in my mind.

At the trailhead, the restrooms had no tissues. Fortunately, tissues and sanitizer are among the few things I reliably remember to carry. Experience had prepared me for that, if not for the reservation.

At eight o'clock, we began walking.

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Conversations on the Climb

On my previous visit, I had learned to look for a particular sign along the trail. This time, as my breathing grew heavier, I found myself waiting for it again. When it appeared, its arrows gave the morning a little more certainty: Chasm Lake one way, Longs Peak farther ahead.

Our destination now had a direction. The rest was walking.

We talked about movies. my friend told me about watching them with her cousins back in India and with her

intermediate friends, about Malayalam films and then Telugu ones. Somewhere between the trees and the incline, I asked a question that mattered considerably more to me than it might have sounded.

"Music director evaru istam?"

"Vivek Sagar."

That caught my attention. His music finds its way into so many of my reels that I almost felt she had answered a question about my own editing history.

Then she named her favourite movie: Ee Nagaraniki Emaindi. She had watched it many times.

Now we had plenty to talk about.

During the pandemic, I had run a meme page. A friend of mine had become deeply involved in that world and started enememeproject. I told my friend about him, the audience he had built, and the opportunity he had received to work on ENE Repeat. A conversation about a favourite film had somehow led back to someone I knew.

Chala chinna prapancham. Such a small world.

The climb gave our conversation its own rhythm. A sentence, a few steps, a breath. Sometimes we talked continuously; sometimes the trail asked for our attention and we let the conversation rest.

At a waterfall, I became the photographer my friends have learned to expect.

"Ikkada koorcho."

"Konchem ala tirugu."

"One more."

I know I can overdo it. Once I see a frame, I become quite stubborn about getting it. In my defence, I am usually

thinking of a later evening, when the hike is over and someone is scrolling through their pictures at home. A photograph can bring back the sound of the water, the cold air, even the effort it took to stand there.

That does not make "one more" any less annoying in the moment. But it explains me a little.

Then the trees thinned and the trail opened out. Mountains filled the view. The climb kept asking more of us, and my friend kept going, steady through the effort. I told her more than once that I was proud of how she was doing. Watching a friend work through a demanding hike is its own kind of encouragement; it makes you want to keep going too.

Longs Peak appeared, raw and rocky in the distance. Wildflowers grew near our feet. There was a valley to look into and a mountain to look up at, which, to my mind, meant another photograph was unavoidable.

Eventually, my friend asked for a break. A couple nearby seemed to want a photograph together, so I took a few for them. Even while resting, apparently, I remained on duty.

There were little stacks of stones around us. my friend sat near a large rock and talked about her cousins and life in Hyderabad. There were so many cousins, she said, that an ordinary get-together could feel like a festival.

We had started the morning discussing traffic and reservations. Now, sitting on a mountainside, we were talking about the places and people that had shaped us.

A Question Worth Stopping For

When the conversation turned to books, I told her about mine, *The Stones That Never Left*, published on Amazon Kindle.

People usually respond kindly when I mention it. They say it sounds interesting or congratulate me on publishing. my friend asked something more specific.

"What inspired you to write this?"

I paused. No one had asked me that before.

Manchi question.

I told her about reading Khaled Hosseini and the feeling that had pushed me towards writing. In the conversation, I named *The Kite Runner*. The book I actually meant was *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. I got the title wrong; the memory of what it had stirred in me was clearer.

Her question gave me a chance to speak about that part of the process, before there was a finished book to show anyone. It was a good conversation to have on a trail: unhurried, interrupted only by the need to breathe.

The path grew steeper. When my friend wanted another break, I pointed towards a rock farther up.

"Not this one. That one. Twenty more steps. Better place to sit."

I would like to call that motivation. It might also have been my chaadastham, my habit of insisting on the spot I had already decided was best.

When we reached it, the view did help my case. We sat between the mountains, with a deep valley and two lakes below us. Longs Peak stood ahead, all rock and scale. We took photographs, then stayed a while simply looking.

Farther on, the trail narrowed along the mountainside. A rock wall rose on one side; the valley opened on the other. I remembered a waterfall from my previous visit and began watching for it.

I wanted to tell my friend what was coming. I could already imagine saying, "Wait till you see this." But I did not know whether the water would look the same, or whether the sight would affect her as it had affected me.

For once, I kept quiet.

I was walking ahead when I turned the corner and saw it.

Hammayya.

The waterfall was there.

I turned back. "Brace yourself. You gotta see something beautiful."

"Wowwwwww."

That was all she said. The view needed very little help from either of us.

We walked beside the stream that fed the falls, water threading through gaps in the rocks before dropping towards the valley. Our destination lay above, at its source. We crossed the stream, and the familiar idea of a trail began to give way to a different instruction.

Now you climb.

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The Last Rock

Earlier, during a rest, I had zoomed in with my phone and shown my friend the tiny figures climbing the rocks ahead. I knew I was giving away the difficult part before we reached it, but I couldn't help myself.

Now we were standing beneath those same rocks.

"Is this the last one?" she asked.

I pointed much higher, towards the broad rock face of Longs Peak.

"No. See that big flat rock up there? That's where we're going."

"Really?"

"Nope. Just kidding. Come on. You got this."

My jokes were evidently still functioning, even if our legs were beginning to negotiate their working hours.

The scramble took about thirty minutes. Hands on rock. A foot finding purchase. A pause to steady ourselves. Another climb. The lake remained hidden, and every rise made us wonder whether the next one would finally reveal it.

Every rock in our path seemed to pose a question. We kept answering with another step.

Then we climbed over the last rock.

Chasm Lake.

After so much movement, the sight made me stop. Water lay beneath the immense face of Longs Peak. We had spent the morning following signs, changing plans, climbing trails and looking for somewhere to rest. Here, at last, there was no need to decide what came next.

We high-fived.

"I'm so proud of you. We did it."

I lay flat on a rock and looked at the mountain across the water. For a while, I left my phone alone. We did not need to keep the conversation going either.

Then came my usual hiking ritual: dipping my face into the lake. It is my slightly ridiculous way of marking the arrival.

"Video teeyi," I said.

So much for leaving the phone alone.

My friend went down to the edge, sat, and put her feet in the water. My photographer instincts soon returned. Another rock, another angle, another request to jump for a picture. My pichi had survived the climb in excellent condition.

We stayed for roughly an hour and forty minutes. Looking back, it feels much shorter. The difficult minutes on the rocks had announced themselves one by one; the time beside the lake slipped past almost unnoticed.

Before leaving, I asked her, "Ela anipinchindi?" How did it feel?

"These experiences can't be explained," she said. "You just have to live them."

I had spent much of the day trying to preserve it in photographs. She had found a sentence for the part a photograph could not hold.

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What the Day Left Behind

On the descent, clouds began gathering. The wildflowers were still there, with the mountain rising behind them, and I saw one more frame I wanted.

"One pic. Ikkada."

My friend was exhausted by then, and I knew it. She agreed anyway.

Click.

"Okay, one more."

I remain convinced that some photographs are worth the extra pause. I also remain aware that I am rarely the person being asked to pose for them.

Farther down, I played a few songs. We saw deer and birds. The trail kept offering small things to notice even as our attention began turning towards the car.

"You manifested a lot for today," I told her. "You've seen everything."

I was still waiting for one thing myself.

So many of my hikes seem to end with a little drizzle that I have begun to look for it. Near the parking lot, as we walked the last stretch, a drop landed on my face.

One drop. Enough to make me smile.

At the car, however, sentiment had to wait. I checked the tire first. After hours of that warning light occupying the back of my mind, there was no obvious problem to see.

Hammayya. The relief was immediate.

On the drive back, the fall colours caught my attention. I had expected their best display to be another week away, but the roadside had other evidence. Then we saw a chapel, with coloured trees and mountains behind it.

We parked, walked down the road, crossed over, and found steps leading up.

My friend looked at them.

"Are we hiking again?"

After everything our legs had done that day, it was a reasonable question.

We went inside and sat quietly for five minutes. The stillness there was different from the stillness at the lake: closer, sheltered, with the road just outside. By then, we had very little left to say and no urgency to say it.

After a pizza break, I handed my friend the keys. She drove us home.

The morning had begun with a destination I thought I had planned for. By the end, I had a missed reservation, a firm instruction to turn around, an invented Plan B, and a tire warning I had carried all the way up a mountain.

I also had a free matcha, conversations with a friend, a waterfall around a bend, cold lake water on my face, and photographs I would return to long after my legs recovered.

Perhaps nature says much the same thing whenever we visit. We arrive at different moments in our lives, with different thoughts, and hear another story each time. That day, I heard it between our conversations, in the falling water, and in the quiet after the climb.

I had wanted to spend my birthday on a mountain. I came home with a day worth writing down.

Ide naa birthday gift.