**Train**

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In truth, the journey begins with the moment of stillness. A moment that arrives after a pulsing traffic race to the train station, eyes stretched wide as your driver skillfully weaves his yellow and green tuk tuk through a densely congested city. After shuffling along amongst a frenzied crowd through the security monitor as it blares to no one’s concern, sprinting up narrow stairwells delirious with panic to find your platform, thrusting through the throng of scattered travelers. After finding and climbing aboard the train, navigating its tight walkways, identifying your number left peeling on the wall and claiming your bench; its pale blue vinyl crusted with dirt and dust, evidence of tours past. After heaving your overstuffed backpack onto the luggage rack stretched above you, after you sink onto your seat and lean your head back against the cool metal siding in relief.

Staring through the rusted railing out at a world beyond your window, a vague wave of tranquility washing over the car; this is when you take notice. You note vendors as they lug stacked steel urns of chai the size of their bodies down the platform, tall stacks of dixie cups spewing from their back pockets. Snack stalls with gaudily colorful packages tumbling from their roofs in thick streams; the bready spice of samosas wafting from toaster ovens. Entire families camped around benches as though they were campfires, worn carpet bags and sacks of produce floating between them like overstuffed pillows. You note the surge of focused, hard-edged tourists donning bulky backpacks and barely scuffed sneakers, blazing past the entire scene without taking notice at all. Blazing past much like you yourself were mere moments before.

Stillness is shattered by the train’s sudden lurch to life. Its moves begin gently; churning out of the station with an easy delicacy, as if trying not to break the hearts of those left behind. Stray dogs straggle cautiously along the platform’s sharp edge; their coats dingy and matted, eyes wide glass as they watch us roll past. The station’s gentle hum melts away, absorbed into its city’s meld of white noise as life rages on beyond us. Rainbow ruins cover the dirt alongside the tracks, weaving thick trash mats atop dried earth. A garbage garden bearing fruits of Coca Cola bottles, plastic bags, scraps of fabric sullied by wild elements. Refuse flowers fed by showers of waste, slow rains that fall steadily from passing windows. Children run alongside our train as it passes, trying to match its steady pace. Smiles widen as they catch travelers’ attention; they begin leaping over litter mountains with a guileless confidence, their laughter bursting through the droning, constant cadence steel hitting heavily atop iron rails. Rows of shacks line the railroad bed, once vivid colors now appearing dingy and dulled. Soft yellow lights emanate from a few, illuminating outlines of residents as they watch us sail past, the cut of their eyes muted beneath the soft glow. The world beyond clouded beneath thick buffs of smog.

There is not a marker noting when we break free beyond city limits; there is not a bridge that we glide over, nor a line in the dirt which we cross. Yet suddenly the train begins to chug faster, smoother; its rhythm blurring into a melodic hum that fills the air, wraps itself around us as we are launched towards the dropping sun. The land is glowing; its dry brush glossed golden in the mellow light. Flat savannah sprawling wide in all directions; our train painting itself boldly across a canvas cracked open, bleeding clots of life. Wiry tree trunks topped with puffs of dark foliage, sprinkled across the plain like stars in an evening sky. The warm, wholesome mediocrity of a pair of cows, their portly bodies still as we coast past. Rajasthani villages: their plots of land marked by a cluster of white-washed buildings, clothing on a line wind as a banner, waving to us amidst wisping wind. Sparse fragments of life that we blur past in an instant, yet they are a burst of rapid color amidst this sepia toned train world. Violet tinged mountains flock a blazing orange horizon, their crests lined up like soldiers destined to protect the beauty of life held within. The train slips past it all, sailing fast into the West as its sun makes her final dip, plunging under the range of Earth.

The world is now dark; collage of once vivid colors muffled to dim, grainy shapes. Leached of the sun’s warm, rich glow; moonlight has a coolness to it that daylight does not. The sky is blanched, stars barely visible beneath its glow, as seen through the limited scope between railings. The air has chilled; it rushes past open windows with a harsh howl unheard in the day. It calls a rustling amongst the cabins as cellophane packages are opened and playing cards are dealt between benches, as thick yak wool scarves are pulled out and draped across shoulders to dull the wind’s sharp bite. Children begin waking from the afternoon sleep they were lulled into; some slump beneath the crooks of their mothers’ arms, eyes wide as they take in new bouts of strangers. Others waddle amongst walkways; chubby legs staggered as their high-pitched squeals dance down the train’s length, leaping lightly from car to car. The hum of vendors boasting chai drifts along open corridors; orange streams of rupees fly as tea is poured and passed. Easy warmth drips down the throat, over the ribs, filling the soul. The day’s gentle dreaminess has passed as passengers settle into their bunks, focusing on the breadth of community they have been given for a few hours’ time, until the next stop. The train carries on.