**Another Time’s Forgotten Space**

I sat waiting for my train under hazy skies and the unusually comforting rotten India smell, along with everything that goes with it. That’s something one can’t avoid in India regardless of their nationality or social class. Whether one is boarding first class or unreserved sleeper, your time waiting will be spent next to laborers, cows, deformed children; and a scent that’s a mix of chai, cooking spices, and then a mix of urine and other things better left unsaid. Waiting not-so-patiently for my train, I sat next to a few upper class Indians who were astonished that I’d voluntarily choose sleeper tier. “I don’t even use sleeper”, one of them confided in me. That left me a little apprehensive, but I was still excited for the adventure that was to come – an adventure that was a 15 hour overnight train ride from Haridwar to Gorakhpur.

My nervousness grew when the train arrived. There was a rush of people, literally thousands of people, all operating in the controlled chaos ever-present in India, but I had no idea which carriage I was on. My facial expression must have shown how clueless I was when a young man who introduced himself as Dharma asked if I needed help. I expected there must be some ulterior motive, but I was lost as could be and didn’t have much of a choice besides asking where it was. He led me to the other side of the train where the people were less groomed, their clothes were mostly tattered, and the amount of passengers were surely triple the other carriages. I entered the train and found my bed, which could have also been called a wooden plank with a thin faux-leather cover. That was okay though – my natural American entitlement complex was crushed within a few hours of setting foot in India. The only mild disappointment came when I realized I was going to be sharing a seat on my bed with the ticketless Dharma, who had used me for his own gain after all. Of course immediately after finding my bed, the staring from the hundreds of passengers on my carriage looking at the white boy with long hair commenced. What began as wondrous glares quickly turned into picture taking and joyous “conversations”; usually in a non-verbal language consisting of pictures, music, smiles, and food.

My petty anger towards Dharma subsided quickly. Every exchange in India is a give and take – he helped me to my spot, therefore he was going to use it along with me. His smile was glowing and his English was spot on, unlike most of the other passengers, so I quickly looked beyond having only half of my spot to myself, and decided to enjoy his company. The 7 of us in our carriage room: Dharma, myself, 2 men in the army, a mother and her daughter, and a shy woman on her own, began getting more comfortable around each other. The 2 army men eagerly took out a fifth of cheap Indian whiskey and poured me and Dharma, my caregiver that night in a sense, drink after drink. The soldiers and I couldn’t share many words together in either Hindi or English, due to my lack of knowledge in their language and theirs in mine. Less than a couple hours in though, we shared laughs and wordless jokes through the universal language of drunkenness.

The mom and daughter spoke to me through the language of food. They fattened me with buttery naan, homemade pakoras, some spicy eggplant, and the ubiquitous masala chai. The mother enjoyed occasionally uttering “You are so good!” in English - a phrase that, thinking of that train ride, still puts a smile on my face. The shy woman spoke to me through the language of extremely dirty stares. I can’t say I communicated back to her in the same language – mostly facial expressions of curiosity as to what was causing the stares. It was as if I had just given her sour milk or told her just how awful her hair looked that day. I never found out what was up with her and chose to ignore it, busy having conversation with Dharma.

He proudly showed me the car that his uncle’s daughter’s husband just bought, the first car in the family. With radiant eyes, he told me of the time he rode shotgun listening to American music. I asked him which band it was, and he gleefully told me Justin Bieber. I think I may have communicated in the shy woman’s language just then, and couldn’t say anything but a weak “Oh.” We talked about movies, books, his dream of America, mine of travelling the world, the corrupt politics in India, governmental wrongdoings in America, and just about everything else. Somehow the alcohol didn’t knock me out at all that night and we talked, almost nonstop, for the entire ride.

Finally the time came where we reached Gorakhpur and it was my time to go. Dharma expressed his wish that I stay on the train and visit his family at his stop, 4 hours from now. I was running short on time and had to refuse, but I wonder sometimes if I would have had a more fulfilling time in rural India with his family than hiking the Himalayas in Nepal. Dharma walked me out and gave me a hug as dozens of people, who formed the backdrop in my excursion, waved goodbye. I gave him my Grateful Dead bandana as a gift, hoping it was some form of compensation for one of the best half-days of my life. As Dharma left, I looked back, physically looking at the train, but mentally at the past 15 hours; just astonished at what happened. I knew that the lessons learned, food and drinks consumed, conversations had, photos taken, dirty stares received, and the huge adventure I had, staying up from dusk to dawn with people so different yet similar to me, simply wouldn’t have taken place had I spent my time comfortable on a comfortable reclined chair somewhere at the front of the train.