

## The Leaving

Between the tropical forest and the Dehradun airport, men watched planes land and leave. Arms overhanging the fence, chins on hands, they stared.

What did they see? People coming and going when they could not. Stories winging away in the vast sky. The remarkability of flight itself, heavy and hot but lifting as easily as a butterfly.

My bags were heavy with everything I carried home. I hadn't wanted to visit India, but when a client invited me to accompany her yoga tour, to write blogs and photograph the journey, I couldn't say no. A free trip to the other side of the world! A place I would never otherwise go, away from my young children, into the humid heat of the Himalayan foothills.

I didn't sleep for a month before the trip. A mystic therapist told me to close my eyes and identify the fear. *I was raised in comfort, taught to travel as a tourist, watch life from a distance. I don't know how to get close.*

It surprised me when, on the tarmac, I swallowed tears. I didn't want to leave. I did not yearn to return to my easy life. In India I had found a contentment, a calm, that eluded me at home.

Do we all dream of something different? Could the swift current of the Ganges and the abundant stars in the night sky be enough for me? Or was it only beautiful because I could leave it?

## The Place

Sometimes a place changes you. A place you never dreamed of visiting, never even knew about, but when you go, the very feel of the earth beneath your feet tells a story you want to believe. Of course, it's easy (and dangerous) to fantasize that life is better, easier, more beautiful and fragrant, in a distant place.

Cliché – an overused phrase that lacks original thought, a stereotype.

A white woman boards a train in India, clutching her backpack and camera bag, squatting in the first-class bathroom to pee over the hole in the floor, urine streaming onto the tracks. Looks askance at the legless man pulling up the aisle before the train leaves the station, hand out, eyes begging her to see him, to drop money in his palm. She stares at the back of the seat in front of her. Like she'd been taught all her life, as her parents whisked her away on colonial vacations to hole up in all-inclusive resorts with tall walls to keep out the natives. As her parents' car whizzed past a man on the side of a freezing highway in her hometown, his sign claiming he had a family to feed and would take anything she could give. And even as she thinks *hometown*, she knows that isn't entirely true, because she lived on the outskirts of the dangerous city, in the safe and sleepy suburbs, and when the locked car ventured south of 8 Mile, she knew to *look everywhere else*: the gleaming skyline by a fast-moving river, the radio dial, the interior temperature of the brand new car, so she could ignore how the man's knuckles blazed red from too long in the cold.

Had I learned nothing? I came seeking transformation but at a distance, perfectly fulfilling the elitist trope that I knew so well: willing and able to experience a tourist-safe version of India while heart-crying at the poverty around me. What did I do to change it other than sponsor the education, room and board of three orphans that I hugged near Lakshman Jula? I wanted to bring them all home, give them a different life, but that was impossible. We can only change our station slightly, if at all, and besides, who says my way would be better for them?

I say I changed when I went to India, when I went to Bali, when I went to Israel, when I kissed the pink stones and believed they could absorb my prayers. The change is in the going, in walking down unfamiliar streets. I am privileged enough to go, and when I carry revelations home in my bursting suitcases, I don't think about how my whiteness allowed this transformation. I don't think about how I expect everyone to speak to me in English, to understand my every word. I don't think about how careful I was to not swallow shower water in fear of ending up sick, my delicate

stomach unable to process foreign microbes. I don't think about how I can't live as easily in a new place as I might imagine.

The writer Jamaica Kincaid says in *A Small Place*, "Every native of every place is a potential tourist, and every tourist is a native of somewhere. Every native everywhere lives a life of overwhelming and crushing banality and boredom and desperation and depression...every native would like to find a way out."

I believe I have seen the world, but I have only seen a tiny corner of it, a whitewashed, neat and clean, tidy corner of a world I can never inhabit because I must return home to sleep safe behind locked doors and under old quilts. It doesn't take long to absorb back into the fluffy comfort of my privilege. In fact, that is something I never leave, clinging to it in the darkness, dialing its number as my emergency contact.

If you can't afford to go anywhere distant and different, does that mean you can't open your mind and let new ideas drip in? When I travel, I gain perspective, realize what matters (being good, doing good, loving my fellow humans) and what doesn't (racing to acquire more things, earning ever more money, filling my calendar until I pray for someone to cancel on me).

I became a cliché in India. Finding meaning in the old stones of an empty ashram, Beatles lyrics for graffiti on the walls of crumbling buildings. The words of white men spray-painted across a place no longer inhabited. I was the blackbird, capturing pictures of leaves and stones arranged to say *all you need is love*. In my hired cars and clean hotels, eating food approved for western stomachs (that was the phrase they used, I swear), carrying a Z-pack in case I accidentally sipped local water, choking down antibiotics to thwart fever, chase away chills. Back home, I never listened to the Beatles. What made me find salvation in their words in the tangled hills of northern India?

## **The Difference**

In India, whole families balance on motor bikes, toss paper plates onto the street when they finish eating. Beside street vendors selling sweets, people kneel in prayer. Rivers promise redemption: the faithful wade in fully clothed, pulling the water over themselves, hoping for rebirth.

In my home, prayers are private, immersions quiet. We designate days for worship and spend the rest running. We think our way is better, that we understand what makes a good life.

I never wanted to visit India. Far from home and clogged with people, I was afraid of the stories in my head, of garbage and beggars, oblivious to the same in my hometown.

But going changed me. I became humble, reflective. I poured warm oil on my hair to soften it, used less toilet paper because there was less to use. I became OK with everything: rising at 4 a.m., wearing the same clothes again and again, eating soupy lentils in a squat at the Golden Temple, peeing over a hole in a first-class train speeding toward the highest mountains, walking rain-wet streets in a quiet dawn without word or thought. I cloaked myself in the quiet and saw that a good life does not need clutter obscuring the view of loping hills. That stripping away everything might actually be the first step to understanding.

## **The Fantasy**

Because I was her guest, I followed the yoga instructor's every step. I'll call her J. She insisted I share her hotel room, trail after her before the dawn and invert my body into downward dog for 11 minutes, until I grew nauseous. She called the shots; I merely recorded them.

"Maybe I'll find a husband here," J giggled, her blond hair and golden skin drawing the gaze of dark men who didn't speak her language. "Aren't the turbans sexy?" She smiled as they whistled. Was it a fetish? Objectification? Both sides dehumanizing, but ours was worse somehow.

I had love in my life – a new husband and four young children. In our

shared room, she played mantra music on repeat to help her sleep.

“Will I ever find a love like you have?” she asked.

“I’m sure you will,” I replied. My father always said that people who want to get married get married. I told her what she wanted to hear.

I didn’t say that I didn’t quite believe my father. Not everyone finds a great love. Some people just make do with what they have. And, as the leader of her American yoga community, she was adored, never known. Infatuation doesn’t make for lasting bedfellows.

I wanted to tell her that pretending to be someone she’s not only confuses the search. For self and for place. For a true definition of home.

I’d heard her backstory: raised Christian, WASP-y, one failed marriage, three grown sons, long blond hair in waves down her back, a pierced nose, a flat belly. She walked naked from the bed to the shower as if I wouldn’t care. I had no choice; I was there on her dime.

What was she doing in white parachute pants and mala beads around her neck? Someone else’s prayer necklace as her jewelry. Appropriating another’s sacred tradition, bastardizing it like tourists do. Claiming it as her new spiritual path. But that was a story I wouldn’t write, the yoga instructor in all-white, hair twisted into a turban. A trip of pretending, like all good voyages.

I sound bitter, maybe even unappreciative. Perhaps because J reminded me too closely of my privileged upbringing, where I was taught to keep my distance. I am grateful to her for taking me to a place I never wanted to visit, for forcing me to face my fear of losing control, encouraging me to learn a language I didn’t yet understand. In India, I bathed in milky humility and came home quieter.

## **The Art of Believing**

At the Golden Temple, I walked barefoot on cold marble. I had no choice. They demand your shoes before you can go in. In my American mind, I wondered if I'd get my shoes back at the end. In the Amrit Sarovar, the pool of nectar, fat orange koi waggled in the depths. Sikhs welcome anyone who believes in God; 100,000 people visit daily.

I'm not sure I believe, but no one asked. What is it to believe? And what is God? Would they really turn me away if I said I was uncertain? But, come on, people! No one can know a God in the sky, a deity we can't see, waving magic hands over all the tiny people like marionettes on strings lifted and dropped down to the ruddy surface of an uneven planet. This talk of God exhausts me. No one can really know, so why make it a criteria for entry? Even the gatekeepers can't be sure. Doubt lurks in the dark corners of every mind. To doubt is human, to believe is desperate. And anyway, we all say what we imagine others need to hear.

I have spent a lifetime searching for meaning in the mundane. I may have found it in the simple task of watching the ghee pot, kneading the dough for naan, a barefoot man squatting over a hot fire. Don't his thighs burn? His knees shake?

Or perhaps in the rhythmic chanting of the Guru. The thronging mass snaking its way inside to listen and watch, scarves wrapped around our heads. There are universal truths connecting us all, and modesty is one of them. For a decade, I'd lived as an Orthodox Jew with my first husband, covering my hair to fit into his world. When I left him, I donated all my elegant and expensive hats, freeing my curls in the bright sun.

But in India, I didn't resent the mandate to cover up. It was temporary, for one. I could don a costume, play a part. In Amritsar, I didn't mind wrapping my head. I can wear another person's modesty just fine and without complaint. It meant nothing to me, so I bundled up and inched along in a caterpillar of people past chanting men, the rhythm constant, the words a vibration. I could be obedient for a time. Holiness a harmony pulsing.

## The Point of It All

After the divorce, I took my children to different synagogues, seeking wisdom and a place to belong. When I married Dan, we recited Jewish, Native American and ancient Hindu blessings under my grandfather's prayer shawl, on the hottest day of summer. After, our children jumped in the lake fully clothed, like the pilgrims by the Ganges.

We joined a sprawling synagogue, but whenever we attended, someone asked, "Are you new?" After four years of not being known, we left in search of a place where we would be remembered.

I brought many things home from India. Wool blankets. Delicate scarves and sheer, embroidered shirts. Two heavy statues shipped ahead: one of Ganesh, remover of obstacles, and a Shiva Nataraja, lord of the dance. They arrived a month after I did, Shiva broken, the deity severed from its base of flames. I set the base in the garden where vegetation overtook it, weeds and grass snaking through and around the licking flames. I mounted Lord Shiva on the garage; he welcomes me home, reminds me that it is possible to break free. Ganesh sits on the piano, visible from my writing desk.

"You don't pray to those statues, do you?" asked my ex-husband.

Why did he care? Why did he think he had the right to ask? And why, even, did I answer?

"It's not my religion," I said. "But I see spirituality everywhere."

After that, he refused to enter my house, waiting for the children outside in the driving rain.

There was so much I didn't say to him, and I'm not sure he would have heard my words anyway. Like, *all people live in similar ways, even if we call our gods by different names*. I have the privilege of believing what I want, of picking and choosing. When I was married to him, I recited

prayers, swaying like Orthodox Jews are supposed to, begging a God I didn't believe in to release me from doubt. I thought if I moved my lips and whispered the words, answers would come. But there was no bellowing voice, no lightning strike.

These days, my prayers are trees blowing in the wind, rivers and birds, deer prints in the snow.

## **The Transformation**

I left Amritsar by train in the purple-dark, city lights infiltrating the dawn. Breakfast was milky chai, chopped fruit and thin pancakes doused in honey and coconut. We pulled suitcases past sleeping bodies on the cold concrete, on benches, under shuttered awnings, in the shadows of locked doors. Sleeping bodies everywhere, exposed to the elements. I wrapped my expensive shawl around me.

In first class, a bullet hole in the window spidered into a spiral of cracked glass. Eight hours to Haridwar, and then a car bumped us along winding mountain roads to Rishikesh. Rain poured down, and our driver wiped fog from the windshield with a rag.

At the hotel, the proprietor draped marigold garlands around our necks. *You are on a journey of spiritual evolution, he said. You are seekers. This will be a transformation.* The next day would bring bright sun and monkeys in the trees.

For the right price, you can hire a private guide to take you through the abandoned ashram where the Beatles communed with the Maharishi. The rain-scented streets became familiar. The moving waters of the Ganges like kisses against the banks. I wore baggy pants and fitted shirts, wrapped my hair in a scarf and danced like I had nowhere else to be. At sunset, silent monks in orange robes led firelight ceremonies.

Every day, I recorded words and phrases and ideas, the details of wildflowers and damp alleys, glass-fronted shops and winding avenues.



After two weeks, I boarded a plane for home. During a layover in Delhi, I ate in a restaurant overlooking the tarmac. There was news of a plane lost over the South China Sea. The world bustled like I remembered. Life became immediate again. I spread butter on a roll and wrote in a journal as planes lifted into the sky.

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