



The Night Train at Deoli

The Night Train at Deoli is a story of adolescent infatuation presented with great sensitivity. It expresses the narrator's love for a poor basket-seller whom he encounters at a small station while on his way to Dehra Dun. He meets the girl only twice, never to see her again, but she remains in his memory ever after. The story focuses on the meeting of the two strangers and their brief acquaintance. It captures the essence of a few moments with the unrestrained suspense and all pervasive romanticism.

The story, that is woven against the backdrop of Deoli-a small station where the train would briefly halt before entering the heavy jungles of the Indian Terai belt, begins with the eighteen-year old protagonist narrating an incident about one of his regular visits to his grandmother's place during his college vacations. The train would reach Deoli station at about five in the morning and halt there for about ten minutes. The narrator vividly describes the ambience of the small railway station with just one platform, that was dimly lit with electric bulbs and oil lamps and the jungle across the railway tracks would just be visible in the faint light of dawn. No one ever got down or got into the train here.

The platform boasted of a tea stall, a fruit vendor, and a few straw dogs; not much else.

The narrator inquisitively wondered what happened behind the walls of the stations and felt sorry for the little place for which no one apparently cared. He was extremely curious about the place and intrigued by the mysteries that lay beyond it, he wished to explore it someday.

He once met a young girl selling cane baskets at Deoli station and was fascinated by her charm. She was certainly not clothed ornately but possessed a graceful gait and a dignified look that captivated the narrator's attention. She had a pale skin, shiny black hair and dark and expressive eyes. He looked at her intently and even though she pretended not to notice, their eyes met.

"Do you want a basket?" she asked. "They are made of the finest cane... "

The narrator was enamored by her beauty and got off the train to get to the tea-stall. There was a mutual attraction between the two and the girl followed him there and asked him whether he wanted to buy a basket. The narrator, although after some hesitation, bought a basket-only not to disappoint the girl and paid her a rupee in return, hardly daring to touch her fingers. Their conversation was cut short by the clanging of the bell by the station master and



the narrator had to rush back to his compartment. He watched the girl from his window smiling at him, standing on the platform alone for long.

I watched her until the signal-box came in way, and the jungle hid the station, but I could still see her standing there alone ...

This was how the first meeting ended on a note of interest tinged with gloom and the cherished moment too seemed to slip away with the platform. The narrator sat awake for the rest of the journey as he was unable to get rid of the lingering picture of the girl's face and her dark smoldering eyes, standing alone and looking at him, which accounted for the magic spell.

However, upon reaching his grandmother's place, he soon forgot about the meeting as there were other things to occupy his mind. It was only when he was making his return journey, two months later that he remembered the girl. An expectation to see her once again surged through him and filled him with an unexpected thrill.

The second meeting of the girl and the narrator was like that of old friends. Anxious to express his feelings, the narrator got off the train and waved to her. The girl too smiled back at him. Both did remember their first meeting and the initial hesitation was gone. She did not go about the platform selling baskets but came straight to him at the tea-stall and the mutual pleasure of meeting each other was silently communicated. The narrator felt a wild impulse to put her on the train and take her away with him as he couldn't bear the idea of seeing her once again receding into distance of Deoli station. He held her hand and told her that he was going to Delhi and promised to return. The girl in return, nodded to say that she would be there to meet him again.