

The Night Train at Deoli

-Ruskin Bond

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.

This time on returning home, the narrator did not forget her. He took a fancy to the girl and his hardly communicated longing turned into a feverish desperation in love. He was impatient for the term to finish finally and left for Dehra Dun. He was agitated, yet resolute to tell her about his feelings.

I was determined that I wouldn't stand helplessly before her, hardly able to speak or do anything about my feelings.

The climax of the story is reached when the narrator does not find the girl at the station. He wonders what might have happened to her and he suddenly felt tenderness and a sense of responsibility for her. He enquired about her but to no avail. Limited time as he had, he had to abandon his search and run up to his train to catch it. As the train sped through the jungles, the narrator brooded over the suspense of the girl not being at the platform. On his way back, he made another attempt to know more about her. However, the new station master and the tea-stall owner could not help him much and the train too, never stopped long enough for him to complete his enquiry. Hence the mystery of the girl remained unsolved.

What could I do about finding a girl I had seen only twice, who had hardly spoken to me, and about whom I knew nothing, absolutely nothing-but from whom I felt tenderness and responsibility that I had never felt before?

The narrator consoled himself with a resolve to break his journey there once and spend a day in the village to find out more about her but it never happened so.

Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to break journey at Deoli and spend a day there.

He never met the girl ever again but every time he travelled past the Deoli station, he hoped and dreamt of meeting her, and seeing the same unchanged face of the basket seller smiling at him. Her memories remained with him like a dream in the corner of his mind and the feeling of passion for the mysterious girl pervaded his spirit, refusing to fade into oblivion, which like a deep-rooted lingering obsession that he continued to cherish. As a romantic he sought to escape the bitter reality which once unveiled, might account for extreme disappointment and deep disillusionment.

Romanticism is quite often defined as the love for strange and unknown & the pursuit of a beautiful story that eludes us. The atmosphere of mystery is built up at the outset of the story with the portrayal of the remote station of Deoli. The essence of the author's romanticism lies in representing a strange, meeting artistically-the unspoken words, the eloquent conversation, the pale beauty of the girl, the light



in her eyes when she meets the author, the narrator's impulse to take her with him, the intense eagerness to see her and finally the unknown destiny of the girl- all add to the feeling of romance.

The narrator admits that he would never break his journey at Deoli as it would spoil his 'game'- the game of trying to spot the familiar and cheerful face of the girl at the station and experiencing a thrill of expectation surging through him, from which he seemed to derive contentment.

The faint and bright memories of the dream like encounter create a world where passion reigns supreme. The end too remains enveloped in mystery and the author lets it remain so like a beautiful and curious dream, the memory of which creates an elusive and mesmerizing effect.