

A Traveler's Heart

By Shea Neuman

As we sat, eating chips and drinking coca cola from glass bottles on the blisteringly hot platform waiting for the train that would take us to Tamil Nadu, I was filled with a longing for something constant: something that did not have to do with getting on and off trains, sleeping in dingy hotels, and forever on the move without a real trajectory.

As I stared at the tracks, my mother stepped into my line of vision, she stood there with her weight on one heel looking for hotels we could afford. We lived a life on the go without phones, computers, or any real connection to what was happening in the world. Most of the time we lived in Nepal but would also travel in India for much of the year. We journeyed from Mustang, to Sikkim, to Arunachal Pradesh, Lhadak, and Bangal. I would not really call it "traveling." It was more like we were living on the go for months at a time without necessarily having a home anywhere. When we traveled, we would bring most of our belongings as we did not necessarily know when or where we would be next. Sometimes things got rough, and it did not look like things would work out, but my mother somehow always got it to work one way or another. It was this unknowing

that really did not sit well with me, because as a kid who had traveled most of his life it was not a fun or new experience for me. It just created a longing for a place where I could settle down and know what I was doing for at least a little while.

But there are also some good things about traveling. Trains are amazing because they travel at a relatively tangible pace. You can really enjoy the ride and have time to transition from one place to the next. They build up your excitement about the place you are headed, while also letting you have time to settle into the journey and not be rushed on to the next place. Sometimes we would be on the train for two or three days, stopping at stations getting amazing fresh fruit from the vendors with their wicker baskets piled high with fruit, drinking chai out of clay cups that you would then toss out of the window. Trains are also great for reading, especially if it was a particularly long train ride where you could get fully immersed in the tale. On these journeys we would either be reading our respective books or my mother would read out loud to us. Today on the train whenever it arrived we would be reading Laurens van der Post's *Story Like the Wind* which was one of our favorite books that we read aloud.

My mother was adamant that we read as much as possible, anything that passed her standards for what a "good" book was. This meant that I did not read books like *Harry Potter* until I was about fourteen. Instead I read books on history, memoirs, and the novels that passed her test. I had never been to school, so books were my escape, and sometimes I would come out of my room only for meals for days at a time. Looking back now I had nothing to do so I naturally did one of the few things I could do anywhere anytime. My mother had brought us as far as she could from the world that she grew up in to give us experiences and ways of thinking that were

interesting and unique. She was always getting us to read books which would one way or another form our imaginations and give us a perspective. But this way of living caused us to be very disconnected from the “real” world and did not really give us the knowledge to appreciate or understand the experiences that we had.

When most people go to school or through an education system they are gaining information to better understand the experiences and events in their lives. Because of the way I grew up I never really had that kind of learning so I mainly gained experiences that I could not really understand or contextualize. By the time I was fifteen I had grown accustomed to very long train rides and riding buses on roads that at any moment

might slide down the mountain into the rivers below. I had walked the streets of Bombay sipping fresh lassis, walked over one of the highest passes in the world carrying our pug, and ridden camels in the rajasthani desert. We went to places that were still very traditional and had not changed. We ate amazing food made by the descendants of the cooks of the Mughul Emperors in Old Delhi. We visited the place where Buddha gained enlightenment. We listened to The Dalai Lama speak during the Kalachakra in Bodhgaya. I had been on many adventures and journeys but had no way to understand them as I did not have the knowledge to contextualize and realize how unique they were.

We came back to the US in November of 2020. We arrived with a dog, two violins, and a guitar. For a while we still kept moving, traveling for traveling's sake, but I did not want to continue living this way. And when the world opened up giving me the opportunity to live a stationary life, I took it. My mother and sisters are still wandering. But I have settled down. I am driving to school everyday, getting to know my family who I never really knew before, and beginning to think about my future without having to worry about where I might be in the next few weeks. I have stability, and a life that does not

revolve around the next destination, the next hotel, and the unknowing that is part of a traveling life. But in my heart I am still planning my next excursion.