

Life's But A Dream

Marc saw his first dead body in Varanasi. It was floating in the water like a piece of contorted driftwood. Its face was eaten away, and he could see its white skull and into the hollow sockets where the eyes once were. The bottom jaw was gone, but the top teeth were still there. It seemed to be laughing.

"It's just like changing your clothes," the boatman said.

"What?" Marc said.

"Death," the man said as he pulled at the oars. "This man died, but now he's already being reborn into a different body." The boatman looked around and smiled. "All this is an illusion. Life's but a dream."

The train lurched forward, rumbling through the desert in its erratic pace. The air inside the train was hot and dry and the dust caked Marc's throat. He wanted a glass of cold water. But there was no relief anywhere. The empty sky melted into endless dunes. Only the sun remained. The bright white sun.

Marc would look out the window and point and some guy would stand up and in a proud bow say, "Rajasthan," and gesture towards the vast desert with a wide sweep of his hand. Later on, when Marc asked the same question he got the same answer. Yes, it's still Rajasthan. Always Rajasthan. Endless Rajasthan. Eternal Rajasthan.

Six years earlier Marc and Helena had lived in New York and everything was lovely then.

Helena's silky blonde hair was draped over the pillow, and her glossy blue eyes were flecked with spots of desire. He ran his thumb over her angled cheekbones, and across her soft pink lips, down her delicate chin and over her chest. He kissed her bellybutton.

"I'm pregnant."

"What?" There was a pause and then he said, "that's great."

"You want to keep it?" she asked.

"Yes. Do you?"

"Yes."

"Then, why'd you ask me?"

"I wanted to see what you'd say."

"Oh, okay. But I do. And I love you."

"But do you *really* love me?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?" she asked.

"I just know," Marc said.

Helena looked away.

"Well, do you love *me*?" Marc asked.

"Yes, of course." Helena was looking at the edge of the pillow.

"Say it."

She looked at him. "I love you."

"But how do you know that you love *me*?" he asked her.

"That's a bad question," she said. "You shouldn't ask me that question."

The train slowed and stopped. The air stirred as a woman dressed in all black, with a black veil covering her face, entered the car. She sat down with a heavy sigh and the rocking began again. The woman's flattened face turned towards him. The white sun poked through her veil, and bounced off a blank metallic eye. The eye was silvery and fit snugly into her red-rimmed eye socket. Marc tried to look away.

"Good," the old woman said, as she lifted up the strange purplish fruit. Her empty eye stared at him.

"No, thanks." Marc's dry throat cracked.

The old woman laughed a deep laugh. Her one good eye darted around and the silver eye never moved.

A skinny man in a thin suit reached into his pocket and pulled out a few old and jagged coins and handed them to the one-eyed woman. She said something and took the coins. She picked up a few of the strange fruits and placed them on an ancient scale.

"It's Karonda," the skinny man in the thin suit said to Marc.

"Oh."

"We eat it for dessert."

Marc studied him. It was good to know someone who spoke English.

"You don't want to try it?"

"No, thanks," Marc said.

The skinny man squeezed the fruit and ate its clear pulp.

"Good," the old woman said again, smiling her oversized grin. Marc sat still, as the skinny man sucked down the juicy fruit.

"You eat," the woman said, as her good eye darted around.

Marc took one piece of fruit from the old lady. She smiled. Marc squeezed the bottom of the fruit and the skin broke and the fleshy interior was exposed. He pulled the fruit into his mouth. Its bittersweet pulp quenched his dry throat. It felt good to feel something soft again. Marc looked around the car and saw the Rajasthanis smiling politely with their eyes. Everyone seemed satisfied.

Marc and Helena were part of the New York scene. At first everything was great, the parties, the beautiful people, the drugs, the money, the freedom, the sky, the earth. They loved it all. But then something changed.

Something dark emerged from inside of Marc, and he became infected by the empty dreams of demons. The demons told him that life was better if you were high. He took drugs, and was happy. But it was an empty happiness and it wore off quickly. So, he took more drugs. This time he got high, but not happy. Only the emptiness remained. Marc never told Helena about the drugs, but of course she knew. He could see that now. It was obvious.

Then they had baby Lisa. And they loved baby Lisa. And Marc really tried to love baby Lisa, but he was too far gone. He knew that somewhere along the way he had stopped loving them. He let them slip through his fingers. Helena had enough. She took Lisa and left. It was the right thing to do.

Marc ended up flipping burgers at some fast food joint, and the world became just another useless planet spinning in a dumb solar system. He couldn't take it. He left New York, and travelled, and travelled, running like a hamster on an endless wheel. And all that he saw was the same-same, but different. He was lost in an amber hourglass.

Then one day, five years after he later, he thought of his wife and daughter. Maybe, he was just a burnt-out shell. Maybe, he was just spinning around on a useless

planet in a dumb solar system, but he had to know what happened to them. He had to make sense of it all.

Marc went back to New York and looked for them. He found out that his wife had married a wealthy man, and that they were living in a nice house in the suburbs. Marc went to their house, and stood outside and waited. He saw his wife come out holding his daughter's hand. He watched them get into a strange man's car. The car disappeared. He was a stranger to them and they were strangers to him. It was all so strange. He'd laugh, or cry, but all laughter and tears are forbidden.

The boatman paddled Marc further down the river Ganges. Marc saw an old woman fill her mouth up with water and blow it into her dead husband's mouth. He saw her do this five times before she released his body and it floated away in the river's current. He saw children playing around funeral pyres. He saw whole families watching the body of their loved one catch fire, burn, smolder, and disappear.

Each funeral pyre was once the body of a person, and the one behind was also a person, and all these fires were people, and all these people were dead. The flames licked

away the faces of the ghosts of his past. Off went the face of his wife, off went the face of his child, off went the face of his mother, off went the face of his father, off went the face in the mirror.

Marc looked up and saw a boy approaching him. The boy sat down and placed his hands on Marc's shoulders, as if they were old friends.

"Life's but a dream," Marc explained.

"English. No." Was what the boy said, and then he stepped back and took two long thin rope whips out from a burlap pouch that was slung around his bare shoulder. At the end of each rope there was a small knot. The boy stood in front of a burning body.

"English, you look at me," the boy commanded Marc.

Marc looked up at the boy and saw that the boy's bare shoulders had white scars on them. He flicked wrist and the rope snapped. The boy smiled and swung his arms and the whips danced around him. He crossed one arm over the other and the whips coiled tight around his thin body, and the knotted ends snapped at his shoulders. Snap, more skin when flying. Snap. Snap! SNAP! The boy's shoulders flared red. His smile was frozen, but his eyes flinched with pain as the sharp knots seared his skin. This was no trick. Soon, the old white wounds flowed blood and the

blood started thickening on the boy's shoulders. The boy was looking deep into Marc's eyes and smiled wider as the whips were flying and his skin was popping and singing. All laughter and tears are forbidden. ALL LAUGHTER AND TEARS ARE FORBIDDEN. And then suddenly, the boy stopped.

"English, you pay." The boy held out his hand, as the blood was trickling down his bumpy ribcage.

Marc put a couple of rupees in the boy's outstretched hand. The boy took them, closed his hand and walked towards the fire. Marc watched the boy's silhouette melt into the bright flames.

The train stopped somewhere in the nowhere desert. The funeral pyres were a long way away now. The sun had set and all that warmth and light was gone. It was cold.

Everyone got off the train and gathered around an old cement well. They took turns gulping down water from a large ladle. Marc could smell the water and it smelled sweet the way true freshwater does.

"Drink. Drink. Come drink." The one-eyed woman waved Marc into the circle.

Marc found the skinny man in the thin suit and grabbed his arm. "Baba, is this water okay to drink?"

"For me, yes! For you, no!" The skinny man laughed.

Marc let go of the man's arm and walked back to the train and the swirling dust danced in the moonlight. Marc sat in the empty train and thought back to that dead body floating in Varanasi.