

Life's But A Dream

The train's air was hot and dry and the dust caked his throat. He longed for a glass of cold water. Outside the empty sky melted into endless dunes. Only the sun remained. The bright white sun.

He'd 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 the 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.

The sun flared, and blue-green circles streaked across his mind. He thought of New York and how lovely everything was back then.

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

"I'm pregnant."

"What?" And then, "that's great."

"You want to keep it?"

"Yes. Don't 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 too."

But he didn't *really* mean it.

"I know."

"Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Say it."

"I love you."

But in the end, he left her.

"But do you *really* love me?"

"Yes," but he wasn't sure.

"How do you know?"

"I just know," Marc said.

"How do you know that you love me?"

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

Marc blinked. His pupils were nothing but tiny pinpricks that stared back at the distant world.

Six years later, on a listless train through Rajasthan, he heard her words again, "That's a bad question. Don't ask me that question."

Rajasthan's endless landscape was going by like a wavy white line. And out beyond the desert was emptiness.

The train stopped, and the stagnant air stirred slightly as a woman dressed in all black, with a black veil covering her face, lumbered aboard. She sat down with a heavy sigh and the languid rocking began again. Marc didn't want to look, but he did, and the woman's old-flattened face turned towards him. The white-hot sun poked through her veil, and bounced off a blank metallic eye. The eye was moist and silvery and it fit perfectly into her red-rimmed eye socket. A shudder ran down to the base his spine.

"Good," the old woman said, as she lifted up the strange purplish fruit. Her eye's emptiness bore into him, and he understood Poe's, "A Telltale Heart," all too well. It was the Eye, the Eye that made him do it.

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

The old woman laughed a deep laugh, and her one good eye darted around.

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 was still smiling, and almost laughing, when she picked up a few of the strange fruits and placed them

on an ancient scale. She lifted the wooden stick that separated the cast iron plates.

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

"Oh."

"We eat it for dessert."

Marc looked at him; it was good to know someone spoke English.

"You don't want to try it?"

"No, that's okay." He said.

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

"Good." The old woman said again, but her veiled grin only looked like a caricature of a smiling mask.

Marc sat still, as the skinny man in the thin suit sucked down the juicy fruit.

"You eat," she said, and her blank eye pressed in on him. Marc was beginning to think that there was some kind of tractor-beam magic behind that eye.

The skinny man said, "It's safe."

Marc took one piece of fruit from the old lady. She flashed another curled smile and her good eye darted. Marc squeezed the bottom of the fruit and the skin broke and the fleshy interior was exposed. He pulled the pit into his

mouth. The fruit's bittersweet pulp quenched his dry throat. It felt good to feel something. Marc looked around the car and saw the Rajasthanis politely smiling with their eyes. Everyone seemed satisfied now.

Marc had stayed with Helena until their daughter was two. He really tried to keep on loving them, but his heart was withered like a dead vine. He took drugs and then more drugs, until all that heroin made him shit blood. Helena took their daughter and left him. It was the right thing to do. Then Marc left. He travelled, and travelled, running like a hamster in a magical wheel, and all that he saw was the same-same, but different. And the world was just another useless planet spinning in a dumb solar system.

Once, six years after he left, he went back and looked for them. He was a burnt-out shell by then, but he was curious and wanted to know what happened to her. He found her living in a nice house in the suburbs. She was married to a wealthy man. Marc went to her house, and stood outside and waited. She came out holding his daughter's hand. He watched them get into a strange man's car. Then the car disappeared. He was a stranger to them and they were strangers to him. It was all so strange. He'd laugh, but all laughter and tears are forbidden.

The train stopped somewhere in the middle of the nowhere desert. Everyone got off and gathered around an old cement well. They were gulping down water from a large ladle. Marc could smell the water; it smelled sweet the way true freshwater does.

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

He found a skinny man in a thin suit.

"Baba, is this water okay to drink?"

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

Marc walked back to the train and the swirling dust flakes danced in the sunlight.

He began to write.

I saw my first dead body in Varanasi. It was floating in the water like a piece of contorted driftwood. Its face was eaten away, and I could see its white skull and 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."

"What?" I said.

"Death," he said. "This guy died, but now, already, he's being reborn into a different body."

Further down the Ganga, I witnessed an elderly woman fill her mouth up with water and blow it into her dead husband's mouth. I saw her do this five times before she released his body and it floated away, lost in the mighty river's current. I saw children playing around funeral pyres. I saw whole families watching the body of their loved one catch fire, burn, smolder, and disappear.

Life's but a dream.

A small boy came up to Marc. He sat down and placed his hands on Marc's shoulders, as if they were old friends. He gazed down at the strange letters on the page. The boy made a face – disappointed that there were no pictures.

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

"English. No," was what the boy said. And then he walked off.

Life's a dream, all right. A Great Big Dream to you and me.

And death?

Just like changing your clothes.