

Summer River Being Crossed

The sun seemed to sit higher in the sky during the month of April in the Southern part of Odisha. Phillip sat on his traveling bag near the dirt road of a rural bus station while periodically glancing at the entrance of the station and then around at the people waiting. Children ran around the sidewalks as their parents sipped *chaay* and smoked cigarettes underneath makeshift awnings.

In the corner of the bus station an old woman stood under the floral umbrella of her fruit stand. She was burning incense. The smoke floated into the air, rising in a spiral, collapsing upon itself, and disappeared. It filled his nostrils, and Phillip could hear his stomach rumbling, so he walked over and surveyed the fruits. He picked up a strange lemon-smelling one that had scaly skin and fingers that extended outward, but he put it down and handed the old woman a mango, instead. She put it in a plastic bag and then carefully placed the odd yellow fruit alongside it. He handed her forty rupees and she smiled at him.

Once Phillip got back to where he was sitting, he fidgeted with his bag's zipper and opened it. He placed the strange fruit in his bag and left the mango out. Without any knife, he began to peel the scarlet skin back with his fingernails, revealing its soft orange interior. Once the skin was off, he licked his fingers and wiped them against his once beige shorts. Phillip bit into the fruit as beads of sweat fell from his forehead. The mango was soft and sweet, like he remembered.

After he was done with the mango, Phillip got up and threw the skin and core out in an overflowing trash bin. He went to go sit back down on his bag. A man walked in front of him, pulling a rusted out wheelbarrow that looked as if it had been in his family for generations; and yet, the wheels were immaculate and could have been cut by a carpenter earlier that day. The wheels were dark brown and had eight spokes supporting it and another spoke jutting of from the center hubcap.

Phillip watched the man walk through the bus station and toward a nearby hill. The man carefully set the wheelbarrow down at the foot of the hill and looked up at the climb ahead of him. The man took a deep breath, and lifted the handles of the wheelbarrow again and began to walk. As he watched the man ascend, Phillip felt his legs stiffen. The man's skinny reddish-brown calves seemed to meld with the Earth's surface and the further he climbed, the less Phillip could tell which was which. A rock jumped out the back of the wheelbarrow, but the man continued forward.

When he reached the top of the hill and dropped his load of rocks, Phillip sighed.

Just as the man began his descent down the hill, Phillip noticed a bus enter the dusty station. He was still sitting on his lumpy bag when the bus pulled up at his feet. Its metallic body reflected the sun right in Phillip's face, and he immediately shielded his eyes with his hand.

Phillip could see the silhouettes of passengers through the large Plexiglas windows that were covered by curtains. The vehicle had letters in Hindi scrawled on the side of its silvery frame, with a lotus flower painted underneath. Aside from the clay-stained tires, the bus appeared to be brand new.

The bus driver stepped off the bus and stared at Phillip with his intense black-brown eyes. The bus driver's hair was thinning on top and he had a thick black mustache that was curled at the edges.

The bus driver finally asked, "Varanasi?"

Phillip nodded, and heaved his heavy bag onto his shoulders. The bus driver shook his head and motioned for Phillip to follow him. The driver slammed his fist beneath the lotus painting and the baggage compartment dropped down.

Phillip shook his head, pointing at his bag and then the bus and said, "*Ji nahi.*" He liked to keep his bag with him wherever he went—no matter how impractical it was. The bus driver grunted.

As Phillip walked onto the bus, he could smell freshly smoked bidi's that gave the air a sickly-sweet scent. There were already about half a dozen people on the bus; a middle aged husband and wife with their baby, an old woman who sat across from them, and two college students—about Phillip's age—sitting in the back reading their textbooks. He decided to sit in the back at an adjacent seat by the window. The student's both stared at him as he walked toward them, but then continued reading.

Before he could get to the seat, the bus driver had started the ignition and abruptly accelerated forward. Losing his balance, Phillip almost fell on top of the young woman who was sitting in the back, but quickly grabbed hold of a seat, and hurled he and his bag into the seat. There was a loud thump as he landed on the hard plastic that was covered with a thin sheet of polyester cloth.

The bus felt as if it were slow cooker, absorbing all the sun's heat and trapping it inside this steel box. Phillip's dirtied shorts stuck to the back of his thighs. The passenger's on the bus were quiet, even the children.

He took off his bag and shoved the load beneath his seat. Phillip inhaled deeply through his nose and exhaled through his mouth.

The sun's rays sneaked through the mesh blinds and fell on Phillip's face. He wiped sweat from his brow and reached for his bag. The bag's zipper was becoming increasingly difficult to open, but with a few yanks, it gave way. There were a lot of things in the bag. Some things that he had forgotten about and other things that he felt he needed. He looked for a water bottle, but soon realized he did not have one.

Instead, Phillip reached for his brown leather notebook. All of the pages were blank besides the first, which was dated "12/31." There were plenty of things to write about, but he didn't want to write, or rather, he did not want to do the thinking that came before the writing. He shoved the notebook back in his bag and zipped it up.

Phillip lifted the shade and peered outside, using one hand to block his face from the sun. Across the land there were only two colors: the reddish-brown scorched Earth and the cloudless blue sky. Off in the distance was a river, but Phillip could only see small glimpses of the moving body. He let the shade drop and rested his head on the hard plastic headrest.

After a while, the sun began to set and the bus cooled down. A slight breeze came through the driver's window and recycled the stiff air into the outside world and replaced it with a crisper air that moved throughout the bus. People began to

speak in low voices and children began to laugh and cry. The smell of samosas and panipuri filled the air.

Phillip smiled and closed his eyes.

Just as he began to doze off, he felt a tap on his shoulder. Phillip recoiled and opened his eyes. The young man sitting across from him had switched places with the girl and was smiling at Phillip.

"Hello," the young man said.

"*Namaste*. Hello," Phillip said while rubbing his eyes.

"Sorry to disturb you. Are you from America?"

"Yes I am," Phillip said. He was happy to hear his language, but he did not want to speak. Speaking forced him to think.

"Why have you come to India?" the young man asked.

Phillip paused for a moment. "I'm looking for something," he finally said.

"What are you looking for? Maybe I help you find." The young man ran his hands through his thick black hair.

"Well, I'm not really sure what I'm looking for," Phillip said.

The young man smiled at Phillip. "Good luck, my friend."

"By the way," he added, "My name is Chosui. What is your name?"

"Phillip. And it was nice to meet you."

Chosui smiled at him again and went back to reading his textbook, which Phillip saw was entitled, *Let's Talk: Beginner's Guide to Conversational English*. He placed his head back on the seat rest and tried to go back to sleep. His stomach was still grumbling. He hoped he could sleep through it.

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In the early morning—maybe around two or three—Phillip's sleep was interrupted by a sudden jerk of the bus. He nearly hit his head on the seat in front of him, but the bus continued to wheeze back and forth, so he ended up hitting the back of his head against the hard plastic of the seat. The bus came to a full stop a few seconds later.

With one hand, Phillip began to massage the back of his head, and with the other he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. He stood up and noticed all the passengers were filing off the bus, so he pulled his bag from underneath his seat and followed.

As he stepped off the bus, he noticed Chosui was standing nearby, smoking a cigarette. Chosui looked at Phillip and said, "No fuel."

Once passengers realized they were waiting for fuel, they finished stretching their legs and smoking their cigarettes and went back on the bus.

Before he followed everyone back on the bus, Phillip turned his head down towards the highway and saw a large figure galloping in the distance. At the sight of this, he stopped moving towards the entrance of the bus and fixed his eyes on whatever it was that was approaching. He saw the bus driver walk towards the back of the bus while talking on his phone. Phillip slowly inched towards the back, placing himself beside the lotus flower that was glazed in the moon's light.

After a minute or so, it was clear that the figure was a horse and his rider. The muscular horse slowed to a trot and swaggered over towards the bus. The rider—who was either in a police or army uniform—began shouting at the bus driver. The driver’s only reaction was to cast his eyes toward the ground as he continually mumbled, “*Maafi.*” The officer dismounted from the horse and lugged a large red container of diesel with him.

Phillip did not pay attention to their exchange as his eyes were still fixed on the horse. Its body was covered in a sleek black coat of hair with a white patch between its eyes. The horse stood behind the bus, neither making a noise nor a movement. The tips of the horse’s ears were pointed inwards and almost—but not quite—touching at the top. They gave the impression that it was always attentively listening for some yet-to-be-determined disturbance. Yet it also seemed indifferent to all that was happening around it. As if it knew what its duty was and it didn’t allow anything to shake it from its course.

Phillip’s chest tightened. He continued to stare at the horse and the horse continued to stare into the blackened distance.

The bus driver and the officer came back around and the driver handed him a fistful of rupees. They parted ways. The officer hopped back on his horse, smirking, and spurred the horse on with the heel of his boot. The horse and the officer trotted back in the direction they first came. The bus driver walked back towards the front of the bus, with his lips pursed together and brows furrowed downwards.

Phillip followed him back on the bus. The stop was no longer than thirty minutes but he couldn’t be sure.

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The bus arrived in a small town, which lay directly across from Varanasi, on the opposite side of the Ganges River. The sun was just beginning to rise and a few of its rays had begun to cut through the openings in the windows. Phillip was awakened by the stir of passengers getting their belongings together. Chosui and his friend had already left. Phillip reached underneath his seat to get his bag, and then stood up so he could put the load on his shoulders. It was heavy but he did not mind.

Phillip walked down the aisle as people were still gathering their things. Before he exited the bus, he looked at the driver and said, “*dhanyavaad.*” The driver, smoking a cigarette, looked at him and nodded.

As he walked outside, the bus station was already streaming with a steady flow of people coming and going. The station looked nearly identical to the one in Odisha. He walked over to a crowd of rickshaws who were already approaching him.

“*Ganga,*” Phillip said to the nearest driver.

“Fifty Rupees,” said the young rickshaw driver. Phillip nodded his head, and jumped in the back of the electric yellow vehicle, which had the flag of India painted on the side of it. The rickshaw reminded him of a chariot, except instead of horses it was a motorcycle that pulled the carriage.

Without hesitation, the driver pulled out of the bus station and into the street. The roads were still quiet. It could have been no later than 6:30 or 7 a.m. The

wind made Phillip shiver, so he extended his hand out of the rickshaw to allow the orange sun to warm him up. The rickshaw's steady hum filled the morning silence. They passed small clusters of shanty homes that were built with scrap metal and old planks of wood. Two women—one younger and one older—were hanging up towels on a makeshift clothesline.

After about ten minutes, the rickshaw driver pulled through a small marketplace and dropped Phillip off a few meters from the river. He handed the driver a fifty-rupee note and walked towards the slow-moving body of water.

A few old men were bathing in the water while a woman was hunched over the river, washing clothes. Phillip scanned the area, looking for someone to take him across. A little ways down the bank, a fisherman was sitting in his boat, lying down with his arms behind his head and basking in the rising sun. The sky was hazy, which magnified the light and gave the impression that everything was smoldering in orange.

Phillip walked over to the fishermen. The man must have heard him approaching because he peered over his shoulder and stood up once he saw that Phillip was walking towards him. Phillip had no idea how to ask for a boat ride in Hindi, so he merely pointed across the river. The man gestured for him to come on the boat.

"*Paanee?*" Phillip asked.

The man nodded his head and pointed at the river, smiling.

Phillip shook his head, and put an invisible bottle to his lips. "*Paanee,*" he repeated.

The fisherman nodded again, and grabbed a two-liter water bottle from behind him and handed it to Phillip. He only drank enough to moisten his mouth and handed the bottle back. With the sunlight now revealing his face, Phillip could see that the fisherman was an old man. He wore a white *veshti* that was mottled with dirt, a brown wool sweater, and a checkered red-and-yellow cloth that he wrapped around his head. His brown, leathery skin seemed to have countless folds and creases, and yet he pulled the large wooden oars with ease.

As they got closer to the other side of the river, Phillip could see the clustered buildings and temples that were illuminated by the rising sun. The structures were colored with soft pinks and yellows, and vibrant reds and blues. In a nearby port, large boats and barges were huddled together.

The fisherman rowed for about five minutes and docked near large adobe steps. Phillip handed the man thirty rupees and took a step back on land.

He turned back to look at the old fisherman and said, "*Dhanyavaad.*"

The fisherman did not respond but he nodded at Phillip.

Phillip began to climb the stairs. The sun was getting higher in the sky and he could feel its heat on the back of his neck. Once at the top of the stairs, he entered a shaded grassy courtyard. The area was empty, and only contained a single tree in the center. Its trunk was thick and looked like multiple trees gnarled together. The tree's roots were sprawled out and pointed in every direction. Beneath the tree were burnt-out incense, unlit candles, and a variety of fruits. As he walked up to the tree,

he put his bag down, and pulled on the zipper. It came undone with ease. Phillip removed the strange, fingered fruit and placed it at the foot of the tree.

Phillip left his bag open beside him and sat in the grass.