

## **The Night Train at Deoli**

by Ruskin Bond

(Adapted story. Intermediate level)

There are some moments in life that are never forgotten. It can be anything - a favourite toy from childhood, a time of shared laughter, the pain of lost love, the scent of a flower, sunlight on a distant mountain top, the platform of a small railway station in northern India, in the soft quiet light of early morning...

When I was at college, I used to spend my summer holidays at Dehra, at my grandmother's place. I stayed there in the hills from early May until late in July. Deoli was a small station about thirty miles from Dehra; it marked the beginning of the heavy jungles of the Indian Terai area.

The train used to reach Deoli at about five in the morning, when the station was poorly lit with oil lamps, and the jungle across the railway line was just visible in the early light of day. Deoli only had one platform, a waiting room, and an office for the stationmaster. On the platform there was a tea stall, a fruit seller, and a few thin, hungry dogs; not much else, because the train stopped there for only ten minutes before rushing on into the forests.

Why it stopped at Deoli, I don't know. Nothing ever happened there. Nobody got off the train and nobody got on. But the train always stopped there a full ten minutes,

and then a bell sounded, the guard blew his whistle, and soon Deoli was left behind and forgotten.

I used to wonder what happened in Deoli, behind the station walls. I always felt sorry for that lonely little platform, and for the place that nobody wanted to visit. I decided that one day I would get off the train at Deoli, and spend the day there, just to please the town.

I was eighteen, visiting my grandmother, and the night train stopped at Deoli. A girl came down the platform, selling baskets.

It was a cold morning and the girl had a shawl thrown across her shoulders. Her feet were bare and her clothes were old, but she was a young girl, walking like a queen.

When she came to my window, she stopped. She saw that I was staring at her, but at first she pretended not to notice. She had a pale skin, shiny black hair, and dark, troubled eyes. And then those eyes, searching and expressive, met mine.

She stood by my window for some time and neither of us said anything. But when she moved on, I found myself leaving my seat and going to the door. I stepped out and stood waiting on the platform, looking the other way, away from her. I walked across to the tea stall. Water was boiling over a small fire, but the owner of the stall was busy serving tea somewhere on the train. The girl followed me to the stall.

'Do you want to buy a basket?' she asked. 'They are very strong, made of the finest...'

'No,' I said, 'I don't want a basket.' suddenly filled with light. We said nothing for some time, but we each knew what the other was feeling.

I wanted to put her on the train there and then, and take her away with me. I hated the idea of having to watch her disappear into the distance of Deoli station. I took the baskets from her hand and put them down on the ground. She put out her hand for one of them, but I caught her hand and held it.

'I have to go to Delhi,' I said.

She nodded. 'I do not have to go anywhere.'

The guard blew his whistle for the train to leave. How I hated him for doing that!

'I will come again,' I said. 'Will you be here?'

She nodded again, and as she nodded, the bell rang and the train started to move. I had to pull my hand away from the girl and run for the moving train.

This time I did not forget her. She was with me for the rest of the journey, and for long afterwards. All that year she was a bright, living thing in my mind. And when college finished, I packed and left for Dehra earlier than usual. My grandmother would be pleased at my eagerness to see her.

I was anxious as the train entered Deoli, because I was wondering what I should say to the girl and what I should do. I was determined not to stand helplessly in front of her, unable to speak or express my feelings.

The train came to Deoli, and I looked up and down the platform, but I could not see the girl anywhere.

I opened the door and stepped on to the platform, deeply disappointed, and fearing the worst. I ran up to the stationmaster and said, 'Do you know the girl who used to sell baskets here?'

'No, I don't,' he replied. 'And you'd better get on the train if you don't want to be left behind.'

But I walked up and down the platform, and stared past the station buildings. All I saw was a tree and a dusty road leading into the jungle. Where did the road go? The train was moving out of the station, and I had to run up the platform and jump for the door of my compartment. Then, as the train gathered speed, I sat miserably in front of the window.

What could I do about finding a girl I had seen only twice, who had said very little to me, and about whom I knew nothing - absolutely nothing - but for whom I felt a fondness and responsibility that I had never felt before?

My grandmother was not pleased with my visit after all, because I only stayed at her place for a couple of weeks. Feeling restless and worried, I took the train back,

intending to ask further questions of the stationmaster at Deoli.

But at Deoli there was a new stationmaster. The previous man had been moved to another station, and the new man didn't know anything about the girl who sold baskets. I found the owner of the tea stall, and asked him if he knew anything about the girl with the baskets.

'Yes, there was such a girl here, I remember quite well,' he said. 'But she has stopped coming now.'

'Why?' I asked. 'What happened to her?'

'How should I know?' he said. 'She was nothing to me.' And once again I had to run for the train.

As Deoli platform slid away, I decided that one day I would have to break my journey there, spend a day in the town, make enquiries, and find the girl who had stolen my heart with nothing but a look from her dark, impatient eyes.

I cheered myself up with this thought during my last few months in college. I went to Dehra again in the summer and when, in the early hours of the morning, the night train came into Deoli station, I looked up and down the platform for signs of the girl, knowing I wouldn't find her but hoping just the same.

Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to break my journey at Deoli and spend a day there. (If this was a film, I thought, I'd get off the train, solve the mystery, and provide a suitable ending for the whole thing.) I think I was afraid to do this. I was afraid of discovering what had really

happened to the girl. Perhaps she was no longer in Deoli, perhaps she was married, perhaps she had fallen ill...

In the last few years I have passed through Deoli many times, and I always look out of the train window, half expecting to see the same unchanged face smiling up at me. I wonder what happens in Deoli, behind the station walls. But I will never break my journey there. I prefer to keep hoping and dreaming, and looking out of the window up and down that lonely platform, waiting for the girl with the baskets.

I never break my journey at Deoli, but I pass through as often as I can.

- THE END -

Hope you have enjoyed the reading!

Come back to <http://adapted-english-books.site> to find more fascinating and exciting stories!