



THE FIRST TIME

Wednesday, January 11, 2017 – Ankola (India) Railway Station

14.643484,74.334808

Those on the road experience many first times – sometimes more than they would like. This first time, however, was something special: spectacular in a most unspectacular way. It happened in a third-class compartment on the train journey from Margao to Udipi. The train had been standing for an eternity at some boon-dock of a station in the midday heat. The fans on the ceiling were running at maximum speed and blowing an ear-pumping vortex of air into the oppressive coach, but did not succeed in cooling it. I was lounging on the fake leather-padded seat, a folded computer on my knees, and gradually my eyes began to droop. As I was sinking into sleep, my half-closed eyes registered that the doorway was suddenly a splash of colour. A turquoise sari-clad woman pushed past me, an old woman, visibly exhausted from nego-

tiating the short path from the platform to the compartment. She sank down next to me with a relieved sigh and pulled the small glasses off her face. I smiled at her – in a friendly, encouraging way. But without her glasses on, she could not recognise my expressions. And, even as I was smiling at her fatigued face, I realised that my view of this land had changed – that I had undergone an attitudinal transformation. I had met many old women during my journeys across the subcontinent. What was brand-new here was that I was now simply regarding the stranger by my side as a tired woman, an old woman – and not as an old Indian woman.

That was about an hour ago, I reckon. The train continues to be at a stand-still in the blazing sun. The fans have resigned from their job. The lights on the ceiling of the coach have conked out.



The old woman has lain down on one of the long seats and is breathing softly. A soft light streams in through the train's windows, making the woman's sari glitter and bringing a bronzed glow to her skin. She looks much less aged now than she did earlier, her body seems firmer, youthful almost. Is it the same woman? I had nodded off for a bit. Had someone else taken her place while I was slumbering? Was she rejuvenated while I was sleeping? Or, has my view of her changed? Am I not awake yet? Or, conversely, did the old woman appear earlier only in my dream?

I lean against the window, close my eyes, and feel the sweat running from my forehead down over the bridge of my nose to my lips. It tastes salty,

a bit like freshly dug up earth and a bit like yeast, like a white bread that is not quite baked through. Can it be that a few tears are mingled with the sweat? Why tears?

It does not matter if I have actually experienced or merely dreamed the scene with the old woman. Just like that, I've lost some of my distance from the world. And, suddenly, I understand how much that changes. It means that this is a journey of no return – no return into that, that was.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.

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