

# LEAVING AMRITSAR

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Phil Sparrow

They hardly speak the whole dusty, rattling train ride back to Delhi. Brown fields and rundown villages slide by outside, Jenny following them till her eyes hurt in their sockets. Opposite, some robust Sikhs try repeatedly to make conversation, sharing their puris and curd and asking about cricket. Noel answers quietly, eyes averted.

It is dark when the train cranks into the outskirts of Delhi. Grey cement, multiple train tracks, stained walls, broken pipes issuing filthy water accompany the last few, slow miles. The train wheezes to a stop and the frenzy of gathering and exiting and leaving Old Delhi station begins. Back-stiff and irate, Noel and Jenny leave too, walk, bent under the heavy old army pack that Noel insisted on bringing. Outside there's a rikshaw, hundreds of them, and though it was 9.00 when the train was pulling into Delhi, it's now after 10 and the driver insists on the night rate. Noel shrugs and Jenny assents and they squeeze in, just wanting to be back in the room in Kailash Colony.

The rikshaw driver gets lost. Nothing new, so few of the drivers are literate and most navigate by memory and wit. It's too much for Noel who grits his teeth and gestures to the driver, speaking in stuttering Hindi, but the driver is stubborn too, steadfastly refuses to turn around. What's this street? *Via Arkbar Marg*. It's familiar, but not familiar enough and eventually Jenny and Noel give up and huddle back in the narrow seat.

Unsurprisingly, the driver finally finds M-block Market and judders to a halt outside the house. Noel punishes the driver, paying only 55 rupees, instead of the 80 he is claiming. The driver thrusts it back, Noel throws it down, knowing how offensive a gesture it is, and he and Jenny shoulder the bags and ignore his outrage. He runs after them and Noel shrugs him off, he persists but they walk on and then the driver leaves them.

They slowly circle up the two flights of stairs. The iron frame door is wedged shut; pulling it, it clangs and the servant boy Afzal bursts out of the room above them, shouting down, *Kya hogaya?*

It's us Afzal, it's alright. *Koi baht nahi.*

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The flat is rank. Rat droppings, mould, dust. Everywhere dust. The tiny washroom stinks. There is shit in the latrine and a scattering of cockroaches. When they unbolt the bedroom, the air is fetid and close. More dust. Noel looks at Jenny. What a journey. She is pale, but smiles, Yes.

They dump the bags on the floor. All the water they had left stored is gone, the buckets in the washroom are empty, more cockroaches lie in the bottom. Noel turns on the tap - there's a gush of water and he closes his eyes. But after a minute, the water stops: the tank on the roof is empty again. He takes up the buckets and goes downstairs, loops under the lilac bushes and scrabbles around to the mains tap. The water trickles out. Noel goes back up stairs, leaving the buckets.

By midnight they've finished cleaning enough to unpack. Noel has carried up five buckets of water and they wash, the dust and tiredness clinging to their skin. Noel doesn't bother to dry himself, just rolls on to the cotton mattress beside Jenny, bunching the shawl he uses as a pillow. It is still warm and above them, the fan squeaks and chirps through the night.

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*The train only arrived just after lunch and it was only then that we moved from where we'd been sitting with a family. As we boarded, Jenny noticed an emaciated man lying motionless near the train. We both thought he needed attention, so after stowing the bags, I went out to see him. In typical Indian fashion, a crowd gathered where no one had shown the slightest interest before. No one speaking, or helping; just watching.*

*I checked his pulse - about 110/ minute, breathing very shallow. He was very dehydrated and starving - skin stretched over his face, gaunt, his temples sunk in. I got some water from a tap and some sugar and salt from a drinkwallah and holding him up, got him to swallow a few sips - 'pio, pio' - before he sunk down again. He was filthy, incontinent - flies everywhere all over his face, mouth and eyes. I sat with him, wondering what to do and praying and shooing the flies and holding him.*

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Noel and Jenny sleep till late and the sun is streaming through the Hessian curtain when they wake. It is cooler, quieter and they lie for a while before rising.

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Will you go and buy some dahlia and milk?

Why the dahlia?

The stuff we had is infested with weevils. We need more anyway.

At the market, Noel contemplates ringing the Amritsar station master to enquire about the Bihari man, but it's 7.00am and there's no chance of anyone being there who knows, let alone cares. He will come back at midday. The *wallah* grins at Noel as he asks for dahlia, recognizing him after the three weeks away.

Good travel? he asks, head inclined.

Yes, *accha*... Noel smiles, and moves to the milk vendor. In the market square people are preparing for the day. The Sikhs who run the taxi service squat, drinking chai, turban-less, their long black hair startling and woolly. Waiting in the queue, Noel thinks of the photos he's seen of the Sikhs defending the temple at Amritsar, against the tanks that Indira sent in. Wild with passion, they had clung, tucked and hidden in the recesses of the Golden Temple until starved out by weeks of siege, they were easy targets.

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*Then Jenny came out, suggesting we either take him with us or get him to hospital. A man who'd come closer said there was a charity hospital in the next town - he said the government hospitals in Amritsar would just discharge him.*

*I felt so impotent - I didn't want to bring him back to Delhi - didn't want to get off the train, just wanted to get home, and to try to decide to completely alter our plans in a snap decision seemed impossible. We'd bought our tickets, the train was leaving in 15 minutes.*

*Jenny went back in to check our bags and I sat with the man for a few more minutes, urging him to drink before I sought the help of another man in trying to get the station officials to take him to hospital. We managed to find the station master. He asked if the man was any relative of ours - we said no - he said, So why are you concerned? The police will come when he is dead.*

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Noel and Jenny sit on the step, eating hot dahlia and drinking tea. The bird life is active, just like before they left for Pakistan. Neither is speaking much, still absorbed in the peace and greenery of the rubber tree that grows by the stairs. After some time, they rise, go inside and continue cleaning the rooms. The monsoon is coming soon and the three weeks away prove that the little flat is poor shelter against the Delhi weather.

Mid morning, Noel goes down to the market again, and tries to find a phone number for the Amritsar station. The heat is intense; he is unaccustomed to it after the rainy cool of Peshawar and Islamabad.

There is no phone book at the phone wallahs and the enquiry number is not answering. Frustrated, he sits, in the cool of the phone room, staring out into the square.

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*Then train started to move, so the man who'd been helping me and I ran for it and got on the final carriages. Jenny was waiting for me in the doorway with our small bag, ready to get off. I came and we sat and I told her what had happened.*

*It was a long ride until the first stop when the man - Laeeq is his name, he is Muslim - and I got off and found the station master to urge him to call the Amritsar station master and get them to do something. Though he said he would, I don't have much hope that he did, or that it was effective. We ran for the train again, just catching one of the final open doors. Jenny and I talked sporadically. It was a long trip back to Delhi.*

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Noel walks back from the market. Their flat is above the garage of a big house. The landlord is in the front garden, grey-eyed, gentle.

Ahhh, hello Noel.

Hello uncle. It's good to see you again.

And how was Pakistan?

Good, we got our visas renewed. It's cooler there too, it rained in Peshawar. We didn't make it to Afghanistan though.

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Here it has been very hot. You must get yourselves a cooler.

Noel climbs the stairs. Jenny is resting; their flat is higher than the shadows and receives the full heat of the sun. Noel had put tin foil on the windows, a futile gesture when the ambient temperature is above 40. He scoops some tepid water from the *matka* and sits in the single chair, his thin kurta soaked and grubby.

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*Why couldn't we have found him sooner? We were at the station almost two hours, to find him only 20 minutes before the train left is so sickeningly frustrating. Why hadn't any Indians done anything? How many hundreds of people had walked by him the days that he had lain there - he'd been there since the previous morning at least - probably longer, judging from his condition. Why did it take two strangers from a completely different country and culture, without language or any local knowledge, to do something? Where were the Indians? It can't be possible to just keep walking by a man dying, until he's dead, then simply phone the police to dispose of the body. What's going on?*

*20 minutes to make a decision - 15, really, by the time we'd stowed our bags and got a grip on how serious his condition was. It is so maddening. We were on the final leg of a long journey home, one that had been gathering momentum since the Sunday four days previously. To shift that momentum and stay in Amritsar seemed too much. It wasn't, but I just felt inadequate to the task. To bring him to Delhi seemed as impossible a decision. An incontinent, smelly, unconscious man on a crowded train for eight hours; then to bring him either to our place or to a hospital - I couldn't conceive of it. The option that seemed 'best' - most achievable was to get him to a local hospital. But how on earth could I ensure that happened in 15 minutes?? I couldn't and I didn't and now I am certain he is dead.*

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Noel stops writing. Jenny is awake, her breathing shallow.

Hello.

Did you get through?

No, I couldn't find a way to get the phone number. No such thing as other state's phone books or directory inquiries, at least one that works. The woman could only speak Hindi and mine wasn't good enough.

Frustrating.

Yes.

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*What did God expect of us? So many parables and stories have come to mind since we got on the train - the rich man and Lazarus, the good Samaritan. As Jenny said, it wasn't the rich man's fault that Lazarus was poor - but it was his responsibility to do something about him. And the Samaritan - he too was on a journey, it wasn't like he had time to spare. He made time. We are told to give the thirsty water, the hungry food and so on. Well, I take some relief in knowing I'd given him water and held him - but that cannot be enough.*

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Jenny is struggling, missing the cooler North-East; the deaf heat grasps and drags at everything. In the evening Noel goes again to the *phone-wallah*, and tries to reach an operator, but again and again the phone rings out.

After dinner Jenny and he sit on the steps, quiet in the thickhot air. By midnight it still hasn't cooled and after they damp the sheet, they lie on the mattress, too hot to hold each other. There is a long power cut in the night and the nearby generators start up, filling the air with rhythm. Sleep is impossible.

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*I can't get away from it: there may well be - and are thousands of men and women and kids in similar situations in India, and all sorts of things may have been different - we could have flown home, or been in carriage number 5, and not seen him, other Indians could have helped: but we saw him: a solitary man whom it was within our power to help, and we didn't do enough.*

*, I just kept thinking of Peter, in the boat with Jesus, he falls to his knees and says, Go away from me Lord, I am a sinful man.*

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In the morning Noel goes downstairs.

Uncle? Inderji?

Noel finds him, fiddling with something in the garden.

Could we have some cold water, if you have some. Jenny really enjoys it, in this heat.

Of course, Noel, just ask. You mustn't get dehydrated. Take some salt with the water, too. Have you seen about a cooler yet?

No, not yet uncle.

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*The man on the platform was from Bihar, or Uttar Pradesh - Laeeq said he wasn't sure which. So, he'd almost certainly come as a labourer, from one of the villages. Those two states are very, very poor - probably he would still have family there. So what happened when he reached Amritsar? Maybe he had work for a while, then had a run of bad luck. It's hard to recover from misfortune in India. People can recover if they have resources to draw on, otherwise, they go under.*

*What can he have thought about all this? What can it be like to come off the land, to a big city to find work, just to live - and then, to find yourself starving, forced now to*

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*beg, your begging bowl empty, thousands of people passing you by as each day you slowly die. No one is interested. No one responds.*

*What finally, does he make of a white man, speaking bad Hindi, holding him, urging him to sit up and drink - and then leaving him, 20 minutes later, alone again?*

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Mid morning, Noel tries to find a number for Amritsar again, but he is losing hope. But, then, there is an answer, and the operator is speaking English.

The Amritsar train station. Amritsar. *Hai*, in Uttar Pradesh. Thankyou.

The woman gives Noel two numbers, but neither of them answer.