

Night in Hijli

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August 4, 2022

The third year of engineering college was the best. It takes you the first two years to settle in, and in the fourth year you think of the outside again.

We knew the campus, and it knew us. The gap between two departments with a footpath to the wall, beyond which was tea between lectures in the daytime. The shaded edge of the field where we could sit on the grass in the evening, idle as the breeze. The solitary twilight bugle call from the second floor of RP Hall that fetched a young fellow from the shop, and the bucket on a rope that was lowered to exchange cash for cigarettes. Chhedi's moonlit shack, with its waxing and waning movie songs on the radio, where they sometimes started your bun-omelet order when they saw you arrive.

Those days in Kharagpur passed happily enough. But at night the campus turned into a quiet village called Hijli. It was Hijli which defined that phase of life, with so little to do and so much time and space to do it in.

Time was slow. You could sit, like I sometimes did, on a cot in the third floor corridor of RP Hall, looking out on Hijli for hours. On the main road through campus, street lights made circles that punctuated the remaining darkness. Bullock carts, laden tall and long with straw, passed by slowly with wheels creaking like faraway crying infants. The full moon, older than life, slowly travelled the sky. Someone whistled a recent movie song as he walked along the corridor of the next block. A breeze moved your hair. A burst of laughter came from an open door fifty yards away.

Occasionally, Mohanty might wander out of his room and call you in to show you some aspect of amplifiers or lenses or magnets or Bessel functions – you never knew what would be next with him. Or, a quiet hour later, Partha might show up and ask, “Come for a walk?” Walks were woven into the nights. Joydeep, in particular, never even asked where we were going.

Some nights stood out.

On one such night when we had played enough carrom and were waiting to see what, if anything, was next, Mrinal came to our wing. He was drunk, and wearing only underpants. His room was in a different wing, which meant he was lost. Mrinal was nice enough, though foggy at the moment. “Where are your clothes?” we asked him. He did not know, but explained after a pause that it was a warm evening. So we asked him where he had gone for his drinks, and what route he took back. We took him along in the night, with stars and insects and the scent of flowers, to retrace his steps. Through a broken section of boundary wall, over a field, past a pond, over the railway track, pausing in the dim light at a corner here and a bush there while he turned his head slowly, trying to remember. A shirt here on the grass, a vest there on a bush, and finally his pants raised in laughing triumph from the dust. Clothed again, Mrinal let us walk him back to his room. When we were leaving, he woke up a bit and wanted to come and walk with us. Somebody gently tapped his head and spoke firmly, and he agreed to go to bed. Once he lay down, he sank with a sigh.

Our search for Mrinal's clothes had banished sleep. Things were quiet. Some late night room lights glowed, indicating non-exam study. It takes all kinds. The common room, still with several people in there, did not appeal to us any more that night. Outside, a late moon had come up. The bicycles stood slightly askew, like the teeth of an old comb, waiting for the morning. The world slept.

So we went to Chhedi's again. Digging in pockets produced a few rupees. As we were about to order, one of our young teachers rode up on his bicycle. He looked tired as he dismounted. We were impressed by his working so late, which we supposed was on research of some kind. He nodded hello, then pointed at our bench to ask if he could join us. We were clean that night and we liked him anyway, so we made room.

Thirty feet away the street lamp cover was dirty, and the light was dim. As he ate, he became gently technical. I think he could not help himself. He said something about vibration control. Though I forget the details now, he asked something about degrees of freedom. I offered an answer that got a nod from him. He took a moment and a breath, gathered himself, and stood up to leave. With a quiet goodbye, he rode off into the night. I leaned out on the bench to see if he would go home or turn back into the academic area. Back to work it was. He was not done yet. We walk side by side, I thought, but in different worlds. I was suddenly glad I knew something about degrees of freedom.

We asked for more tea. Then young man Ghosh showed up. He was from another hall. We liked him. "Hello," he said, "feed me something." He offered cigarettes. We asked for a bun-omelet for him and asked him what he was up to. "Project," he said, a bit self-conscious among us non-academics. We knew he was working on something with a professor, an extra research problem, with a view to going abroad for higher studies later. We politely changed the topic. Ghosh is a well-regarded academic now, though we never did find out what his project was on.

Much remained of the night, so we walked towards the old defunct airstrip in Salua, an hour away. The road was a grey thread into the distance. There were tall whispering trees on each side, and the few houses along the way were dark. DD sang a song. It was about a path in a forest covered with flowers, a moon in the sky, and a lover waiting. After a bit of silence, Rosh tried out some new phrases he was working on for his next foray into debating. Joydeep was quiet as usual, observing the outline of the trees and the arc of the moon. Chiradeep had made a few harsh remarks about a disliked professor, but had since then relaxed into the moment. Partha, in his gentle way, told a not very funny joke that had us laughing for some minutes because it felt good. When we arrived at the gate to the compound in Salua, there was nobody there. But a possibly drunk, vaguely soldierly guy walked up after a while. It seemed that he was on his way home from somewhere else. We chatted with him a bit, about the breeze, the moon, the weather, sentry duty, and nighttime in general. When he heard we were students, he seemed pleased. He told us, quite seriously, to go back to our rooms and study. We promised that we would, not wanting to hurt his feelings.

The night still had a couple of hours. So we turned back to campus and then walked further, to Hijli railway station. It was deserted. There were two goods trains standing there. The night had turned warm from our walking. I remember using my shirt to wipe droplets from my glasses, though the heat is gone from my memory. By that time it was only Joydeep and me; the others had gone to bed.

We went onto the platform, climbed the stairs and stood on the overbridge, looking down onto the tracks and the dark goods trains. We spoke without haste of a random chain of things, each topic flowing into another. We spoke of the girls on campus, and the boys. Of studying, and of jobs. Of which professors were fools, and which were not. Of families. Of what life means. Of what is worth doing and what is not.

Eventually, one of the goods trains started moving slowly. It did not seem to be in a hurry. Joydeep leaned over and spat on the train roof. Liking the idea, so did I. Upon our unexpected attack, the train stopped. We waited for ten minutes to make sure, but it did not move. We had won. I thought a little about how much a train weighs.

Finally, Joydeep touched my elbow and pointed. There was a glow in the east. With bodies heavy but spirits contented, we started on the walk back to the hall. In my room, my bed pulled me in.

People say we are only young once. Maybe there is another way to look at it. We are all born knowing what is possible. Living teaches us what is not. Age is just another name for the loss of possibility.

Every time I think of nights in Hijli, I am young again for a while. For in one of those nights, my friends, I put clothes on the body of a boy who had none, I faced my teacher's questioning and answered with honor, I gave food to a hungry student who went on to be a scholar, I walked up to a soldier and encouraged and thanked him, I discussed with my close friend some of the deepest questions of life, and I stopped a train in its tracks and lived to say so.