

PASSAGE TO INDIA

TRIP UNITES DAUGHTER WITH MEMORIES OF HER MOTHER

While washing her, I notice how frail mother's body has become over the past two years. The dress chosen for today, though new, will envelop this soft frame.

My reverie is interrupted by an assertive voice. Mother desires to go home; no, not to her apartment in Brookline, Massachusetts, but to her real home, her childhood habitat, which is "a place of wonder."

"It is a crazy idea!" "Why?" "Because you're in the hospital and must stay longer in order to get better, so there is no way you can travel to the hills of North Carolina."

After I cover her fevered brow with a cool cloth, Mother turns her head away from me and explains that she needs to feel familiar earth under her feet again. But it is not me who is saying no, it is the ovarian cancer that is refusing her passage.

Why is this particular exchange being played in my head now, as I sit at a train station in Jhansi, India? It must be my fever that is forcing my mind back to a time when cancer forced my mother's mind to wander as well, to unknown places, at least unknown to me. But she was clear about why she wanted that trip: "a chance to walk on familiar ground again."

Feeling lost and not having the strength to take out my map, having no idea what is next, feeling left behind—should I return?—fly back home? But I am a chaperone, supposedly helping to take care of students as they tour India. Perhaps it was not a good time for me to accept

this job—take this trip? People say that my wounds are still open; after all, it has only been six months since the cancer took mother from me.

My head is beginning to ache as the sun beats down on it. Will this place show me no mercy, because I showed her none? Mother's home—that place was never important to me, just a place she mentioned once in a while. But

so fast that seeing is painful. I am able to take in the scenery; the vista is full of brilliant hues, which is like a damp cloth stroking my fevered brow. Memories waltz around in my head. There is a dress that was given to me long ago, by my mother. The colors of the dress are much like the ones dancing by the window. Every detail of the garment comes back to me.

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during her illness, she talked about it in brilliant technicolor. Those memories covered her, when her favorite dresses would not. Should I have said yes to mother's petition? She asked so little from me.

The train is coming, but I do not know if I am able to move. My fever has turned to chills. Mother was always so sick after her treatments. My head is spinning so fast, and my stomach turns too much for me to recall the next destination. Did one of the students just say something about the Taj Mahal, as he ushered me onto the train?

At last, my stomach is not as upset. My head turns without falling forward. I shall attempt to open my eyes. Good. The train is not moving

As I am being rocked by the train, my eyes slowly close. A caressing voice whispers in my ear. My eyes open ever so slowly; the colors are wrapped around a figure sitting next to me. She is familiar. Her breathing, at last, is regular. There is no longer the sound of her insistent cough. All that surrounds her is calm and determination, as she is draped in my—in our dress.

I close and open my eyes several times, very rapidly, to be certain. When I open them the last time, in order to truly take in—she is no longer—but wait. She is walking, now dancing towards her—our—destination: the Taj Mahal, where love and death unite to create a wonder.

BY MICHAEL ANGEL JOHNSON