

The Silhouette Behind The Glass

I hardly ever get nightmares. That's why when I had a nightmare last week, I immediately touched my face, trying to sense if there was the wet coolness of a tear on my cheek. None. All I could feel was the bump of a mosquito bite from the night before. I looked around the room. My roommate was sound asleep. I couldn't understand how I hadn't woken him up. I'd never cried so much in a dream, never been so scared.

I fumbled through the dark bedroom looking for my glasses and my phone. Ever since I realized that I use my dreams as a canvas to analyze internal conflicts, I've made the habit of writing them out. I opened *Notes* and began to recount my nightmare.

I was sitting alone in a train car. A lavish five-course meal had been set out in front of me – a silver spoon in my left hand, a golden knife in the other. But just as I was about to take a bite, I heard sobbing in the train car next door. Curious, I got up and walked to the glass barrier.

I was shocked. I was greeted with an overcrowded car filled with children I'd interacted with while in India, hungry, eyes brimming with disappointment for who I had become. I called out to them, hoping to get their attention. My pleas were echoed with silence. No one even made the effort to look in my direction. They could not see me or recognize me. I was a shadow without a silhouette – nonexistent, helpless powerless.

It has been seven weeks since I first arrived to India. In that time, we collected thousands of data points on children's physical and mental health. Yet I still do not feel satisfied.

I feel uncomfortable.

A couple days ago, I interviewed someone that reminded me so much of myself – someone who people sought advice from and valued for his individuality, genuine, simple. I cannot help but think back to my nightmare from last week in which I was someone different, unrecognized. I cannot help but think that I became a shadow, without a silhouette.

The Silhouette Behind The Glass

I strongly believe that tackling inequality is a prerequisite for alleviating poverty. As a result, I keep a list of every inequality I witness. Audis driving behind tattered rickshaws, welfare offices looking down upon tent clusters at its footsteps, lawyers in neatly pressed suits next to naked children. Inequality exists. It is a known fact, not an award-winning discovery.

But sometimes we become so bent on recognizing inequalities around us that we forget about the inequalities we ourselves perpetuate. Perhaps that's why the children could not recognize me in my nightmare. Perhaps that's why I found myself struggling to figure out who I'd become when I interviewed that young man.

Reflecting back upon the seven weeks I spent in India, I unknowingly contributed to the inequality I observed. I stuffed myself with exotic tofu shells, drank cheesecake mocktails, debated whether I should buy branded jeans, and complained about the heat despite traveling in an air-conditioned Maruti. When I was not working, I lived like the Delhi elite.

Now you might argue that it is necessary to give in to indulgence once in a while. And I agree. After all, eating at restaurants, buying clothes, and traveling in a car provides a source of income to someone – a waiter, a chef, a fashion designer, a driver. But I could also have chosen to directly eat from the man selling momos in the Chittaranjan Park Market, purchase clothes from family-owned businesses in Lajpat Nagar, or travel using auto-rickshaws – where I knew the money I spent directly went into their families' pockets. Instead I continued to feed corporations the money that I am privileged to have. I chose to splurge in excess.

In my attempt to assimilate, I don't want to lose the one thing that has gotten me to where I am today – my simplicity and genuineness.

I recently interviewed someone my age and, in the process, I felt guiltier for my actions. He narrated to me how he was unable to find employment as a result of a medical disability. When I asked him what he used his free time for, he told me that he found solace in the clicks of

The Silhouette Behind The Glass

the Rubix Cubes he loved solving; the power to shift a chaotic cube into ordered colors endowed him with a control he rarely had in life.

I sat there amazed. He was content, a little worried, but patient throughout the conversation. All he wanted from life was to be independent, succeed in a world that classified him as a failure before he even had the chance to begin his career, succeed as he was rather than become someone else. His genuineness served as a jarring reminder for why I was in Delhi – to learn from the community I worked with and imbibe their resilience into my life.

In the future, I hope to create bottom-up, community-led changes in healthcare governance. Yet I inevitably find myself consuming in a manner that is inconsistent with the lives I am trying to touch. This does not mean I have to be poor to work with the poor. I just need to do a better job bridging together the two worlds I live in – consume wisely *and* be generous.

That's easier said than done. Very few people are constantly thinking about these issues. Even I find myself straying from what I have observed. In the last fifteen minutes, I have surfed Amazon to find a new shirt to wear while also looking up places to get samosas nearby. In a world where materialism takes precedence, it's easy to get distracted.

But I have to begin somewhere and become more aware of what I do and how I do it. Hopefully by recognizing this, I can recognize myself and those that I am working with can recognize me – breaking the glass barrier between the train cars.