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April 2006

The Eight Twenty Four Churchgate Fast

“Life is like a fast local train in Bombay,” Amar said to himself as the train left the Andheri station on its way to Churchgate. “It does not wait for you; you just get left behind if you miss the chance. It moves forward relentlessly, pausing only momentarily to pick up random passengers. Passengers who you meet only for a fleeting moment, before they dissolve into the teeming millions.”

Amar was on his way to college. He was a final year student at Wilson College. This morning, he had barely made it to the platform when the eight twenty four Churchgate fast local started moving. He ran alongside the rapidly accelerating train and managed to find enough space on the doorway to put one foot on just before he reached the end of the platform. The train was hopelessly crowded as usual. And it was dangerous to be precariously perched outside the compartment like he was, one foot dangling outside.

“At least here I won’t be suffocated to death. And I will not go deaf listening to the *bhajan mandali* singing itself hoarse within 2 feet of my ears,” he thought to himself.

He craned his neck to see if she was in her usual place today. When he did not find her there, he looked, as best as he could through the crowds, at other parts of the compartment. The *briefcase gamblers* were in their usual seats, concentrating on their game of *teen patti*. The members

of the *bhajan mandali* continued their loud prayers, cymbals clanging away. They seemed to be completely oblivious to the passengers around them, who looked as if they would happily strangle them if they could. The stockbroker was also sitting in his usual position by the window, cell phone in hand, loudly making deals worth crores of rupees right on the train. But she was not in the compartment.

“I don’t even know her name, and here I am looking for her,” Amar thought wistfully.

He remembered the day he had first seen her, in this very train. He had noticed her because she was hanging on outside the train, one foot dangling free. It had been a sight to arouse the curiosity of even a typically indifferent Bombayite like him. It was rare enough to see girls in the general compartment, instead of the ladies’ compartment and here was one, indulging in the daredevilry that young men like him took pride in.

His curiosity had made him run ahead to the compartment she was in, quite close to the front of the train, even though it was quite a distance away from where he was standing on the platform.

The next day, he had seen her again in the same compartment though she was not hanging outside, but standing just inside the compartment in the small space adjacent to the doorway. Something had made him run up ahead to that compartment on that day as well. The day after that had seen Amar reach the station uncharacteristically early and take his position at the far end of the platform, ready to feast his eyes on her.

Soon, it had become a routine for him to wait for the eight twenty four fast, and at the same position on the platform. Even though he reached his college a little too early for his first class, he would always take the same train and wait for it in the same position.

It was the noisiest and smelliest compartment in the train – noisiest because of the *bhajan* singers and smelliest because it was just behind the vendors' compartment with its fisherwomen heading to the market with their wares. The fisherwomen also vigorously competed with the *bhajan mandali* in the racket they could generate. But a youthful curiosity deep inside him made him ignore these minor inconveniences to see her.

She was not particularly beautiful, at least in the sense of beauty that had been popularized by Bollywood. But she had the sort of everyday features that were intensely attractive to Amar. She looked like the clichéd *girl next door*. Now, Bollywood was appropriating even the *girl next door* image, with the Konkonas and Vidya Balans amidst the glamour that the Aishwaryas and Sushmitas represented. What was unusually beautiful about her face however, were her eyes, expressive like those of a *Bharatanatyam* dancer.

As Amar reminisced about her, he realized that he had not seen her for almost a fortnight now. He had been laid up in bed for several days because of a viral eye infection. On the day he started going to college again after recovering from his illness, he had gone up to the front of the platform as usual. He had got into the regular compartment, but she was not there.

“Perhaps she is away on vacation, or has fallen sick like me,” he had said to himself. “There is a terrible virus going around nowadays.”

He remembered the first time he had made eye contact with her. The *bhajan* singers had been singing a particularly complicated part of the song and the singing had been completely out of tune. Even thinking about them singing like that made him wince. He was reminded of how he shuddered involuntarily when metal grated upon metal.

He closed his eyes and remembered the pain that he had been in on hearing the brutal murder of the *bhajan*. He had noticed that she was looking at him, a sympathetic smile on her face. It had been as if she understood his pain and shared in it.

The train was speeding by Khar Road and was approaching Bandra station. Amar was quite tired now. Hanging on to the train with one foot and one arm was hard work. And the after-effects of all those wretched antibiotics that the doctor had given him for his viral infection did not help matters.

“Some of the crowds will get down at Bandra, making their way to the new offices at Bandra-Kurla complex,” he thought to himself in relief.

As the train stopped at Bandra, Amar realized that his relief had been quite premature. The crowds did not seem to reduce at Bandra. If anything, they only increased. When the train started moving out of Bandra station, Amar found a place again at the doorway with some difficulty.

He remembered the day he had first touched her. It had happened when the train was leaving Bandra station and it had been quite by accident. He was hanging out of the door of the compartment as usual and she was standing just inside. The train was swaying particularly badly that day – perhaps it was one of the old rolling stock, with their bad shock absorbers. In any event, she had let go of the handrail momentarily and lost her balance. She would have fallen out of the train if it were not for the fact that he had restrained her. That was also the first time she had spoken to him. Just one word,

“Thanks.”

But it had seemed to him as if he had just heard a long work of prose. And so engrossed had he been in hearing those imaginary words in his head that he had said nothing in return.

He could not stop thinking about her now. The memories came flooding back in a mighty torrent.

He remembered the incident with the man who slept every day in the train. Now, the sight of a passenger fast asleep was common enough on a Bombay local train, where long distance commuters utilized every last opportunity to catch a nap. What was unusual about this man was that he could sleep perfectly well when he was standing. Amar had noticed that he even snored when sleeping like this.

On that day, this man had found his place next to her. And his head managed to roll around and make its way to her shoulder repeatedly. She would move it away, only for it to

return almost purposefully to its destination. Amar was convinced that it was on purpose and the man was only pretending to be asleep that day. She had made several polite attempts to push his head away and had even woken him up to tell him not to put his head on her shoulder. But he went back to sleep after a while and his head started making its way back towards its preferred destination.

It was then that she made the well-timed move that still amused him when he thought about it. Just as the man's head was about to rest on her shoulder, she deftly moved aside. He banged his head on the railing behind him. That was the end of the man's attempt at catching some sleep that day. He did not return to the place next to her after that day.

A sudden jerk in the train brought Amar back from his journey into the labyrinths of his memories. He was looking out of the train absent-mindedly now. He saw the women cooking, washing clothes and bearing the burdens of everyday life in the shacks they called home, by the side of the tracks. There were little children running around, playing dangerously close to the trains, but some invisible *lakshman rekha* kept them magically away from the tracks themselves.

He was determined to talk to her the next time he saw her.

“If I see her again,” he reminded himself.

Perhaps he would invite her to the college festival that was coming up in a few days. Or perhaps she would come with him to the trip to Matheran he and his friends were planning.

“Don’t be stupid. You don’t even know her name yet,” he said to himself.

Amar thought of how he would start a conversation with her the next time. He didn’t know where she got off the train. She was always still in the train when he got off at Charni Road to make his way to his college. She seemed like a college student – her clothes and her backpack suggested that. Perhaps she was in one of the colleges near Churchgate. The next time, he would miss his first class and go all the way to Churchgate. Perhaps that is where he would start a conversation - at Churchgate station.

The train suddenly came to a screeching halt. He was surprised, since fast locals rarely ever stopped except at their scheduled stops. The train had certainly not reached Dadar yet. He recognized that they were somewhere between Mahim and Matunga Road stations. There was a little bit of a commotion behind him, but Amar ignored it.

His eyes closed again, he started imagining how she might look at that very moment. In his mind’s eyes, he could now see her face – the animated eyes; the enchanting smile. She was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a yellow shirt. Amar was smiling now as he imagined this sight. He started rehearsing what he would say to her when he met her again.

Presently, the sun came out of the clouds. When he opened his eyes, it took him some time to adjust to the suddenly bright surroundings. He could see several people walking by the tracks. Just then, he saw somebody that looked very familiar. It was a girl, wearing blue jeans and a yellow shirt, just as he had imagined a few moments earlier.

“Can it really be her,” he thought to himself as he shielded his eyes with his palm and tried hard to focus on the figure walking by the tracks.

As she came closer, it became clear to him that his eyes were not playing tricks with him. He was shocked to see her down by the tracks, but in his surprise, he could not utter a word. She stopped by the side of the compartment he was in and looked at him, wearing her familiar smile of understanding.

She held out a hand for him and he jumped down without any hesitation. He did not know what to say. He did not even ask her what she was doing by the tracks or why she wanted him to join her there. He merely stared at her. Finally, she said something that made very little sense to him.

“So you are number thirty seven. I am number thirty two”, she said to him.

He gawked at her, while she smiled. He was so engrossed in savouring the sound of her voice that he could not say anything.

He looked back at the train to see that the stockbroker was busy on his cell phone, completing his trades. The gamblers’ whoops of joy or disappointment occasionally punctured through the cacophony of the *bhajan mandali* and the loud conversations of the fisherwomen.

He turned around, still bewildered and saw her smiling in her familiar, sympathetic way. She started walking

alongside the train towards its rear. Seeing him still rooted to the spot, she gestured to him to follow and he complied.

There was now a small crowd of people ahead of them by the tracks. The driver and guard of the train were there too. As they passed the crowd, Amar turned to look at what was holding its interest. It was then that he saw *his own lifeless body* lying on the tracks.

The guard was feeling the pulse of the body on the tracks and presently stood up, shaking his head slowly. Amar understood now what she had said to him a few moments earlier.

He turned around to look at her and her eyes again seemed to talk to her.

“Where were you when I lost my balance again?” they seemed to ask.

He smiled at her and said, “I have been meaning to talk to you. Can we go for a walk?”

Her expressive eyes gave him the answer he had been looking for.

“Life is indeed like a fast train,” he thought to himself. “One moment, it is hurtling down towards its destination, carrying its motley group of passengers. The next moment, it has disgorged the crowds of passengers onto the platform. Or sometimes, dropped them off on the tracks somewhere along the way.”

They walked side by side on the tracks. He held out his hand to her and she unhesitatingly responded. A train was approaching them at full speed now, but they walked on, hand in hand, happily engrossed in the conversation he had dreamed about on his last trip on the eight twenty four Churchgate fast.

Glossary

<i>Bhajan</i>	Hindu prayer-song
<i>Bhajan mandali</i>	Group of amateur <i>bhajan</i> singers, formed from amongst regular commuters in the Bombay local trains. Several fast trains, that cover long distances, have regular <i>mandalis</i> that sing <i>bhajans</i> every day.
<i>Bharatanatyam</i>	A traditional dance/ballet form of Southern India that extensively uses hand gestures and eye movements, to enact stories from Hindu mythology.
<i>Lakshman rekha</i>	The line of <i>Lakshman</i> ; in the epic <i>Ramayana</i> , this was a line of protection drawn in the sand around his brother <i>Ram</i> 's wife, <i>Sita</i> by <i>Lakshman</i> , when he had to leave her alone. She would remain protected, as long as she stayed within the confines of this magical line. The term is figuratively used to denote any line of protection, or a line that ought not to be crossed.