

Unscheduled Halt

By Nitasha Kaul

“Unscheduled Halt! It’s an unscheduled halt!”

Before my sleep-fuddled brain could properly understand the meaning of these words that were ringing about the railway compartment loudly, I sneezed. An involuntary force of habit took my palms to my face and I murmured something like “X-Q-zz.” No one heard me.

It was early morning. People were walking up and down the corridor excitedly; the shutters had been pulled open. A child wailed loudly. Exactly the kind of howling it had kept up all night. And now there was no rhythmic caress of the rolling train wheels to drown the fevered pitch of its cry.

I saw a woman leaning out of the window near my berth, the brown outline of a starfish printed on her pink kurta.

“Arpit, why has the train stopped? Has someone pulled the chain?” she asked her husband.

“Maybe. A fool’s idea of fun. We’re not near any station or bungalows so it can’t be because someone wants to get off,” he replied.

“I have heard that nowadays people even make small private cement platforms near the outskirts of cities and bribe the train drivers to stop,” the talkative old man Parasmani added to the conversation.

The Korean couple kept silent.

Upon embarking yesterday night, I had introduced myself to the other passengers in our six-berth compartment. Everyone except Parasmani had avoided asking about my lame wooden leg. Arpit’s wife Shubha had even looked away. I still felt traumatised from the accident; it wasn’t so long ago, last year this time I was young and in perfect health.

Holding the ends of the thin sheet adeptly under my ankle I turned over the other side to try and remain insulated from this commotion. I was a heavy sleeper and even the discomfort of wearing a bra and jeans was not going to interfere with my dreams.

What had I been dreaming of? That was always a good segue to try and get back into sleep. I pressed my eyelids shut and tried to simulate the moments before I had heard about the unscheduled halt. I was back on the island, the name Robert, sandals, crabs, and a café where food is made to order and there is no menu at all. A machine that gives me something I like one out of three times for sure. I feed it all manner of old things – plastic token, a worn out black thread necklace, and it gives me shiny orange stone bracelets, gleaming coins, and much else besides. Yes, I would

feed it something else this time, but what did I want in return? An old burnt out car, green expanses, and shells...

I knew I had successfully sunk back into the quicksand of bizarre dreams when I finally woke up an hour later. It must have been the creeping heat in the coach that finally roused me. I peered at my suitcase and realised that I had forgotten to remove the airline tags in the rush to make the train yesterday after landing in Delhi.

The skies were still dressed twilight when I sat by the window after freshening up.

Most passengers had disembarked and stood around the tracks. The women inside were fanning themselves, children jabbered.

Time was an odd poppy. My leg ached from the strain of travel. Fragments of songs drifted in and out of my head. My room in England was definitely far from my present destination Charakpur. The eucalyptus trees were filtering the shadows of a partly clouded morning, and a tractor went past my vision from left to right. A small boy was being chased by his elder brother who screamed at him in Bengali. I turned to see the number 79 in half-obliterated marking in Hindi and English behind my head, and leaned against the folded-down middle berth.

Everything was screwed. My science studies abroad had not brightened my prospects of getting a job there. Laboratory work had numbed me. I'd chosen the

wrong field and done poorly. With it being election time, populist anti-immigration measures were in fashion, I didn't have much chance of getting a job and I felt foreigner and *foreigner*. After the accident, Robert and I had parted ways, so there wasn't much to stay on for. But what would I do back here in India? Nothing had added up.

I sighed.

A man passed with a metal container and head basket saying "Chaii. Kafee. Chaiii" in a monotone.

"Bhaiya" I hailed him, and asked for a coffee.

He set down his container and handed me a thin plastic cup of the brew. Ten rupees it was. I fumbled in my purse and found eight rupees, or a five hundred rupee note. He grumbled. I didn't want him to go away with the five hundred to find change.

Parasmani held out a ten rupee note. He demurred politely when I gave him the eight with apologies.

"Thank you."

"Not at all," he beneficently smiled.

I felt obliged to make some conversation.

“Are you travelling to visit family?” I ventured small talk.

He seemed encouraged and responded at length. “A friend’s family actually. We were classmates a long time ago. Very Long Time...In the nineteen forties. We went to college together. Then he went back to his state for government service and I stayed on in Delhi. I found out a week ago that he died.”

“I am sorry.”

“No need to be. We all die. He was a part-time astrologer, he must have seen it coming,” the old man chuckled in an instant reversal of mood from contemplative to playful.

“Where do you work?” I asked.

“I used to work as the manager of a small printing press. Recently we were taken over by a multinational company. Changing times, but makes no difference to me now. I am retired. I remember and observe, that’s it.”

Then we were quiet for a few moments while I finished my overly milky coffee and he continued to read what was evidently an old newspaper, for it carried the report of bomb blasts in the North East that had taken place two days before.

“I knew it. This always happens! Oh God!”

This exclamation preceded the entry of pink starfish clad Shubha back into the compartment. Her equally strained and excited husband immediately sat down next to Parasmani on the opposite berth. I moved closer to the window pulling my sheet with me, but she remained standing. The pair looked at each other in exasperation and started talking about the delay, no doubt for our benefit.

“It’s going to be another couple of hours at least. Thankfully it is daytime. Can you imagine if this was night in the wilderness?” Arpit gestured grandly at everything outside. “The driver does not know. There are no answers. We needed to be in her town by noon. For a wedding.” Parasmani promptly folded his paper and nodded sympathetically.

The child started wailing again nearby.

Shubha, looking downcast, stared at the *chappals* on the dusty floor. Then, for the first time, she set her big black kohl-lined eyes on me and said with some emphasis, “Of course we have sent them a message but on such occasions one misses something by not being there. *We are helpless now. What can we do?*”

I blinked. I couldn’t care less if the train were to be stuck here for a long time. Being able to get somewhere would be good. But I felt a much deeper frustration – it was as if my entire life had been halted in perpetuum. Why did the accident have to happen to me? The drunk driver had made sure that I’d never run on my feet again.

“Where are you going?” Shubha addressed me.

“To visit my grandparents.”

Arpit spoke up, “At least the delay is not too bad for you. We just heard from the other coach that there is a shop by a *dharma-kanta* a kilometre down the road. Some of us are planning to go there. We came back to get our money.”

“In fact, the money was with me all the time! We came back to ask if people here needed anything,” Shubha jumped in, looking warily outside the door in case anyone had heard; it wasn’t a good idea to broadcast that the money wasn’t on their person.

“Yes, yes,” Arpit immediately assented, as he eyed at the Korean man on the top berth. Merely once had the Korean couple climbed down to get water for swallowing their anti-malarial tablets. They had headphones on and soundlessly played games on their mobiles.

“I don’t need anything, thank you,” I said.

“If you could get me some cigarettes, I’d be grateful,” said Parasmani. “I didn’t keep enough with me.” He handed them a note and away they went.

Soon after they left, he tsk-tsked, “They are very upset by this delay, unlike us. We are patient travellers.”

“Do you have any children?” I blurted.

“None anymore. I had a son but he and my wife died while on a pilgrimage. Their bus plunged down a valley. It was a disaster with no survivors.”

His eyes had latched onto a flock of birds.

“Oh!”

“Eleven years ago...” he coughed softly.

I reflected aloud, “I think of my troubles – the months in the hospital after the accident, not being able to get a job of my liking – and feel sad, but when I hear what others have gone through, my problems are tiny in comparison.”

“That’s a cliché. Everyone has their problems. There is no metric to compare. Each is unique,” he said with a fly swatting motion of his right palm. I noticed his stained teeth and frail form.

“I didn’t mean to offend. My point was a general one, for example, unhappiness in love isn’t as much a tragedy as starvation.”

“It might be.”

I kept quiet.

He did not impact the tiny oasis of silence in the compartment, and the sounds from outside became louder for it – children’s voices, humming of machinery, a toy clicking, multiple conversations, a dog barking.

I thought of my grandfather living off his savings, getting secretly drunk, and my grandmother trying her best to maintain normalcy. I felt a wave of pity for old age. I was aware that this was somehow the wrong emotion, that I ought to be able to get myself to feel something other than pity for this inevitable fact of the human condition. But I could only manage pity, a curious concern, and then I drew a blank.

As if he had read my mind, Parasmani said, “I’m not that old. I can still remember what it was to sleep as soundly as the young. I remember Youth. I used to get up early and sleep late, never get tired, spend my days with friends talking about our lives and how they were going to turn out. We had dreams. Now, one close friend is dead, and I have no household. What has age taught me? You ask.”

Before I could ask, he went on.

“Age has taught me nothing. It’s strange, you will say. Age doesn’t teach you anything. You make mistakes, learn nothing. And as you get older, anyway, learning anything becomes more difficult. The only thing one gets is some share of a perspective...”

Against my will, I was being pulled into Parasmani’s nostalgia. An as-yet-invisible part of me had surreptitiously jumped over the unstated barriers of a lifetime to dare imagine what I might say in his position, or for fear, *my* position at his age. The sentiment that I will age and die struck me with a clarity that penetrated everything – physical, animal, human – around me – my very vision, to render it all murky, vulgar, obscene. In the face of such banal mortality, the world was an obscene spectacle. Yet had he not asked for cigarettes some time ago? I tried to console myself but often found dark truths ensconced within comfortable sanities.

When I started to pay attention again, he was speaking about the festival of color.

“The colorful fogs of *Holi* – you must have seen the way they obscure one’s view, yet everyone derives pleasure from the madness. People who are capable of being rational let their bodies, their hair and clothes become messy as they play colours with abandonment. The same thing happens over the years of youth. When I was young, I felt that there was a multicoloured fog that obscured my vision. I saw nothing but those heady colours.”

His talk about youth and colourful fogs was making me tired. I never had much energy to be vivacious and I felt especially dissipated then.

“You got six thrice! Now it’s my turn. It IS my turn Rigzin,” a young girl shouted in the next cabin. The plastic coffee cup veered unstably in the breeze.

I wanted to sleep again and forget all about being in the here and now. My gaze strayed over the old man’s head and into the aisle where the voices emanated. The children were probably playing *Ludo* or *Snakes and Ladders*. I saw the little multicoloured squares on the cheap cardboard and tried to visualise how the numbers turned from 18 to 28.

“Are you a believer in God?” he asked me.

“No, not really. I’m not religious. I lost my God after reading Darwin,” I said, hoping it didn’t sound arch.

“I lost my God without Darwin. I used to fancy myself a smart man in my day. I was in control of my life, family and budgets,” he wryly remarked upon the latter. “But I failed to understand my wife’s increasing religiosity. She started going to temples everyday, fasting so often and even trying to persuade me to be a part of her *pujas*.”

“...my wife would be terribly angry sometimes at my intransigence. She blamed my lack of devotion for my son’s failure at everything. I didn’t relent when the time came to accompany her on a pilgrimage. A *swami* had suggested this as the way out for our son’s success. I was adamant and she was a good match. Then, after some arguments, she set out alone.”

“And that was when she had the fatal accident?” I couldn’t help making the connection with his earlier words.

“Not that time. But the next year when she undertook the same journey, that was when the rains made for road trouble and their bus slipped into the valley. Both of them died instantly.”

“That’s terrible,” I stated the obvious.

“She was a mathematics teacher in a school, you know. Her students came to give cards and condolences to me. I felt that it had all happened because of me. It was

foolish to think so. But I blamed myself intensely for a time,” his voice was steady but low.

We’re all meagre, I thought. Had I said it aloud, Parasmani might have called it a cliché. I was here on seat 79 early in the day listening to an old man talk about his life. Day before yesterday, I was weeping alone in a flat across the seas. Distance was a miraculous thing to comprehend. Was time like distance? Did we ascend the enormous mountain of age and have only travellers’ tales to show for the journey?

I could hear the girl and Rigzin as they rolled the die, the dog’s sporadic bark and the infant crying, someone snoring, a transistor playing All India Radio programmes. The sun had risen and a crumpled silver toffee wrapper thrown on the pebbles between the tracks was sparkling like a little diamond. I was headed to meet my grandparents who would be glad to see me after so long, but even if they were not, I wouldn’t know from their welcome. I hadn’t told them of the accident and my leg. Having lived with them for years as a child, I didn’t want to worry them again as an adult if I could help it. In the intervening stretch of time, they must have gathered more white hair and aches.

Every person or place was like a bucket of the irrigation wheel that turned half inside the earth and brought up a pail-full of something. From inside me they came and I felt very loosely connected with myself. I could imagine being in several places at that exact moment – in my flat back there, on this berth here, in my old room at Charakpur, with this man’s wife on that bus, in my own youthful foggy days, and now

standing blindfolded on the red coloured square marked 28 on the uneven cardboard game surface, either a snake or a ladder facing me.

“Death is like a halt too. A sudden stopping that ends everything,” I don’t know what made me say these words. They forced their way into sound.

Before I could add something to dilute the utterance, he said sombrely, “Death is difficult and pointless, a halt can be something that makes you reconsider a journey.”

I can’t say I immediately followed the significance of his words.

“I’m sorry to talk of such depressing things. Let me tell you of an interesting incident,” he offered, then winked conspiratorially, “Since you haven’t got a book, or you might have escaped my chatter!”

I smiled, “what incident?”

“Once I was on a train like this one and it abruptly halted in a similar manner,” he began.

“I don’t have a great sense of humor, in case you’re joking,” I warned.

“It’s true, what I’m about to tell you – I was on a train eleven years ago. It was blistering summer, we were covered in sweat. A large family was travelling in the

compartment. I sat in a corner while they bustled about. There were four or more children and aunts and uncles too, no one noticed me. Only the youngest child, a mere couple of years, was curious enough to stare at me.”

“How long was the halt that time?”

“The train never started again,” he calmly replied.

“Hnnh?”

“The route was abandoned for a while. So there I was – surrounded by people, heat, pickles and *pooris*. I didn’t want to talk to anyone, so I dozed off. Within a few hours, there were people running frantically, women covering heads and praying, a hullabaloo if ever there was one. When I could not bear the detachment I had affected for myself, I asked someone what the fuss was about.”

“‘Monument! The monument!!’ was on everyone’s lips, and they were all heading somewhere, blabbering enthusiastically. I got down and made further enquiries.”

“Had there been a riot?” I asked seriously. Parasmani’s description made me think of the awful instances where disagreements escalate into riots on Indian train journeys.

“Luckily not”, he answered. “It was more startling than that. We were not very far from a small village with a monument said to be quite old. And what had happened belied all imagination – a whole monument had disappeared!!!”

“Disappeared?” I echoed sans conviction.

“That is what I couldn’t believe at first. But after I asked several people who were not hysterical or anything, I realised that they were united in their sense of revelation. A large very old monument, a ruin, had disappeared between that day and the day before.”

“How could that be possible? Did you see the place where it had been?”

“To begin with, I wasn’t too keen on walking the distance in the tortuous heat. But after a time, I couldn’t resist joining the throngs who were heading to the site. The news was spreading like wildfire and some were cycling from afar to get to the site of the disappeared monument. The train tracks were besieged with hordes of people making their way across near a forest grove further up the line. That’s why we had halted,” he explained.

“I had been listless for months yet my step quickened at the anticipation of witnessing this bizarre happening.”

“What kind of monument was it?”

“Nothing special. Apparently it had been a fusty domed structure of stone and steps at the edge of the village forest near the banks of a river. The route there was not navigable by car or bus and the nature of the track made even bicycles difficult to use. As I walked, I was in the company of family men, women, layabouts, workers, farmers. It was a good round rally crowd.”

“Had anyone seen it the day before?”

“The villagers swore that it had been there. A month earlier some official had visited too. It was impossible to dismantle, everyone said. For it to have disappeared was like an act of magic or God’s will.”

“And did you see the place?”

“I did. There was a clearing at the site and it looked as if nothing had ever been moved. The crowd was swelling, people prayed on their hands and knees to the spirit energies and local deities. The tree branches were being girded with knotted colourful strings, holy men were on their way to investigate the miracle and offer their services. Someone was trying to inform the police and the newspapers. Everyone was convinced that they were witnessing a miracle. And I...”

“You did not believe it?”

“When I had boarded that train, I was an atheist on my way to *Sanyas*; I was going to take the easy way out, renounce the world and eventually take my life – this was just after my family had passed away – I had resigned my job, closed my bank account, left the city, and was headed nowhere... Then, the train halted... the monument may never have existed, but I had found something through that incomplete journey – the need to survive the absurdity.”

He was quiet for a while, then continued, “Yes, age hasn’t taught me, encounters have. Architecture is a wonderful instrument for projecting human feelings... Ancient as it is, the will to live is a monument that disappears without trace sometimes, and that’s when sheer belief will carry you through.”

It was convoluted.

We were interrupted by a cold drink seller who stopped by the window and offered *Thums-Up* and *Limca*, holding two wet and perspiring bottles deftly between his fingers as the rest clinked about in the melting ice bucket in his other hand. With sign language and our assistance, the Korean couple bought a *Frooti* drink. Parasmani asked me if I would like anything, I hastily refused and the seller peered inside the cabin once more to make sure that he was not missing out on any hidden customers, before walking away.

Anxious for closure, I prompted Parasmani, “After that halt, you went back and...”

Clearing his throat, he looked at me directly and said, “And lived as before, until my retirement. Reading, writing, exchanging letters with childhood friends, playing solitaire. Occasionally I still travel, as now.” His confident smile had returned; it was a trifle alienating. Was he deliberately being evasive and playing with my curiosity about the disappeared monument, a curiosity that he had calculatedly aroused?

“Youth is...,” he began.

“Excuse me for a moment.” I stood up with precisely learnt gestures. The transformed and imperfect body I now had was teaching me a new language of movement, its corporeal grammar. There were days when it was consoling simply to walk without awkwardness.

I made my way to the coach doorway. Did Parasmani understand that I had deliberately avoided him? I smoothed my crinkled top, pulling it over my jeans, simultaneously manipulating my right ankle to trace circles in the air for better circulation. I inhaled. The smells hit me – urine from the toilets behind me, manure from the fields in front. The monument could not really have disappeared. He was surely talking in riddles. He meant to lecture me without seeming to do so. Even then, it was disturbing to confront...the monument...age...infirmity. What would I have done in his place? Do we need miracles to reconcile us to ourselves when we are deeply broken? Seeking meaning isn't enough. And belief can be blind. Yet...it all is and we are. A weird lure that I ultimately felt powerless to either acknowledge or deny...I laughed gently, derisively.

It was best not to think much, I reminded myself. Climbing down onto the ground, I saw the same cold drink seller returning with a nearly empty bucket from the front of the train.

“Do you know what’s causing the delay?”

He set down his bucket, scratched his head. I realised that I had addressed him in English without thinking about it. I repeated my question in Hindi. A knowing look swam over his face and he sanguinely informed me that someone had thrown himself on a different set of tracks down the line. The metropolis express had to be diverted because of that and our train was being held up to allow the faster trains to make up for their delay. In any case, he had heard from the engine room that we would start soon enough, in an hour more at most.

When I thanked him for the information, he offered to sell his sole remaining bottle of *Limca*. His face fell when I declined and he walked away with rapid strides. Watching his dirty gray oversized trousers and vest recede into the distance, I wished I’d bought the drink from him. His worn out rubber *chappals* were gingerly stepping over the stones.

It was not until he had gone much farther away that I realised he had just told me someone had killed himself on the tracks.

A common enough tale in a vast land criss-crossed with lines and so many frustrations. I thought of the man who had killed himself but could not feel much sentiment for a faceless nameless person. I needed to know a little more about his life, his losses and his circumstances before I would be able to grieve him even as a human body. I had been calloused by so many stories, so many lives -- a total washout.

An unexpected halt had once saved Parasmani's life, now an unexpected halt was the result of someone's death. Some pauses conclude, others allow a new beginning. One could opt for an affirmation.

"Excuse me," the words took me unawares. I turned to see Shubha and Arpit, looking livened by their walk. I followed them back into the compartment. They offered me an open bag of chips. Unhesitatingly, I took a few and smiled at Shubha "Some poor fellow has committed suicide on the tracks," she said.

"I heard that too. But you won't believe what else I've heard," I looked at Parasmani who was holding his pack of cigarettes eagerly. He lit one, taking care to blow the smoke outside the window.

Arpit's eyes repeated Shubha's question, "What?"

They heard the story of the monument. This time Parasmani avoided any mention of the impact on him; he drew no inferences.

When he had finished recounting, Arpit remarked, “For a monument to disappear just like that, something must have deviated.”

“Was it reported in the papers?” Shubha asked.

“The police refused to file a complaint since the prior existence of the monument could not be proven beyond doubt, but the local papers reported the strange happening. For some time, it was the only thing people could talk of, and then it wilted away into a collective of memories.” Parasmani relished the attention.

“So interesting! What did they say? I remember hearing of a village where a class-full of schoolchildren had supposedly fallen asleep all at once, it was something psychological, they said. I’d never heard of the monument before. The speculations, what were they?” Shubha was warming to the tale.

“Well, there was every sort of speculation. Some said it was an act of God which required the interpretation of holy men; it might be an omen that needed deflecting to ensure no ill would befall the nearby village. Some rationalists said it was a special kind of earthquake that swallowed up the structure. Some even said it was brought about by a few women who frequented the area; they were witches whose ill deeds had caused the disappearance. Some wanted to trace this to the official who had visited that site a month previously, although he later denied having done so and nothing came of it. Of course, the monument might never have been there in the first

place. It may have been an instance of collective hysteria. A delusion of monumental proportions...”

At last I said, “I would prefer the story of an unexpected halt to lead to a fake miracle than to a real death.”

Not long afterwards, the train started again. Slowly at first, until it chugged to reach its comforting cadence. I watched the ground go by, the parallax of the crawling trees, and the clouds that looked like billowing linen pillows of eternal rest. The small cushion under my elbow had a large crease in it, a canyon fold in the fabric. I tried to fill it with imaginary seas, then gave up.

One by one, the travellers changed as stations went by. Arpit and Shubha got off first, then the family with Rigzin and his sister, the Korean couple next, then Parasmani.

He waved cheerily to me as the train left the platform.

Then again the fields raced faster and the electricity pylons stood like lonely guardians on my vigil by the window.