



TARUN KANTI MISHRA

THE DESCENT

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As the train slowly pulled out of the station Birupaksha settled comfortably into his seat. He took out the morning paper from his handbag and began reading it.

The compartment was not unbearably crowded since it was a reserved one, but still there were a lot of passengers in it, and they carried with them too many pieces of luggage. The bustle of the crowded platform and the sticky heat inside the compartment had made Sumati listless. A light breeze blew in through the window, reviving her.

Birupaksha, who had been flipping through the newspaper for a few minutes, got up suddenly and set about inspecting his luggage, mumbling anxiously, "Arre, where is our black suitcase?"

It was where it should have been – along with the red suitcase, the iron trunk, two handbags, a water bottle, packets of eatables, and Sumati's vanity bag. Before they had set off for the railway station Birupaksha had counted every item carefully while loading the luggage on to a rickshaw. Then, at the platform, he had laid them out neatly and, when the train arrived, carried each piece into the compartment. Now he returned to his seat after reassuring himself that everything was in order. Nothing had been lost, nothing damaged. He reopened the newspaper and resumed his reading.

Sumati looked out of the window. The train was now crossing a long bridge that had been flung across the dark and deep waters of a river. The breeze felt moist.

Birupaksha lifted his eyes from the centre page of the newspaper to say, "Ja saala, this government won't last." He then proceeded to read out to his wife a news item, the substance of which was that there was a cold war on between the CM's son and the FM's son-in-law and that it was likely to get very "hot." The fate of the government lay in the hands of the minister for excise. But no one could say whose side he was on.

Sumati listened to him in silence. The Madrasi passenger, lying on the berth in front of them, opened his eyes, gave Birupaksha a grim look and then tried to go back to sleep.

Birupaksha concentrated on the newspaper once more.

Sumati wanted to go to the toilet. But the very thought of the stench of train toilets made her decide to wait. Rajgangpur was eight hours by train from Bhadrak. Even before boarding the train she had decided that she would not visit the toilet unless she absolutely had to and had taken the precaution of drinking only a small quantity of water.

Birupaksha said, "Where have you put the water bottle? I want some water." He drank noisily, straight from the bottle, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down like a strange animal. To Sumati the sight was repulsive. Birupaksha wiped his wet lips, his moustache, and his face with his left hand and belched loudly. "Do you want some?" he turned to ask Sumati.

She shook her head.

That morning, at the railway station, Birupaksha had had a bitter quarrel with the rickshawala, who had asked for three rupees more for the luggage. Birupaksha was firm that he would not pay a paisa more than the fare agreed upon. But he had to yield in the end because the train was about to arrive. Paying an extra two rupees to the rickshawala, he had hurled a word of filthy abuse which had stunned Sumati. How easily obscenities escaped from his lips! Only two days ago, as he had made a futile attempt to kill a mosquito buzzing inside his mosquito net, he had shouted a very ugly expression. Sumati had felt that the offensive words had been meant for her. Or else, how could a man say such things in the presence of a woman he had been married to for just three weeks!

Three weeks. Twenty one days. To Sumati they seemed to be closer to three eons. Oppressive. Like eternity.

"The train is running an hour and fifteen minutes late. It will be seven by the time we reach Rajgangpur," Birupaksha said absentmindedly, looking at his wrist watch. Then he shifted his gaze to the fan overhead that hardly seemed to move, and yawned. He had never liked the watch. What he had really wanted at the time of his marriage was a Timex with a gold chain, but he had

been given an ordinary HMT. He was not pleased with anything he had received – the television set, the gold rings, even the suit piece. Although he never clearly said so, his displeasure was no secret to Sumati.

J*agabandhu he gosain*. Suddenly a bhajan was heard from a corner of the carriage. The voice that sang it was soft and broken. Must be a young boy, twelve, thirteen years old, singing for alms. "Oh, they make life hell even in these reserved compartments," a passenger shouted angrily from the other end. The Madrasi, sleeping on the berth opposite them, turned on his side, appearing to be more irritated with the passenger who had complained than with the beggar boy. Birupaksha lifted his gaze from the newspaper, looked all over the compartment, then out of the window, at the monotonous earth spread under a grey sky. Lazily, he got up, stretching himself. Sumati knew he was going to the toilet.

The beggar boy was in their cubicle now, still singing. It was not easy to make out his age from his thin, weak body. An old shirt and torn shorts could not entirely conceal a life of hunger and deprivation. Sumati saw the boy groping his way forward. He was blind. As he made his way, his head bumped against the sharp edge of a berth. Then he tripped over a large box. Finally he stumbled to Sumati's berth after colliding with a big fat man. Standing very close to her, he tried to recover his balance and resumed his song, *Kaalīa saante ho*. But the song went out of tune halfway through, and he stopped. Drawing a deep breath, he turned towards Sumati. "Ma, take pity on your poor son. Give me a paisa, please."

Sumati was confounded. How did this boy know she was a woman? What mysterious sight guided him? The boy pleaded again, "Ma santani, may Bhagwan bless you with seven sons and seven daughters. Have pity on this blind boy. Give me a paisa, ma."

On his outstretched hand lay a few ten paise coins and a four anna coin.

The compartment was full of passengers, but no one seemed to pay any heed to the boy. Some lay on the upper berths, sprawled in sleep, some chatted with fellow travellers, while some stared out of the window, deep in thought. Sumati asked the boy, in a low whisper, "If you are really blind, how do you know I am a woman?"

Even before he could say anything, Birupaksha returned from the bathroom, wiping his face with a handkerchief. Seeing the beggar boy near Sumati, he said sharply, "You, boy. Get lost."

The boy moved away without saying anything.

The train, which had been running breathlessly for so long, now let out a whistle, which sounded like a cry of despair. Birupaksha looked at his watch, muttering, "We have reached Balasore. The train stops here for seven minutes."

Passengers who had been fast asleep, like babies cradled in the arms of eternity, now stirred. Others gathered their luggage and looked out, impatient for the train to stop. And at last, sighing heavily and heaving like a wounded reptile, the train slithered into the station and stopped, supporting itself against the platform. A few people got off hurriedly, as if escaping some lurking danger.

The platform was full of men and women, shouting, pushing each other, running about urgently. Birupaksha got up from his seat and looked out. He said, "I need a packet of cigarettes. Should I get you a Pepsi?" Sumati shook her head. But she kept her eyes fixed on him until he was lost in the press of people on the platform. There was something in his gait which singled him out in a crowd. The way he carried himself suggested a certain contempt for the world around him. Yet it did not indicate either self-confidence or self-respect. It was as if he meant to say, It does not matter whether the world exists or not, whether I do or not.

Just as Birupaksha vanished from the corner of her eyes, the blind boy came up to Sumati again. "Ma, give me a paisa, you will earn punya."

"You are not blind."

The boy had not expected such a response from the dark sunless universe enveloping him. He gaped in astonishment.

"If you are blind, how do you know I am a woman?" Sumati again demanded.

A strange smile spread on the boy's wide open mouth. He bared yellow teeth and said, "That is simple. Every human being smells different. Women have a special fragrance."

"Ai boy. Move! Give way." It was the big fat man he had collided with a little while ago. He carried two packets containing snacks and curry. He was followed by two new passengers. Finding the coach crowded, they frowned in irritation.

The boy moved away and melted into the crowd.

Women have a special fragrance! The boy had said this with a smile. Was it true? If it was, why did Birupaksha never say so to her, even after spending twenty one nights and days with her? Never had his touch conveyed to her an awareness of this, or even a sense of respect. All along he had seen her as nothing more than a necessary article like a toothbrush, used once and forgotten for the rest of the day. What pleasure could one expect from a life spent with a man like this, who crushed her body under his weight night after night? Twenty one days ago he had been a total stranger. He remained a stranger to her even now. An unknown town called Rajgangpur, a cramped rented house in one of its narrow lanes - this would be her prison day after day and night after night. Was life this worthless, this terrible?

After the lapse of seven neverending minutes the train began slowly and reluctantly to pull out of the station, as if nothing lay beyond, and the platform marked the end of the world.

As the train started to move, passengers scrambled into the carriages. Everyone, but Birupaksha, was back. The platform and the crowd on the other side of the window began to recede like an

unpleasant memory. Birupaksha had perhaps climbed into another compartment in the rush and would get into his own when convenient.

The train picked up speed, then suddenly it slowed down. The screeching sound of the brakes was heard and the carriages shivered lightly.

"What happened?" A few passengers inquired loudly. "Why did the train stop?" But no one knew the answer.

The platform had been left behind. Now, on one side could be seen the signal post. On the other was the workers' basti and a filthy pond where lotuses bloomed.

Why had the train stopped here?

A few passengers, overcome by curiosity, got down and looked around.

A man came running in with the news. "An accident! A man got caught under the wheels."

"Under the wheels! How?"

Pieces of information were brought in one after another. First someone came and said that it was a woman who had slipped and fallen. Another said, It is true that there is a body on the track, but it is not a woman's. It is a man's body. A barrage of questions followed. What did the man look like? How old was he? Has the doctor come? Where is the police?

A clearer picture emerged only after all the pieces of information had been put together. A young man of about twenty five had fallen off the train and had been cut into two. He was wearing a white half-shirt and brown trousers. The cigarette he held in his hands was still burning.

White shirt and brown trousers? A lighted cigarette in his hand? Sumati saw Birupaksha rise before her. The right age, the right clothes. Even the cigarette! But, strange! Sumati's heart did not race. Her eyes did not betray any restlessness or anxiety. Her lips did not at all quiver. It seemed as if nothing terrible had taken place. What did the young man called Birupaksha mean to her? Before the last purnima he had been a complete stranger. He was

dead now. So what? Could Sumati not carry on as before? Just as she had done all these twenty one years! It's all right. This was destined to happen, she told herself. She would not go to Rajgangpur now. She would return to Bhadrak, and from there she would go to Binjharpur, where her parents lived. There she would find herself among familiar faces, familiar sorrows and joys, and the days and nights she knew so intimately.

Sumati shut her eyes and leaned against her seat and tried to ignore the excitement, the commotion that swirled around her. She had no idea how long she sat there.

The train began to move slowly. People came back into the compartment to their seats.

"It was a ghastly sight! Awful. Did you hear what I said, Sumati? One couldn't bear to look at it."

Sumati heard the familiar voice very close to her.

She did not open her eyes.

"That beggar boy who was annoying you was really blind. As soon as the train started moving, he jumped down thoughtlessly. Naturally, there was no platform there and he fell under the wheels face down. What a terrible death!"

Birupaksha sat down beside Sumati. The acrid smell of cigarette that came from his mouth permeated her nerve cells like a deadly poison.

Suddenly a sob swept over Sumati like a storm, a flash flood. It would be difficult to say whether it was grief or relief that overwhelmed her. She wept bitterly, swallowing her sobs, her head resting on Birupaksha's shoulders.

Birupaksha laid a hand on Sumati's back. In the other he held a burning cigarette.