

Inflection

I

He had just started to get into the flow. His heels had been making steady thudding contact with the bitumen for some time now. It took a while for all systems to reconcile themselves to the fact that this was a long run. Not like a short clumsy shuffling sprint to catch a bus. There was a point of transition, a cusp, at which the protests of his joints started to get muted and an inertial force took over. He was quite slow – it took him an hour to do nine kilometres – but that was OK by him.

He had gotten up early to run along the canal- side track which started near Jervois Road. There were a few others on the track, but it wasn't crowded yet. He loved it when the flow happened. It made it all worth it: the suddenness of waking, the groping for the phone while it blared the bugler alarm tone, the pain in his left ankle when he started – everything. Not thinking about anything is incredibly difficult. But when he was in the flow, he often realized that he had spent time in a reverie. He could be staring at his feet plodding away or

the Singaporean pastiche of greens, concrete and steel which flowed past. He loved it when the things to his right and left organized themselves into streaming layers: one layer moving in the opposite direction, the next one moving with him, and then the next one opposite, and so on.

It reminded him of the time in his childhood in India when he had sat next to train windows. The journey from where his parents worked to their hometown took twenty eight hours. He loved the journeys, he looked forward to them and he remembered them fondly. But he would often wake up from dreams in which he got lost on a train.

His mother later told him that there was a saying that the water changed every *kos*, and the language every twenty *koses*. One *kos* is a bit more than three kilometres. Well, the scenery from the train window didn't seem to change at all at any regular distance. But by the time the journey ended, they were in a completely different world. There were urban blots before and after the big stations of course – then, as now, most of the towns were ugly. But for most of the journey, the landscape was an irregular but neat matrix of fields with mud boundaries and trees in between. As the train hurtled forward, the landscape organized itself into those blurred streams moving in opposite directions. The greens turned less lush and the colour of the mud changed from reddish to yellowish as they traveled further up North West. He imagined musical patterns in the chugging of the engine. When they crossed the large bridges the rhythm and melody changed abruptly.

There was time to kill, and he killed a lot of time just looking out of the window. It was almost as good as reading. They often asked him what he was thinking about. He would mumble something by way of an answer, but of course he had forgotten whatever it was, if there was anything.

When you grow up, you need to do things when you're not sleeping. You can't do nothing for too long. You start to bend the rules to count things like watching TV as something. His Indian colleagues considered watching cricket while drinking beer the supreme sporting activity. The Singaporeans watched the EPL^[1] instead of cricket.

His eyes latched on to an attractive female butt ahead of him. It happened without premeditation. They were roving, they paused and then traced their way back a bit. Her curves were just right. If they had been more pronounced, he probably wouldn't have found them as sexy. There was a tipping point here, he thought to himself.

She wore just a white top which left most of her long shapely spotless legs uncovered. They were taut and increased her allure. Her shoulder-length hair was black, and it weaved a sinuous path as she walked. It contrasted with the tan of her neck and the blazing white of her top. He could just about see the outline of her panties where they created small but discernible ripples in the smooth surface of the top when her haunches rubbed against it. Were they black? Ooh, that would be too much. Or maybe he was imagining it. He strained harder. He was drawing closer anyway. He concentrated again: were they really black?

Her eyes were. And they were blazing.

How the hell did she get to know? Women had this mysterious sense which told them. She had the look of scorn and contempt which came naturally at a time like this. He lowered his gaze, hung his head in mock apology and overtook her. He would have liked to say: 'Hey, I'm desperate and single, so what if I was staring. I didn't burn a hole in there.' He didn't say it, of course, but they had communicated a fair bit in that instant when their gazes met. He sensed that she only felt a resigned kind of mild disgust after that. He didn't stop to check.

A woman friend had told him once how it felt to be leched at. He understood that point of view as well. He could say this much for himself: he was quite understanding.

II

He had missed the company bus and was on his way home from office, a little later than usual. At seven in the evening on a weekday, Tiong Bahru MRT^[2] station is very crowded in a Singaporean kind of way. Crowded, but still orderly. When he got off the train, he was in a hurry to get to the bus stop. It was difficult to overtake people. The only way was to weave through the crowd. That meant walking twice the distance he would otherwise have walked, but he still did it.

The walk through the crowd brought back memories from his student days, of his trips from Kanjur Marg station on the Central Railway line in Mumbai. It was strange, because there wasn't much in common between the two stations. One was very much in the first world, the other firmly in the third. Of course no one calls it third world now. The politically correct classification is emerging markets. Emerging from the local trains and the stations on the Central Line was very straightforward. All you had to do was not resist the collective push of the crowd. You didn't need to think too much until you had to choose a direction. The thing was, back there, everyone was in a hurry. If you walked too slowly, you would at least get jabbed in the back.

But in that crowd, you could still ask the next guy for directions and get them. Here it had only happened to him once. He was walking on the kerb along Orchard Boulevard,

when a driver lowered his window and looked at him hesitantly. The woman next to him in the car sat with a map open, and she was shaking her head as she pored at it.

‘Are you from here?’ the driver asked him.

Vow, that’s a difficult question to answer, he thought. It was strange. If someone asked him where he was from, he would have the answer pat. ‘Umm, if you tell me where you want to go maybe I can help you?’ he suggested without being the least sarcastic.

The driver still looked embarrassed. ‘Orchard Plaza hotel?’

‘No, I don’t know that one.’

The driver shrugged, and drove off as the light turned green.

Back there crowd had a life, an energy, of its own. Every crowd has a character of its own which is made up of facets like purpose, place and time. The people in that crowd changed, but the crowd didn’t.

It was a layered crowd. When their scholarship money came in, he and his friends would travel in a first class compartment. There was no aircon and it was equally muggy. If anything, the crowd was even more crushing. But they smelt deodorant instead of sweaty armpits. Towards the end of the month, if they still wanted to go to town, they had to travel second class.

Here in Tiong Bahru he negotiated the crowd carefully as usual, crossing from one side of the passage to another. There were a few others like him, but not too many.

She was plumb in the way as he turned a corner, and hemmed in on both sides by the currents of people who moved on in steady state. She was short and plump, and wore a grey dress. Her hair was cut short and it was white in patches. Her skin had been ravaged by the years. It was irritating, being forced to stop.

‘Help a blind woman, Sir?’ She held tissues in her left hand and a cane in her right. She had a cloth bag slung on her right shoulder. The tissues were a brand he hadn’t seen before. Sakura Twin Baby.

Her eyes were grey and lifeless. She asked the question in the manner of a person who did not expect a reply.

He felt ashamed.

‘How much?’ He asked

‘One dollar’, she said.

‘How many for one dollar?’ he asked – he didn’t know.

‘Three. How many you want?’ She asked a bit sullenly.

‘I’ll take three,’ he said, and gave her ten dollars. He felt another pang when he realized she thought he wanted to haggle.

She felt the note, and reached for a wallet in her bag. She put the note inside and started to count out one- dollar coins.

‘That’s all right,’ he said, ‘I don’t want the change. Have a good evening.’

‘Thank you Sir!’ She said. He looked into her eyes. They were still expressionless. But she looked beautiful when she beamed. The change from the stoic look she had had happened so fast it took him by surprise. It made him feel good.

‘You’re welcome. Bye,’ he said, starting to move away and ease himself back into the throng.

‘God bless you, Sir’ she said, a little louder as she realized he was going. She was still smiling.

He wanted to reach out and squeeze her shoulder, and say, God knows all about me. What are the chances he'll bless me? Why don't you bless me instead? Instead he just said, 'Bye bye, take care.'

For some time, he had this urge to go back, hug her and talk to her. But he walked on, along with the crowd now.

III

There are cusps, points of transition, which we choose to ignore every day. If you look carefully just after sunset, the sky turns a deep blue before it turns black. It happens in every part of the world when it's not cloudy. We don't stop to watch.

He lay in bed thinking about these cusps, and his thoughts strayed to the cold winter mornings of Delhi. He had spent many winters there. Things had changed now, but there was a time when they used to bathe with buckets of hot water from the geyser. Then, as now, the houses were not heated. In that ball-freezing cold, he would strip and stand naked for a while. It would be a few seconds before he felt the ecstasy of the hot water on him. If you have been there, done that, do you know how you brought yourself to strip, when a second before you had been shivering in three layers of clothing? There was the anticipation of the hot water, perhaps. But there was still a transition. We just did it without thinking. He had tried talking about it to two friends when they were drinking once. Those guys had rolled their eyes and he quickly changed the topic.

Falling asleep is a transition. When you're done with the day, and when you try to sleep, sleep doesn't come to you exactly when you want it to. It's not easy, but if you try you

can catch yourself falling asleep. There's a moment when you feel... lighter, and you know this is it. You'll be asleep *now*. If you don't wake up in between – which gets rarer but still happens once in a while as you grow older – it will be morning the next thing you know. Sometimes that moment of lightness comes without trying at all, especially when you are tired – and not too happy or unhappy. We don't stop to notice that moment, we just run past it. Most often we lie awake waiting for it for a long time.

This was one of those nights. He didn't want to read any more, he had switched off the light, he was tired and it was the perfect moment to fall asleep. Of course sleep kept him waiting.

He turned to one side and thought about the two women he had crossed that day. Maybe they were they both thinking about him. Same person, different views. It made him wonder – did he know himself?

Notes

[1] English Premier (Soccer) League

[2] Mass Rapid Transit, the Singapore metro