

Dinesh in Switzerland

*Dinesh in Switzerland*

Dinesh had never believed in love. Love meant Bollywood actors in Switzerland running around trees in open fields and verdant valleys with mountains in the backdrop. The parents of the wild-eyed lovers always intervened, and said an amplified “NO” to their shenanigans. Yet dance they did, around trees on leafy-green hills, in a light drizzle. To wet the heroine’s blouse.

He made his way past the ladies section, up front, wondering if one of the ladies in a black *burqua* was Nafida. He imagined her peering through her veil and looking, with deep, deep love into his eyes.

Dinesh ambled his way through the aisle between the seats of the green 189M Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation bus. He made his way knocking his metal ticket holder against the sour-smelling, grimy metal rail intoning a sacred chant, like a Brahmin at a fire, his litany, his liturgy: “Ticket, Ticket, Ticket”. A triplet of Tickets. When the bus stopped, he would let out the authoritative “Right, Right, Right” to let the driver know that people had got off, and that the bus could move on. A triplet of Rights.

He was a conductor. Not the kind that leads orchestras, but the kind that maintained the bureaucracy of the bus, the handing out of tickets, the liturgy, the making sure the menfolk stayed in the back away from the Ladies’ Section up front and didn’t whistle at the ladies or touch them in an ungentlemanly manner.

He knew Nafida would not be on the bus anyway. She was either in her pink *salwar-kameez* dress, he imagined, trying to give a bath to her little brothers and sisters, who ran naked around the water pump. Or she would be at the St. Ann’s College where he knew she

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took Home Economics. *Like one needed a degree to become a good decent, modest housewife.*

The 189M bus ploughed between Mehdiapatnam in Hyderabad, and Secunderabad Station. Hyderabad and Secunderabad were twin cities, sisters grown into the old age of some 400 plus years. The sisters were finicky and fussy, much like the traffic, and in their old age farted petrol fumes on rather rickety legs. Since Mehdiapatnam to the Station no longer took 30 min, but 1½ hours, Dinesh usually had time to look up at the billboards. Gaudy, chintzy, selling love and devotion to consumerism. Cell phones, computers, more fucking cars, the New Indian Pantheon — Samsung, Hewlett-Packard and Honda — the new Trinity, the new Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva. Om Gam Mercedes-Benz Namaha. Pray to Ganesha three million times to get rid of the obstacles on the road. The people on the road were weird phantoms in their helmets and hermetic cars. People gave you dirty looks as they peered out of autos and spat red betelnut juice. Vicious words were bandied around, finer points of driving discussed.

The bus went past Chintal *Basti* slum where Nafida lived. It was mainly a Muslim *basti*. It was a *basti* full of squat, square houses with onceuponatime white-washed walls. There was a water pump for all their watering needs. The pump was surrounded by a dirty pool that bred mosquitoes. There was a tangle of electricity wires and telephone lines, mostly pilfered, on wooden poles taller than the houses. Most houses had tin roofs and corrugated iron grills on the doors, painted in pastel shades of light blue and green, rusting at their bottom edges.

Then the bus would swivel past the world-famous Jubilee Hills mosque, a giant green and white mosque with magnificent turrets and domes. The mosque was surrounded by a white wall trimmed with green on the top. Proverbs from the Koran in curliqued Urdu adorned the wall.

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Dinesh had gone to the mosque, unbeknown to his parents, who would have sent him to an early funeral pyre if they knew, and had seen Nafida there for the first time.

As Ali, Dinesh's best *dost*, was preparing to go into the mosque, for the special Friday *jumma* prayer, Dinesh had asked him, in his circular manner, with curiosity, although he rarely did things on a whim, and without careful deliberation :

“Can I come too?”

“Arrey Dinesh, by the way, have you ever been inside a mosque?” asked Ali, the man who ran the cigarette and *paan* stall. It was called “Famous Cigarette and *Paan* Stall.”

“No *baap*, never. I would like to pray with you. Can I borrow a *topi*?”

Dinesh wasn't religious, not even a good Hindu.

Ali on the other hand, was what one would call a “good Muslim”, not fanatical just devout. One might say that he had to fit the part of a “good Muslim” just because he worked just outside the mosque, but that wouldn't be true, as a young boy he had, with some seriousness, attended a *madrassa*, or Koran school.

Ali gave Dinesh some *attar* perfume to put on as well, and the *topi* fit snugly on Dinesh's curly head. His scraggly beard fit the part.

When the others folded their arms Dinesh did so and when they prostrated he followed suit. He wished he knew what the words meant. Indeed he wished all Hindus knew what the words meant. The mullah intoned the prayers in a voice that could have blown across the deserts of Arabia.

When he had finished the prayers he walked out to the tap to have a gulp of water. Then he slowly put on his sandals, decorated and ornate Kolhapuri sandals – he had bought them cheaply at the stand outside Secunderabad Station – one foot at a time, and made his way to where his limegreen Bajaj Chetak scooter was parked. He stood a minute on the mosque steps and waited for the crowd to thin.

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Nafida was there with the other women waiting for the menfolk. She was in a pink *salwar-kameez* unlike most of the other women who were in black *burqua*. She stood out as Dinesh scanned the horizon (it was just before where the flat plateau gave way to the hills, the hills where the rich lived).

Ali touched him on the shoulder as he went past and walked up to the girl, no a woman, a real lady, in the pink *salwar-kameez*. She was fair-skinned, like she was a user of fairness creams – no, it was a natural fairness, with her light eyes. Dinesh on the other hand was dark-skinned and burly. Not much of a Bollywood hero. More like a comedian. Ali ushered him over. Dinesh's feet seemed to have taken root and his tongue seemed too big in his mouth, but he told himself not to be silly and walked over. Ali introduced Nafida as his sister. Dinesh tried to smile, but he was shy like a bride on her wedding night. Nafida looked at him benevolently it seemed, like a Goddess.

He mumbled apologetically about needing to buy chicken from the butcher and turned down their offer to come and have *chai* at their house.

Quickly, trying not to show any signs of panic, he looped a leg over the seat and zoomed a way in an arc almost crashing into a guy on a motorbike who said “*Arrey, madarchod*” rather harshly.

Dinesh didn't want a scene so he offered a demure “Sorry, boss” and putt-putted away.

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Dinesh's sister, Rekha, got through her exams and was keen on going to college, something he himself had never been able to do. At a young age he wanted to be a doctor because he thought he was dutifully compassionate, so-sensitive-he-could-cry-at-whim, but youthful dreams die and new goals spring up pragmatically. So, he became a bus conductor.

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There had only been his father's salary, which was paltry because he was only a bank teller, and his own income. His mother, who needed weekly massages for her nagging arthritis, couldn't work anymore. He was going to tell his sister that she needed to find work, and that he was thinking of working extra hours, when she told him she wanted to go to St Ann's.

*Wasn't that where Nafida went?*

His father had said, "Rekha, you need to get some work."

But Dinesh swiveled in his chair and intervened, miraculously it would seem for Rekha, and told his father respectfully: "I think she needs to improve her life, and herself, besides it will decrease the dowry and increase her marriageability if she went to college."

Dinesh's father looked at him from under shaggy befuddled eyebrows through thick bifocals, eyes that seemed to see into his very soul. Dinesh almost jumped in panic.

"Please, Please, Please," pleaded Rekha. A triplet of Pleases.

Then the furrows on his father's forehead relaxed and magically, unbelievably he said: "Okay" and went back to reading his newspaper. The headlines blared: "Communal riots break out in Mumbai over Ram Temple issue."

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One Wednesday, when he went to pick up Rekha from her first class, he saw Nafida. She was walking down steps in the direction of the gate. Rather elegantly. *She could change my life*, he thought. *I could better myself for her.*

He caught himself staring, so immediately he turned to the watchman and asked for a light. Smoking would make him look cool. *No no no...* that would make him look like a rowdy. So he said to the watchman so that it would seem to an overhearing Nafida that it was intelligent conversation:

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“What about these elections coming up?”

The watchman said something about the BJP, the Hindu Nationalist Party, and Dinesh panicked. He turned away and tried to think of something that wasn't so intolerant to Muslims.

So he tried in a senatorial voice to say something about the Congress Party being the only party for him because—here he smiled benignly--they believed in “Unity in Diversity”. Glancing in Nafida's direction, he showed-off a knowing smile, but she was conversing with a classmate.

*Damnit.*

Then a youth, obviously a miscreant and a rowdy-sheeter, one of those red-wallahs said something about both parties being ruling class shits, and two more rowdy-sheeters joined in one of them bellowing about how all of them were wrong as all politicians were corrupt.

While Dinesh tried to think of how to steer away from the present locus of conversation, Nafida was watching from under a cool shady tree, so he did the next best thing he thought he could do and lit a cigarette after all...

Then one of the rowdy-sheeters said: “Oye, you're smoking and you talk big-big about politcs and all *rey*, sister-fucker!”

At which Dinesh struggling to maintain decorum, searched frantically for Rekha trying not to look at Nafida who was *now* watching the gathering ruckus.

Then somebody who seemed to be a professor walked up and said something about how “This is a girls' college” and “All of you ruffians clear out” in English.

The big rowdy-sheeter turned to him and with a sneer said to the prof-type person: “*Orey*, old man, if it's a girl's college what are you doing here?”

There were callous, disrespectful sniggers, uncalled-for, regarding one so illustrious.

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Another one, trying to maintain the decorum of the august assembly, said: “Old man, what do you think of the elections?”

The prof ignored the second question, turned to the first questioner and said:

“I am a professor here and if you don’t clear out I’ll call the police.”

“Oye, just because you speak English you think you’re a big man?”

Then the rowdy made as if to attack him, while his goons held him back theatrically.

This changed the whole scene.

The professor, an old pudgy man, pulled up his shirt-sleeves and made as if to fight. Dinesh played the inevitable role of pacifier and stood in between. It would seem like he was brave to Nafida.

The rowdy-sheeter immediately turned to him and said in Telugu: “What does this old man think of himself? Bastard!” and spat on the ground.

Dinesh, so as to not to come off as Hindu, tried replying in Urdu. It didn’t work. But he could see that Nafida had given up watching anyway.

They all started to walk away anyway as the watchman waved his stick about pretending he had been the stabilizing factor.

Like Gandhi or something.

A Gandhi with a stick.

Marching to gather salt.

The watchman turned to Dinesh and attempted to say something heroic but Dinesh had seen Rekha coming toward him and moved towards her.

The next morning, Dinesh went on his morning walk. He had woken, excited, to the sound of birds chirping, in the twilight before dawn, before morning blustered in. He was a Scientist, a Doctor-that-he-never-would-be. He loved examining the boundaries of things. The boundary

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between sleep and wakefulness. Or the boundary between wakefulness and sleep. He would lie there examining the blurry, warm, dreamy edges.

Just like he would watch cricket games from the boundary.

It was on the cool side and dewy, and the Earth breathed easily. He did his usual lap around the cricket *maidan*, which at this time of the morning, 5 am, was devoid of the usual cricket playing brats. They all thought they were Kapil Dev. He had once thought the same of himself, that he would play for India. He barely watched cricket anymore except India vs Pakistan. He would have to stop that. Because wasn't it about the difference between being Muslim and being Hindu?

It was said that in Chintal Basti, Nafida's neighborhood, they celebrated Pakistani victories.

He heard the morning prayer call from the mosque and as he passed a house he heard the Suprabatham, the call to awaken Lord Venkateswara from his sleep. *Which God would wake up sooner? Hurry!*

It was still dark out. He started to run. He ran hard. He stopped to catch his breath. Then with his lungs blazing he started to run again. He was Kapil Dev running up to bowl to Javed Miandad. He collapsed on a bench.

*I could be on this very bench holding hands with Nafida. I could be with her at a cinema hall. I could take her out to ice cream. I could ask her to marry me.*

*Is it our karma that I was born Hindu and that she was born Muslim? Or was it my destiny to be a hero to her heroine and rend asunder the unjust things that came between True Love.*

Tomorrow after work he would go to the cigarette stall and get Ali to take him home for *chai*.



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As the green bus went past the mosque he was dying. Normally his thoughts would be filled with hopes for being promoted to one of those luxury Metro liners. Or he would be chatting about politics to an accountant. Or he would revel in the position of being the Keeper of Order and Morality on the bus.

Today at the back was an obviously poor man in *lungi* and cut-*banian*. Sitting next to him was a man in a nice blue shirt. The man, no he wasn't that rich, he would be on a Metro-Liner, was pointing out the sights. There is Krishna Oberoi Hotel. Five star. And there, the City Central Mall. And this Mall. And that Mall. Randomly. (It was true some, but only some, Hyderabadis were getting fat off Infotech.) But Dinesh looked on as if from a distance. He was detached. When the man pointed out the Jubilee Hills mosque, Dinesh felt a tinge of unrequited love and sighed.

The world held no charm for him.

He was staring out the window as the bus pulled away from a stop where two young men got on. He saw them footboarding. Normally he would do nothing about it, even though it was against the law, but today he was full of love's ardent passion, so he turned to them and gave a stare to let them know. One of youths started to hang out the door with only one hand on the rail. *Brazen bastard.*

Dinesh took a swing at him with the ticketholder.

The boy flinched. The rod was grimy from a mixture of sweat and damp petrol fumes. And, as the boy reached up to block Dinesh's swing, the hand on the rod slipped and he fell.

The bus had not been going fast but this did not prevent the boy from having a bad fall. His knee was bloody and an arm was bent.

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Dinesh was horrified. A crowd formed and when it was ascertained that Dinesh had been the culprit they gathered to charge him. Dinesh ran. Like Kapil Dev. Someone threw a rock at him. It hit Dinesh square in the back. He fell. Then they punched and kicked him.

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Dinesh returned home in a dour mood. His stomach hurt and he had bruises on his legs, and on his back where the rock had hit.

He really wished Nafida was his wife and that he could be taken in her arms. He took a Brufen and really wished he drank. His father didn't and strictly forbade it.

There was no point going to the police. They were without connections or one resorting to bribery, ineffectual. He had been picked up by the laborer and the nice blue shirt man and his driver who had shooed away the crowd, but by then they had been satiated with a good kicking. Two of them slapped their palms in celebration.

Rekha, mother and father were suitably sympathetic.

Ali that evening offered a free cigarette pack and an invitation for pity *chai*.

"Arrey, hero, posh work you did today, kicking that sister-fucker off the footboard!" Ali said.

Dinesh didn't even look at him.

"Like some macho wrestler-hero."

Dinesh forgot all about his aches and pains and looked forward to meeting Ali's father, mother, brothers and sisters and, of course, Nafida. Despite the bruises and the sullen mood he had been in, the promise of meeting Nafida couldn't be sweeter.

He roused himself and drove his scooter with élan. He zipped through the streets, angling between autorickshaws and bicyclists. He pumped his fists at the pedestrians like he

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had just won Wimbledon, and triumphed in beating red lights. He was master of the road, like his father owned it.

*Nafida, Nafida!*

At the petrol station Ali caught up in his much speedier sports motorbike.

“*Kya yaar,*” he asked, “you seem to be over the kicking you got?”

Dinesh didn’t even think twice. “Hee hee hee,” he laughed. “Bring those rowdies here to me, I’ll knock every one of them down”. *Ha, I’ll drive like a mad fellow, because today I meet Nafida.*

They got to the little house in the basti. It was a squat, square house painted anoncommittal beige. The doorway was wooden and brown in color. He parked his scooter, put his arm around Ali’s shoulder and walked tall.

*Nafida Nafida here I am.*

Ali’s mother opened the door.

“*Asalaam Aleikum, Auntyji*” he bellowed.

He barely heard the salaams back because just then Nafida walked into the room. He tried to look at Uncleji but he was completely diverted.

It was a comfortable room with cane chairs with blankets on the backs and a fine Persian carpet on the floor. The only thing on the wall was a picture of the *Kaaba* stone in Mecca around which the frozen-still devout circumambulated, with Arabic script gently curling around the turrets of the mosque that the stone was housed in.

*Nafida will you sit with me do you love me can I marry you.*

She smiled and he thought he would get on the coffee table and dance.

A little *bachcha* in his underwear ran between them.

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Then chai was offered. As he leaned forward with one hand on his knee and the other holding the proffered Gold Flake cigarette, his favorite brand, one pinky in the air, and one eye on Nafida, he surveyed his domain.

*Aha, I have found love. I have it like a diamond in my palm.*

Dinner was served. Piles and piles of *naan*-bread came in and there was lamb and chicken and *biryani*, better than “PA ADISE”, better than Paradise itself and all with the One.

The One he knew was the One. And together the two of them dancing in Switzerland, around the trees, on the mountain slopes. In a light drizzle.

She smiled at him and asked if he wanted more.

*Ha! I want it all.*

Then there were sweets. Dinesh, still gorging on the chicken, put some in his mouth.

*Ah my sweet, we finally meet*, he thought in his best James Bond impression.

He was ever the poet, he was Amitabh Bachchan, hero, lover and winner of them all.

*O Nafida, shall we drive in our Benz car today?*

*Shall we holiday in Maldives? Shall I buy you a diamond ring?*

*What shall we name our three children, two sons and a daughter?*

*Shall I whisk you away to my palace, no, our palace?*

Every time Nafida retreated into the kitchen he felt like it was the sun during an eclipse.

*O Nafida, love, I will make a movie for you, write sweet romance novels.*

There was mango lassi and *barfi*. They had gone all the way.

Then they once again gathered in the small but definitely cozy living room. To his delight Nafida perched herself on a cane chair by him. *Had she too fallen in love?*

She smiled every time he looked at her.

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He made a conscious effort to stop staring. He blushed and couldn't keep from smiling.

They talked of movies and the new flyover bridges. They talked about buses. Then Nafida talked about her college, St Ann's.

"You know," said Dinesh, "my sister goes there right. She is doing B.Com." Then, pride still in his voice, and like he already didn't know, he asked: "What are you studying, Nafida?"

"Home Economics."

"Ah," he said full of erudition, like he had an ammunition belt, like Rambo's perhaps, of degrees. Bullets of scholarly achievements.

*He would quit his job as a conductor and become a great businessman. They would open a tailor shop. Their children would be decent, educated, well-behaved children. They would be religious, connected to the religions of both their parents. Nafida and Dinesh would grow old together. They would have an empire in the end.*

*She would die first and he would roam the land a lovelorn poet, cursing God and the loss of Beauty and Truth in the world; no, the Universe.*

*They would be reunited in heaven. But till her death, life would be heaven.*

The conversation changed to the beatings. He had been brave and victorious. There had been knives and machetes. He had rallied like Hanuman, the Monkey God of Bravery. He delivered karate chops like Bruce Lee.

Nafida who had been looking on compassionately was now amazed, her eyes as big as the medieval shields at Salar Jung Museum. She regarded him with what he thought was awe at his undaunted heroics.

Then Uncleji asked Dinesh, "So have your parents found you a pretty Hindu girl to marry?"

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His thoughts came to a squelching stop. Like a bullock-cart in mud. Then popped up a thought, weakly: *But, Nafida is the One.*

He tried to quell the thought but it stood resolute like a fortress. His mind revolted but he knew he shouldn't panic.

“No, Uncleji, I have no plans as yet.”

*What plans? What plans?*

*I want to ask you for Nafida's hand.*

He glanced dartingly at Nafida. A portion of her awe remained. She had a thin smile on her lips and was looking into his eyes.

He started to panic. His head hurt and his back ached. *Maybe she would give him a massage. Naked.*

He gathered himself. He needed to go out into the open air. Only the chill air could make his passion bearable. The unfairness, the injustice, the bad *karma*. *The world was devoid of Beauty and Truth.*

“D'you want a cigarette, Ali?”

“We can smoke one here,” Ali replied.

“No, I need to be outside.”

“Is anything wrong?” asked Nafida.

“No, no, nothing.” Still trying to be a champion.

He stumbled into the street.

Then he choked and said: “I must be off.”

He tried to breathe evenly as he mounted his steed. He was able to swivel on his seat and utter an “Allah Hafeez” to the family that had gathered by the doorway. Nafida looked more than a little concerned.

*O Nafida, don't worry, sweet. I will have you.*

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He gunned the engine and escaped.

When he got home a Telugu love song was playing on the television. A Telugu Film Song Extravaganza on the TV. It was bland. *Because Music needs to hurt a little or it isn't Real Music.*

He walked past Rekha doing some homework, his father reading the inevitable newspaper about inevitable Hindu-Muslim riots, and his mother with her arthritis snoring loud as an airplane, sleeping ramrod straight on the *divan* in the drawing room.

*None of them knew what love was.*

His parents had had an arranged marriage and it was certain that the same would befall Rekha. But not for him.

He walked past them. Walked up the cement steps to the balcony.

He lit a Gold Flake and looked at the half-moon.

*O Nafida, on a night like this.*

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Voting day had come by and the streets were jammed with lorries selling the various parties. There were flags and posters and loudspeakers and sloganeering. The MQM, a Muslim party, was electioneering in Chintal *Basti* and tempers were sure to rise. He took it as an excuse for his trepidation in going to see Nafida again. He wasn't sure how she'd view him after the way he had left.

The BJP rallied Hindus around the Ram Temple issue. The Temple in Ayodhya was to be constructed on the land where a mosque stood, that had been built on the site of a Ram Temple, the BJP insinuated. They had destroyed the mosque and were mobilizing to build the Ram Temple there.

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The fury reached a crescendo, a release of pent-up workaday frustrations. A person was distorted, no longer an individual but a “Muslim” or a “Hindu”. Secularism in India was once again a failure. It had nothing to do with education, but how easily the politicians maneuvered and manipulated the masses, the lowest class. And instead of class warfare we had religious civil war.

No one knows who threw the first rock, or who painted the graffiti in red. But that soon became plural rocks and a plethora of graffiti.

There was anger in the streets and confusion. Muslims killed Hindus and Hindus burned trainloads of Muslims. Hyderabad, which had equal populations of Hindus and Muslims, erupted.

*Bastis* were attacked. Riots broke out. People used kitchen knives, stones and farm implements and killed.

The buses stopped running when curfew was announced.

Chintal *Basti* was in flames. Dinesh was scared. He wanted to get to Chintal *Basti* to see if all was ok. If the unthinkable had happened.

He fretted and shook. He went up to the balcony and saw the city in flames. He heard shots. He looked in the direction of Chintal *Basti*, saw smoke and worried.

The phone lines were cut so that the police couldn't be called. They were on one side or the other side anyway. Then the electricity went out, as in the dark it would make killing easier. The city of Hyderabad was a warzone. Screams were heard throughout the night. Shots were fired.

Dinesh jumped on his scooter. He drove with calm, sure of himself, with stealth. He drove through the blazing streets, gunshots and burning cars and houses all around him. He slowed around corners. He saw police vehicles and crowds that were defying the curfew.



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There was no way to tell if the crowd was Hindu or Muslim. Men were running and looting and gathering in the shadows.

At the turnoff to Chintal Basti he saw the Military Police blocking the way. The slum was aflame. Dinesh waited in the shadows, still, unable to think, unable to move. He dropped his scooter kept close to the walls and headed in Nafida's house's direction. He didn't need to go far. It was burning. He ran to the doorway and looked inside. *Had they been inside? No, no, no they couldn't be.*

Then he knew, if they were alive they would be at the mosque. He made his way back to the scooter. He saw a crowd smashing it to pieces.

The mosque was four km away. He half-ran, half-jogged. He stayed close to the walls and peered around corners. He was trying not to think. He was pure awareness. He wasn't thinking of Nafida or his own house.

In the shadows he was neither Hindu nor Muslim, just a scared man. Nor was he Dinesh. He was sharply aware and yet part of him was detached from the burning houses around him.

He saw a burning bus. The tires were giving off noxious fumes and the windows were populated by flames that licked the night air. Was it the 189M? He couldn't tell.

The police were at the mosque, Muslim policemen obviously. He snuck around the back where the toilets were and climbed through a window. He walked into the prayer hall where Nafida would be. He saw Ali praying by a pillar. Ali looked up to see Dinesh. Dinesh was scanning the room for Nafida. Ali rose, grabbed Dinesh by his shirt and pushed him towards the wall.

“What are you doing here, fool?”

“Where is Nafida?”

“You're an idiot to come here.”

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“Where is Nafida?”

“Man, go, go before somebody finds out.”

Dinesh would never remember how he got back to the street. But he ran towards where the rich lived, up into the hills where there were no flames, where people were watching on TV the flames burning up someone else’s city.