

# PARUL... one of many\*

THE blackness of night was flushed with an orange permeation, and then the roaring, hissing train thrust its body into Bombay Central Station. The ubiquitous female face painted on the compartment exterior, hair slickly combed into a bun, plastic half-smile under plastic eyes, shook, trembled, and was still.

Women surged forward into the “Ladies”, elbowing one another, protesting and laughing. The seats had all been taken and M stumbled into the centre aisle, stretching to reach for an iron handle just as the train shuddered and jerked out of the station. A young woman edged her way into position opposite M and they smiled at each other wryly. The black, dust-encrusted fan above, directed churned October air at them. M took a pamphlet from her *thaili* and began to read.

“Are you a professor?”

M looked into the eyes of the young woman and shook her head. “No”.

“Are you a teacher, then?”

“Yes”, M smiled.

“Seeing you reading, I thought so. Which school?”

M told her.

The young woman leaned forward, one hand outstretched. The light from a ceiling bulb reflected off the gold arches of her spectacles, and the eyes, enlarged behind powerful lenses, squinted and were eager.

“Please, can you help me? I’m desperate. Can you get me tuitions?”

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\* This is not fictitious. It is the record of an encounter on a train, exactly as it happened.

“I’m not sure, I...”

“I’ve completed my first year B.A. Do you think I can become a teacher, or do you think it would be better to become a nurse? I have to earn money.” The two thin plaits framing the soft plain features of her face moved in her agitation.

The pages of the pamphlet fluttered in M’s hands and she said, “I think you would be eligible for the primary school teachers’ course. Why don’t you try that? But it’s a two year course.”

“How much do you think it will cost? Not much money, no? Because I have very little money.”

Then in that crowded train came the torrent of words – the story of a stranger on a familiar train. M returned the pamphlet to her *thaili* and listened.

“I’ve run away now. I’m not going to be beaten every day. He even took a knife and attacked me. See”, she thrust her arm towards M. A deep brown weal ran between the dark hair on the skin. “And see here”, a similar scar just above the left shoulder blade. “The doctor in the hospital told me to take a certificate, but what did I know – I was thankful to have escaped and to be alive. And when I had shouted and screamed, my husband’s brother had also come to beat me, because what would the neighbours say?”

“It is a filthy vulgar family and so I ran away. Within a week of my marriage, my husband said to me, “Your body? I can buy better than that in the bazaar, much better.” But who would believe that I have a husband who goes all the time to other

women?”

“I was married through a marriage bureau... Why does a girl get married? For some protection, some security. So I said yes, and I even went with love in my heart. But they didn’t want it. They only wanted a slave to do the housework.” With broad brown fingers she lifted her spectacles and rubbed dry eyes. Several strands of intertwined faded grey thread encircled her thin wrist from which the bones protruded.

“When they beat me many times, I registered a case with the police. The police inspector even spoke to my husband but that didn’t stop him. But before I ran away, I told the police – I told them that if I was murdered in Bombay or even outside Bombay, his family would be responsible for the murder – him, his three brothers, his sister and his mother.”

At Dadar, the compartment emptied partially and they found seats together. M watched her companion swing her feet onto the empty space in front of her. Big-boned feet were encased in stained white foam slippers, one size too large.

“What about your family?” M asked.

“Four times I went to them. But my brothers and sisters say that I am a hindrance to them. My father says, if I am unhappy, why don’t I commit suicide? So you see it isn’t fun there any more. It isn’t fun any more. That is how our community is.” She shrugged and dry eyes were rubbed again.

“You’re very brave. How is it that you have such a fighting spirit?”

M’s companion smoothed the folds



-Ira Roy

of her faded nylon sari and shook her head. "I don't know about fighting spirit, but I believe in God. I don't care for my bloody family or his vulgar family. I know I am right and I look to God for help because what does this bloody world give you?"

The woman to the left of M leaned forward and she too listened silently.

"I went to a lawyer to get a divorce. But she's busy now. I want a divorce – I only want to be free. I don't want any money from him. I just thank God I am alive. Even a beggar on the road would think it better to starve than to touch his dirty money.

"I left everything behind – all my saris, my blouses, my petticoats, my bangles, even my new lipsticks and my scent. I took only a little of my jewellery. My grandmother's sister had given it to me. She said, "Parul, one day this might help you." But she would weep if she saw me now."

M looked up and caught the smirks

of the two women on the seat facing them. The broad folds of her crisp, starched sari rustling, one of the women leaned over to whisper something into the other's ear. A delicate gold bangle glinted around the wrist that cupped the whispering mouth.

"I live in a hostel now. I told them I was an orphan. I didn't tell them my real story. It isn't charming. Please don't mind because I'm telling you." Parul touched M's arm.

"You see I have to remain hidden because I do not want my husband to find me. Otherwise I'll be in danger, so I told them I was an orphan."

Then they sat, Parul and M, holding hands in silence, in their shared knowledge of humiliation, and M could feel the strength and resilience in Parul's fingers. Facing them on the compartment wall, a blue-haired girl, longlashed eyes shut in ecstasy, dreamed in a yellow bubble of the young man whose thirst she had slaked with a Limca.

M took a pen and a magazine from her *thaili*, held them out and asked for Parul's surname and address.

"You will really write to me? Really? Oh, thank you," and in shaken blue letters Parul wrote down her name and address. "Which station are you going to get down at? I have to get down at Khar Road, so I'll go now."

The train drew to a halt and Parul was on the platform, at the compartment window, her hands reaching in through the dark iron bars. M clasped her hands and they smiled at each other. The light winked off the glass of Parul's spectacles; then she was gone into the crowd moving serpent-like up the stairs to the exit. Hema Malini, her face a lurid pink, flapping poster bosom thrust out, looked saucily down at M from the hoarding against a *paan* and spittle stained grey pillars.

And then the train was racing once more towards Borivli.