

It was barely dawn when Ishan woke up.

It was the train's three tiered compartment. He had the lowermost berth and couldn't sit up. Not until the passenger asleep in the middle berth got down and lowered his slot. There was not much he could do except remain lying awake in his place. There was the option of quietly sliding out of the berth and standing up. *But how is that any better than remaining lying down?*, he argued against it. Mumbai was still quite a while away. And there was no telling when the middle berth would be lowered.

Someone in the compartment had left their window open. The icy winds of the desolate countryside shattered against the speeding train before darting through the grills of the open window in shards, stinging Ishan's skin. The dreary motion of the wheels had synchronised with the crude rhythm of the engine to form a languid lullaby, as the train cradled its sleeping passengers indifferently.

*Best to remain lying down*, Ishan resolved. His mind began swirling around, as it yearned to grab on to his passing thoughts and leap into the realm of remote memories. He let his mind run free. At times he would hold onto something; an image or a thought. Other times everything would just slip through, leaving his hands kneading against one another. As the motions of his subconsciousness played out a montage of his deepest reflections, Ishan stretched comfortably and watched on.

All of a sudden, a pair of heavy legs, wrapped in black pants, dangled from above. The suspended limbs oscillated freely, symphonised by the movements of the train. It was the man in the topmost berth. He had woken up too. The man took a deep breath and lunged forward, lowering down his enormous body. His entire weight dangled by his elbows as his outstretched toes probed for a landing spot. They eventually tipped on top of Ishan's bedsheet at which point he let go of his elbows and slumped heavily onto the edge of Ishan's berth. His lower back pressed against Ishan's knees, he leaned forward and floundered around the dark floor for his *chappals*. One by one he picked *chappals* off the ground, squinting at them as hard as he could. Finally, settling on a pair that looked more or less like his, he clumsily slipped them on and quietly began making his way to the end of the coach, towards the door.

The touch of another man's body against his own repulsed Ishan. He felt an urgent impulse to bathe and cleanse himself immediately. If it was up to him he would even have had the bedsheets and his clothes washed right away. But, alas, he was stranded on a moving train; a train chugging towards Mumbai without the slightest regard for Ishan's preferences.

Some time later, the man from the top berth waddled back into the compartment. He began prodding at the man asleep in the middle berth. "Wake up, Suleiman. Borivali is here." Suleiman was not ready to get up yet. "We haven't even crossed Virar bridge," he replied without moving.

"It will be here any minute. Now get up!"

Suleiman began squirming inside the cocoon of his blanket. He let out a gaping yawn, as he emerged from its layers. He stretched his arms and thrust his chest forward, pushing out all the pent up sluggishness. A moment later, he slid down from his bunk. The three of them lowered the middle berth together and settled down on Ishan's seat, upright in a row. By the window, Ishan gazed at the abstract shapes being conjured by the emerging daylight in a horizon of fractured shadows. The other two were immersed in conversation.

In the meantime, the baby with the woman in the berth parallel to Ishan's began wailing. "Shut him up!" a coarse voice boomed from above. The woman obediently began coddling the child. "Go back to sleep," she mumbled softly into his ears. But the child showed no intention of being pacified. Soon, the man from above descended. He lit a *beedi* and growled at the child. "Shut your mouth! Shut up *now*... or I will toss you into the sea."

The train was crossing over the Virar creek, a deceptively vast water body. The dwindling light of the setting moon along with the simmering glow of daybreak wove into each other, painting the wavering waters with striking colours. *There must be countless creatures that birth, live and die under these waters. It is their world. Do they ever dream about land or the skies? Hmmm...I doubt it.* Ishan maintained a steady gaze on the restless water as his thoughts began trailing. *Maybe someone is looking down at us right now... wondering about us... pitying our own confined existence... like the fish in this water...*

A sultry, salty odour wafted in through the window. They were past the bridge. The stench of decay from the dead snails, mussels and fish, subsumed within the swampy layers of the Virar creek, began to drown the fresh morning breeze. He watched the landscapes transform drastically, from one to another, in an instant. *So much packed into a moment that barely lasted a blink. Breathing in the fresh air of vast plains in one instant and exhaling it onto*

*the sweltering surface of an endless reservoir in the next. It's like living in a loop.* Humming and swaying to its own tune, the train continued its advance towards the final destination. The closer they got, the more restless Ishan felt. *How did all of this happen? What have I gotten myself into?*

Half the coach had emptied by the time Borivali arrived. The crowd on the platform maintained rigid expressions, devoid of any sort of tenderness. Some of them scorned at the faces crammed behind the bars of the train's windows while others were just plain indifferent. Hawkers announced their wares, careful to not divulge the prices, so as to invite enquiries and bargains. Ishan recoiled from the window uncomfortably. They still had to cross Dadar before they finally arrived at Mumbai Central. Until then, he intended to do nothing except remain in his seat. The train jerked a couple of times before it finally took off again.

Ishan looked on in silent confusion. He didn't feel like he was in Mumbai at all. He hadn't come here out of choice, so he had nothing in the form of expectations. But the stark difference between the landscape in sight and the one that he had captured in his mind while leaving the city fifteen years ago was the source of his disorientation. Giant cement boxes. Large moving crowds filled with psychologically isolated individuals. It seemed like no one wanted to have anything to do with one another, as far as possible.

*The city must be gasping under all this weight. The skyline is not a clean frame anymore. It seems splintered. And no one seems to be bothered by that.* The clutter of buildings made him anxious. *I will have to make my way through all this and find a hole to hide in,* Ishan heaved. He, however, had no clue how he was going to go about that. And there was no turning back from here now. At least not for the time being. His immediate future was shackled to the train that was running at full speed, backwards ahead. The past had been left far behind. A choice that was his. He continued looking out the window, wide eyed, searching for any sign of the Mumbai he knew. He blankly watched local trains whirring by and platforms overflowing with swarms of all kinds.

He disembarked onto the platform at Mumbai Central and remained standing there for a while. Not that he was expecting to be received by anyone. He was simply trying to calibrate his senses to the chaos. He didn't know where he belonged or what was his role in this madness. A few moments later, he picked up his shoulder bag and flung it around his left arm while picking up the bigger bag in the other hand. He could feel the books in his bag by their burden, weighing down on his shoulders and his mind. He began moving towards the exit of the station, switching the heavier bag between hands every

now and then. At the exit, he placed the larger bag down and pulled out a piece of paper with an address from his pocket. He took a step towards the chain of taxis for hire. He went from window to window, extending the piece of paper towards irritated taxi drivers, hoping for a sympathetic response. The fifth taxi driver he approached magnanimously clicked his tongue at Ishan, reset his fare metre and shoved the backdoor open towards him.

The city that looked alien from the distant view of the train window seemed all the more unfamiliar on its roads and streets. The multitude of sights, sounds, and smells, all at once, had numbed his senses. As his restlessness grew he sank into a corner of the backseat, where he remained for the rest of the ride.

A while later, the taxi came to a halt. Ishan glanced at the taxi metre and began pulling out money from his wallet. The driver signalled Ishan to stop and handed him a creased rate card. *Ohohoho!* Ishan studied the card in shock. *These are the fares??* But he almost immediately resigned to the fact that there was not much he could do other than pay up. Once the taxi driver left, Ishan faced the building across from him and cross-checked its name board with the address on the piece of paper.

*'Padmaraag', 5th floor, Ashutosh Parikh.*

He had been corresponding with this address through letters for a while now. He got into the lift and pressed the button that said '5.' Stepping out of the lift, he walked up to the only door on the floor and rang the doorbell. It was one of those musical doorbells that squealed an entire tune, an annoying contrast to the traditional single chime. Just as the tune died out, a small peeking window opened up out of the frame of the main door. A pair of eyes studied him carefully. He then heard the scrape of the chain lock, followed by the thuds of two bolts being unlatched. The door widened open by five or six inches and then shut again.

"Someone is here. Looks like it's for you!" a woman's voice yelled, away from Ishan's direction.

A few moments later the door opened once more, completely ajar this time. Ashutosh stood in the doorway, measuring up Ishan with a sharp gaze. He then took a step back and moved aside, indicating that it was okay for him to enter. *Looks like this is the extent of my welcome,* Ishan nodded slightly. He stepped inside and halted after taking a couple of steps.