

Break journey

"All this meaningless destruction, this senseless rioting and arson, setting trams and buses on fire at random, on some pretext or other, this sudden conflagration, people running helter-skelter in desperation, the wailing of a siren followed by police vehicles, 'lathi' charge, tear gas, and the sound of bullets, - that old man stumbling and falling on his face at the street corner, the little boy screaming with pain and fear when a bullet struck his foot, - I do not understand why I come here again and again, to see all this . I find all this intolerable- yet I come again and again. Why! I am a busy man, I have work to do. But without any warning my taxi is stopped by a group of red flag wielding young men, and my work goes down the drain. The tram suddenly stops, - thousands of slogan shouting and overwrought young men arrive from somewhere and surround the tram. Tins of petrol, bricks and steel pipes make their appearance. As one watches, almost before one can blink an eyelid, the tram bursts into flames, people flee in all directions, screaming and shouting amidst the smoke and fire. The shops quickly down their shutters. The batons and sticks are wielded at random, window panes are shattered and pieces of broken glass rain down, there is chaos everywhere. "Run, run, man, what are you staring at!"

Sheila suddenly looked back and said, "My umbrella! I have left my umbrella behind."

"Are you mad? Your umbrella! Where will you take it anyway?"

Dragging me by my hand, Sheila ran until we came to a pharmacy. Stopping there she said, "I know this pharmacy," and we stood at the door, gasping. A thin young man wearing glasses was about the shut the collapsible gates. Sheila shouted, "Wait a minute, please."

The man looked at us uncertainly. Then he spoke to someone inside, "There is a girl"

"Let them come in," directed a voice from within.

The young man opened the gate about an inch or so wider, and stood aside. I hesitated, but Sheila pulled me inside. "Come, come," she said. "You do not have to show your guts by standing out there. Oh, come on!" As I followed her, I glanced back. The tram was still burning, there were now a couple of burning cars too. The red flames could still be seen with billows of black smoke. The sirens were still wailing, and off and on bells could be heard ringing from somewhere, - the fire brigade trucks were at work somewhere, unwinding their hosepipes, getting ready. Like magic, the broad and busy street became deserted; stones, bricks, and bits of broken glass filled the street, together with bicycles and hand carts that were thrown about in the riots. Someone had left behind a pair of Hawaii sandals in his hurry to get away, someone else had dropped a brief case as he fled. The burning vehicles were surrounded by men in khaki and white, the balconies of the building around were filling with curious and terrified people. All traffic was blocked. Someone was blowing a whistle, and all other confusion and chaos suddenly came to a stop.....

A bald man wearing a dhoti and a vest, probably the owner, was sitting among the medicines. He asked us to sit down. Looking at Sheila he asked, "Were you on the tram?"

"Yes," she answered.

"Have you any idea what happened?"

"No. Without any warning whatsoever, all of a sudden....."

"Yes," he said. "That is how it happens these days. No one knows who has a grudge against whom. Suddenly the resentment bursts into fury. It is happening all the time. The whole country seems to be burning with bitterness and hatred."

Without wasting any more words, the man put on his glasses and opened his newspaper. He must have been quite used to such happenings. The boy sat on his stool and stared at the road. Sheila took out a tiny wisp of a handkerchief from her hand bag and rubbed the perspiration from her face. She tried to tidy her hair looking at a mirror advertising some brand of cold cream hanging on the wall. Something struck the man as he read the newspaper. He looked up at me, thought about something, and said, "The whole country has gone mad, - it's the death wish. You understand what I mean?"

I was taken aback. "Death wish?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Suddenly hundreds upon thousands of people are coming out from the small lanes and by lanes, from the huts and shacks, running in desperation to the very centre of all the bombing and shooting, well aware that they may die any moment. What is this but a death wish?"

"Oh, that's what you mean?" I replied, more out of politeness than anything else.

"Yes. And each of us, it seems, always has a dormant desire, - maybe a secret desire, - for death. That's not my idea. Psychology says so. Now it seems that our Calcutta has made all the necessary arrangements for the fulfillment of that desire! No one can tell when the end will come, when that latent wish will be fulfilled. As you walk along, as you turn the corner of a street, suddenly, without any rhyme or reason, you will be struck on your back, maybe with a long knife, maybe your head will be cracked open with a heavy cudgel, or maybe a bomb will burst under your feet. And there's your death wish fulfilled."

He took off his spectacles and looked at us meaningfully. I did not know what to say. Then, folding the newspaper, he continued, "Of course we need to modify the theory a little. I mean, this death wish is not personal, you understand, not for the person concerned alone. It is for others too. If it is necessary for you to die, then others, you and me, and anyone else, too, has to die. You may also call it the gift of death, you understand..... So," he went off at a tangent. "How, and where, do you plan to go now"?

The boy at the door said that a few people had started venturing out to the roads, there were a couple of vehicles too. If we could somehow cross this street, we would get a taxi in Madan street.

We waited there for about five minutes more. Then thanking them, we went out cautiously. The street was still almost deserted. A lone constable, truncheon in hand, stood opposite the pharmacy, scrutinizing the flat roofs of the houses. Who knew when acid bulbs would land on ones head, thrown down from there! Two cars whizzed past. The wind screen of one of them had the word PRESS written on it in large letters, and the other car had the word EMERGENCY written on a piece of paper pasted on one of its widow panes.

"Emergency! Emergency!" I exclaimed, annoyed and irritated. "This bloody city of yours is always in a state of emergency. What emergency? What is the meaning of this emergency?"

"What? Don't you know what an emergency is? It is everything, - birth, death, marriage... and what not!"

"Oh, come on! A baby is being born somewhere! Why, don't you know that in our country a baby is born somewhere or other every second of the day. How can that be an emergency? And someone is dying? Someone is about to get married, and the auspicious time is passing away. Are these things...?"

"Alright, alright," Sheila said slightly peeved. "You do not have to lecture any more. For the time being, apply yourself to the question of how we can safely get to the corner of the street. What am I to do with you? You will not take the trouble to know the roads. You only know how to criticize!" They walked rapidly along, keeping near the closed shops. Wiping the sweat from her face, she said, "You hate this city so much, why do you keep coming here again and again? I have never insisted that you must stop over here every time, on your way to Delhi and look me up. You can go straight to Delhi, for all I care. You do not care to know a single road, you do not know any tram routes. I always have to take you around wherever you want to go. Why do you keep on coming here? See, I have wasted all my time with you. I will not get any work done today." Sheila was a very busy person. She had to go to Chowringee and get cinema tickets for the night show, she had to go to a particular shop in Park street to buy a particular perfume, (that perfume is not available in any other shop, apparently). And then they had to go to a particular restaurant they had discovered nearby, and have a couple of Milk shakes....

That night, sitting in a taxi in front of a cinema hall, I did not understand the directions Shiela gave the taxi driver. But leaving the familiar bright neon-lit Park Street filled with glamorous and expensively clad people, we proceeded along an unfamiliar road, - almost as though it was not in the city. Looking outside, I remarked, "What a nice area this is!"

The cool night breeze blew softly across my face as the taxi speeded onwards along a smooth broad and almost deserted road. It was as though this was not a part of Kolkata, - there was no clanking and rumbling of trams and buses; no confusion and shouting; no vendors screaming out their wares; no political slogan shouting. There were no beggars and refugees either. Instead there were tall trees on both sides of the road, shielding the well kept houses behind. Most of these houses had large compounds and one could imagine that well bred children played there, that the families took group photos there surrounded by well maintained gardens, dotted here and there with shining cars. The road was clear and clean under the fluorescent street lights, - so quiet, so peaceful, so ... civilized.

Sheila suddenly turned towards me, startled. I asked the driver, "Sardarji, what road is this?"

It was Sheila who replied, "I think it is the Syed Amir Ali Avenue."

The Sikh driver nodded, "Yes this is the Syed Amir Ali Avenue."

"Amir Ali avenue, - it is in Kolkata, isn't it?" I said. "If one has to live in Kolkata, it would not be so bad if one could stay on a road like this. If I could build a house here...."

Sheila quickly turned and glanced at me, then turned away again.

"You want to build a house here, truly?" she asked eagerly and unbelieving.

I smiled. Here? Hah! I stay in a small hotel in Surja Sen Street. I travel in overcrowded trains. - First let me get a plot of land in Guwahati."

"You want to settle in Gauhati?" she asked.

" I suppose so, at some point of time," I answered lightly. " I will live a long time yet. There is no hurry ."

"Suppose you are assailed by the death wish", she asked in a mocking tone.

"Death wish! Now, so soon"? I looked at her. "Are you mad? Don't you know....?"

Sheila knows. This is not the time for that kind of psychology. It is not feasible here in this city either, where Sheila was surprised to hear that I wished to live. Oh yes. She was very well aware that I always felt like running away after staying in this city for just one night. She knew I could not tolerate the harshness and violence, the poverty, the foul smells and the filthy garbage. I could not stand the crowds, the thousands hanging on desperately in the trams and buses, rushing about, tearing their dhotis, scattering their sandals in their maniacal urgency! No one had time for others, everyone was irritated all the time. It was always emergency, - emergency! One could not walk on the footpaths, they were so crowded. During the day they were full of beggars, sick people, vagabonds and thugs, slogan shouting youth, and refugee families, cooking and indifferently carrying on with their daily lives. At night thousands lay sleeping on these same pavements. It was people, people, wherever one turned, whether it was on the roads, in the cinema halls, theatres, restaurants, offices or the football fields. And the frauds, the thieves, the abusive shouting at each other, the racket and chaos! It is an uncivilized city! How could all these thousands and millions of people live here for so long? I somehow manage to spend one or at most two nights here, on my way to Delhi, - what might be called a 'break journey', a stop over. Then...I flee!"

"Who knew that such a beautiful and quiet area like the tree lined Amir Ali avenue lay hidden within this same city!" I said to myself.

"You come here for two days," Sheila said in an accusing tone. "You get down at Sealdah, and get on at Howrah. If you walk about all by yourself in those filthy and crowded places only, naturally you will get disgusted. You only protest and criticize. I have told you so many times, - stay for at least 5/6 days. Then I can take you to the nicer areas. I know that you are bound to like those places."

Sheila got down in front of the girls' hostel. "Don't get down", she said to me. "You do not know any of the roads, so it will be better if the taxi drops you in your hotel."

"Wait a moment," I replied. "Let me get down."

"No," Sheila protested. "It is getting late. You will get lost looking for the correct tram or bus routes. Go in this taxi."

I jumped down from the vehicle, and peered at the metre. "What do you think of me?" I asked annoyed.

"Why do you behave in this way?" she said. "I am also late,- the hostel warden might get annoyed. Be a god boy, my dear and go in this taxi." As soon as she had said the word, "*lakkhiti*" she stopped short in embarrassment.

I stood without a word, - it was the first time I had heard a tender word from her. In that moment of pregnant silence, I could hear the strains of a sitar coming from a radio from

inside the hostel, and from the distance, from the big street, the bells of a rickshaw. "Sahib will go to Sealdah," she instructed the driver. He nodded indifferently, and started the car. Suddenly coming out of my stupor, I saw that the hostel gates were receding. I put my head out of the window and said, "I will come tomorrow."

"Alright," she replied, "But come after five. I have to go to Bhawanipur again with Shipra in the morning". Gripped by a sense of excitement, I sat in the taxi as it speeded forward. But as we turned into C.I.T. road, I asked the driver to stop.

I paid the fare and asked, "The number 20 tram goes to Sealdah, does it not?" "Yes," he replied.

I jumped on to the tram. I do not know why I left the taxi, and took the tram. I suppose it was a sense of exhilaration, of unwonted excitement, the sheer joy of life. Or maybe it was a kind of challenge, - did she think I was so useless that I could not even go to my hotel in a tram! There was also an element of curiosity, - perhaps I would see something from the slow moving tram that I could not see from the windows of a taxi!

The tram almost empty, there were lots of empty seats. I chose a seat near a window. The tram started moving immediately with a loud clanking noise. The shops were starting to down their shutters, and the streets were slowly getting deserted. Pictures floated by as the tram drove on, - lines of dark shop fronts, then suddenly a bright light from somewhere, - a cinema hall disgorging people after the night show. A sudden bright blue spark as the lines from a tram rubbed against the electric wires, then again a stretch of deserted and quiet road. Neon lighted advertisements flashed off and on. Without warning, a pond covered with wild hyacinth, came into view. The road looked unusually broad in the bright street lights. The many tram lines cutting into each other at the crossings sparkled. ... Suddenly the tram stops with a mighty jerk. But it was not a regular tram Stop. There must be some kind of obstruction. I looked out of the window. Ah, the place is familiar, - I had walked this way a number of times when no taxis were available. There was a large hoarding advertising Hamam Soap, and below was a signboard with the words "S. P. SHAW, (P) LTD., CONFECTIONERS AND GENERAL ORDER SUPPLIERS" written in Gothic letters. Cake and pastry trays, and shelves with butter cheese, jams and jellies etc. could be seen through the window panes. The shutters were closed, but there was still a gap of a few inches. The lights were still on inside, and a part of the shop was visible. I could see a lone tray with a single packet of Britannia biscuits on it. It was quite a funny sight, but it was somewhat sad too. There were some hand carts leaning against the wall (they were never there during the day), and a few Hindustani day labourers were squatting on the verandah, busy rolling their indigenous tobacco and chatting. Someone had also hung a mosquito net in one corner, using one of the pillars of the veranda and the light post as props. I remembered that during the day, even in the intense heat, a man sat in front of the verandah, frying delicious '*pakorās*' (fritters) and brinjal. I had often been tempted to eat them. A man with only one leg used to come and drink water from the hydrant there, and then lie down on the ground and go to sleep. A blind beggar woman carrying an infant with a bloated stomach, always stood there holding out a tin for alms. Sometimes a good hearted man buying fritters would throw a few coins to them. Again, near the beggar woman, a rough looking man wearing half pants stood waving calendars and shouting the same sentence over and over again. But I never could understand what he was saying. The stove that the fritters man used was nowhere to be seen, - he probably slept somewhere else, and the owners of the hand carts had taken his place at night. ... I remembered the lone biscuit packet again. - it seemed so lonely, the poor packet! All the other packets must have been sold, and this one remained, all by itself in the deserted shop window! Nobody thought about it, probably. But then I thought, many people knew about the packet, - the manufacturers, the suppliers, the agents, the shop keeper.

These were definitely fully aware that this one biscuit packet, out of the thousands manufactured and distributed, was the only one left, at least in S.P. Shaw and company. And they had full account, each one of them, about their profits and losses from this lone packet! And who knew, it might not be there next morning. It might go into some woman's shopping bag, to appear later in the day at some dining table. The tram started moving noisily again, clanking as it went. Hah! Death wish? As if I were a small boy who could not go home by a tram at night! What did she think! The tram moved on, casting shadows and light alternatively, on my face. I remembered that she had called me "Dear". I saw that it was not at all difficult to travel quite happily on a tram at night; - maybe it was not impossible to live here permanently, too. ..A lone rickshaw passed by. ...Amir Ali avenue was a nice, pleasant road. - She had called me 'Dear', 'lakkhiti', her 'Dear, good boy'....

Next morning I read in the newspaper that two political parties, the Marxists and the Socialists, had started arguing while taking out a procession. This had grown in intensity, leading ultimately to an exchange of blows. It was apparently this incident that, spreading rapidly among all sections of people of the city, including the floating population who were to be found all over Kolkata, had sparked off yesterday's incident. Seven people were injured in the police firing, and three killed. The Marxist Forward Bloc and the RSP had called for a *Bandh* on the 25th. In protest, but other political parties like the Congress, Janasangha, the Communist party etc., were against the call. So it was feared that there would be some more clashes on that day.....Fortunately I would be in Delhi by then. Let these people do what they liked, and kill themselves in the process! What did it matter to me! - The middle page of the newspaper featured a photo of some young boys who had been caught red handed while stealing rice and sugar from a railway wagon. The leader seemed to be a curly haired youth wearing a torn vest, about fifteen years of age, who stood at the end of the line. His eyes were restless, yet cautious, and suspicious. There was hardly any sign of the *joie de vivre* of first youth. I studied the boy's face for a while. Arriving at Howrah station, I booked a berth in a third class sleeping coach, and on my way back, going past a shop in Dharamtala street, selling ladies' umbrellas, I had half a mind to get down and buy one for Sheila. But the bus drove past the shop, and I did not have time to get down. I thought that I would buy one in the evening. I got down at the Gariahat crossing, - I had to meet a friend. By the time we had finished talking and eating, it was nearly one o'clock, and it was extremely hot. Fortunately I was able to find a taxi. Opening my newspaper once again, I looked at the picture of 'wagon breaker' boy. I noticed with surprise that his face was neither thin nor emaciated. It was round and chubby. But how? Most definitely no mother or father had put a plate of good nourishing food in front of him, and urged him lovingly to eat.... Suddenly the taxi's speed lessened. There was a crowd of excited people in front, shouting and arguing. We were about to cross 'S. P. Shaws'. I sat up straight, and saw that the sign board was hanging down, the man selling hot fritters was nowhere to be seen, but his stove was rolling on the ground, his small store of coal scattered all over the road. The steel gates of S. P. Shaw and the nearby shops were shut tight. Someone had smashed the glass show cases, and bits of broken glass lay strewn all over the place. The beggar woman was not there, neither was the man with one leg, water from the hydrant flowed on to the footpath, unhampered and free. Had these people run away, were they dead, or had they been arrested? There was not a single shoe in the broken show window of the shoe shop; the lone biscuit packet in S. P. Shaw's glass show case, now shattered, had vanished. ... The police were trying to push the crowds away. There was a police jeep and a wireless van. A police sub inspector on a motor cycle came and gave some directive to my taxi driver, another sub inspector in khaki was trying to say something to the crowds, gesturing with his hands as he did so. The taxi driver changed gears and started driving, gaining speed as he drove on. He looked back and said, "This street is always the centre of these students' violence. This morning the seven party Students' Front had planned to carry out an agitation here, -they have nothing better do,

living their fathers' money! The police could have promulgated Section 144, and all this could have been stopped..."

But I did not hear the taxi driver's next words. I had shut my eyes.The harsh midday sun seemed to have softened, and in the soft darkness of evening, the taxi was speeding (running away, maybe?) past a vast sheet of water, it could have been a river, or perhaps a lake. THE reflection of the lights on the rippling waves looked long and wavy.....

"Where have you brought me?" I was asking Sheila.

"it is not necessary for you to know that," she was saying. "Just tell me whether you like the place or not -"

I could not see her face clearly in the dim light in the taxi, but a lovely fragrance flowed from her clothes and filled the taxi with its aroma.

"Oh, that's all right," I said. A young couple whizzed past on a scooter, - their fair flying, and the girl's skirt billowing. They were probably Anglo- Indians. - For some reason, I remembered the lone biscuit packet in S. P. Shaw's. Where was it now? Had it landed in some small footpath stall dealing in smuggled goods. Or perhaps someone had eaten it, relishing its new and unfamiliar taste. ..The scooter vanished in the distance. And I suddenly said, "Actually," I hesitated a moment, then continued, almost desperately, "Actually, of course, only my liking it alone will not do...!"

Thankfully, it was dark inside the taxi, and we could not see each others faces. I tried to find Sheila's hand on the seat. I though I would know her mind if I could feel her hands, I would know whether her face had flushed or gone pale. (But of course there was no one else in the taxi.)

"Do you know Sheila," I said. "I have been thinking about that man in the pharmacy, - about the death wish. I do not know what these psychologists have found after analyzing our minds, but this discussion about a house of our own. Is this for dying? Who wants to die now, so soon?"

Sheila made no reply, but I became restless. How could I make her understand that what the man in the pharmacy had said was not right, that he did not understand why, in spite of everything, the people could not live anywhere else, what the secret of its magnetic appeal was. I became impatient once again to find her hands and hold them. But I knew that I would not be able to tell her all that was now in my mind. In all probability, I would simply indulge in a long lecture, - as I always did..... . Inside the speeding taxi, the cool and damp night breeze blew on our faces. An Ambassador car in front of our taxi, was lowering its speed and flashing its red back lights. Staring at those flashing lights, I continued, "All this frequent violence, all this bloodshed, makes it seem as though everyone is waiting for death, is prepared for death. The incidents are so all pervading, they are apparent almost every minute and in such diverse ways, that it is difficult to realize that hidden behind all this drama, is the extreme desire to live. One does not realize that the chaos and turmoil of this great city from morning till night, the people rushing about hanging precariously on overcrowded buses and trams, struggling all the time, - we do not realize that these people are rushing around like madmen only for the innate desire to live, not to die. Maybe we go rushing headlong into the centre of crazed crowds, knife in hand, to be faced suddenly with hordes of rifle toting policemen. At such moments, self preservation becomes our first priority. We run, we flee. I have to save myself! So as I run, I take whatever comes to hand, I loot whatever I can, and run! I have to live, I have to subsist. Just as we cannot think of dying today, thinking of all

the things we have yet to do, of our immense desire and will to live, we think of what we have to do, - build a house, make love, - so many plans... . What these violent incidents tell us is not that we want to die, to kill. All these agitations and disturbances are reminding us again and again that it is still not time for us to leave this world. There is lot more to come, lots of work to be done. It is not yet time to die. We must live, live as long as we can. We have to live.