

PICKPOCKET

Everything was the just the same that day. It was the same platform. I was waiting for the 9:15 local train to the Victoria Terminus. The crowd of the Kalyan railway station, the stifling heat of a Mumbai summer morning It all added to the mundane spirit of that day. I was on my way to work.

After a brief struggle to get inside the train, I managed to find myself seated comfortably, close to a window, just the way I like it. It is usually not easy to get a seat on such a train; providence was with me at least for some time. I decided to settle down with the newspaper and get in touch with what was going on in the world, when I noticed her sitting opposite me.

I would not take the liberty of calling her pretty. But there was something about her that would make a person glance at her for a second time. A certain calmness of expression, indicating a determination of achieving the tasks set out for the day, and a balance of emotion outlining her face that implied a strong character. I liked her. She seemed a typical working woman of Mumbai who takes time off work to look after her family.

“Care for some Bhel-Puri ? I just made it before leaving.” I admit I was taken aback. Then followed the embarrassment of realizing that I had stared at her too long, I hastened to refuse her kind offer. I loved Bhel-Puri, but I was too startled to say yes and engage myself in the whole process of eating. But since she had taken the first step to socialize, it was my turn now. “Today is exceptionally muggy. I wonder if it is going to start raining. The monsoon is due anytime, you know.” Taking about the eccentricities of the weather is often a convenient way to say that you would like to communicate more with the person you addressed. It works most of the times. She replied saying that she thought the same while waiting for the train. I asked her where she was heading, and was somehow pleased to find that she was heading to the same place as I was. “I just dropped off my son at school before coming, you know. My little darling! His name is Appu, and he is the sweetest thing on earth. Would you like to see his photograph?” I couldnt say no. When a pleasant lady like her suddenly exposes her emotional side to you, then you do feel out of place. But then you have to take a look at the photograph that is already thrust into your face. I thought I had seen the kid somewhere. I told her that. “Yeah you must have. He and his father are on Television all the time!” I remembered where I had seen the kid before. I was looking at the wife of the biggest industrialist of Mumbai. “Goodness! Are you Mrs. Patel by any chance?” I asked. She gave me one of her looks that meant yes. “I dont like publicity, keep it low”, she whispered.

Something was not right. Why would the wife of a millionaire travel in a local train? Surely she would have at least ten cars at her disposal, ten chauffeurs at her command to drive her to her workplace. Workplace? Why would she have to work? She was wearing pretty ordinary clothes. Something was not right. She seemed to read my thoughts - “I know what you are thinking. Why would I be here if I was what I claim, right?”

I hastened to explain that that was not the case (I lied) and I was merely surprised by the whole situation. “I dont like publicity, I told you before. I was a common middle class girl before getting married, and I want to be like that even after marrying Vishal. Thats why I work in the service sector, take the train to work and keep out of the limelight. Vishal doesnt like my common place behavior, you know, we have a lot of differences on that issue. But it usually gets sorted out.”

Oh, thats nice. I admire you for your attitude. I didnt completely believe what she said, but maybe it could be true. If millionaires could be eccentric (and poor people mad), some effect from her husband could have passed on to her. And after all she did have the look on her face that I noticed when I first saw her. What good would it do to her to lie to me? I was just another passer-by, who would probably never see her again after that brief train journey.

If you have been in Mumbai, you would know how you conclude that you are close to the Victoria Terminus. People start jumping into the in-bound train because it is just too crowded when it starts out from the Terminus. We were coming to an end of the journey. We both got up from our seats and joined the tide of people moving out You do not need to push, you are carried out by the tide and as some magical force sweeps you, you find yourself out on the platform, fortunately, in one piece.

She was not lying. She had more than a commoners money in her purse. It was time to get back to work. The local train back to Kalyan was waiting.