

Chapter One

A biting cold night in December. Four passengers sat silently in the first-class waiting room of Tundla station. All four were covered from head to toe, concealed by their overcoats, but even in the dim light of that stark, dispassionate room, built and decorated in accordance with the Indian Railway's precise specifications, it was obvious that they were very different individuals, thrown together from different corners of society.

The one in the easy chair had an enormously – even indecently – powerful body, as though he were a giant beast, the kind that outgrows its clothes and shoes at sixteen, to the amazement of its parents. His face was large too, almost as big as a jackfruit, and longish, and on the broad expanse of his cheeks – perhaps because his pores were swollen from the cold – the seeds of next morning's beard were already sprouting in blue dots.

The second one was a nicely proportioned, pleasant looking man, dapper, well-groomed, immaculate in his western garb; complete with hat, cane and gloves. His face was round, plump, grave, his complexion just the shade of dark that makes good-looking men even better looking; his hair, though plentiful and black, betrayed the occasional flash of silver. His lips were neither too full nor too thin but clearly etched, the kind used to commanding with a few words. Anyone who had set eyes on him would have agreed that rules were never flouted in his disciplined, predictable life, that he never had to raise his voice.

This natural authority in the way he occupied the waiting room chair, legs elegantly crossed, this stateliness, this majestic quality, was also visible in the third person. He was on the stouter side, and of an old-fashioned, aristocratic appearance: hair parted in the middle, ruddy of cheek, with a rakish moustache that suited him perfectly.

But the fourth: he was the antithesis of all this elegance. Slight in build, he was seated in one corner, his feet up on a chair – although a second easy chair was vacant – but there was no sense of repose in the way he reclined. He kept fidgeting but seemed unable to find a comfortable position, and even when he closed his eyes occasionally, furrows appeared on his brow, as though he was thinking of something important and as though volatility of thought was his wont. At first glance he appeared very young; perhaps he was the youngest of the four, but when the light shone on the lower half of his face, you no longer mistook him for a young man.

These four travelers had met earlier that day: in the gardens of the Taj Mahal, on the steps of Sikandra, and again leaving Agra. They had

conversed, all in the same compartment, on the train. These exchanges had revealed that the powerfully built man was a contractor; he had been to Delhi to secure a government order, visiting Agra on his way back, and wanted to stop at Varanasi too. The second one was an old, trusted bureaucrat in Delhi, currently in a very high post in the military and off to Allahabad on vital government work, thereafter to Lucknow Cantonment. The third man was one of the better-known doctors in Calcutta, Dr. Dhar; having delivered a lecture on diphtheria at a medical conference in Delhi, he was now on his way back to tend to his patients. And the fourth was in this part of India simply on holiday; he hadn't decided yet whether to return directly to Calcutta or to stop off somewhere along the way. His profession was not clear either; he said he wrote books, but did writing count as a profession? That he was involved with books was clear, though, for after the conversation ended, the huge tome he opened seemed, in its form and appearance – so the other three felt – completely unsuitable for casual reading on a train. Whether it was readable at all was suspect.

The bad news had come at Tundla. A cargo train had been derailed near Aligarh, no trains were running. How long? Well, it would take at least four or five hours for the lines to be cleared. In other words, no hope tonight? Didn't look like it. The bureaucrat had important work, he had inquired about flight schedules – the first flight out was at nine thirty, and yes, he would be able to take a train back to Agra in a bit. The doctor had tried to accept the situation philosophically, but the contractor had kept breathing deeply and muttering, “So cold . . . and now!” This despite the fact that both his physique and his clothing

were designed to insulate him admirably from plunging temperatures. But the bookish gentleman, the thin one, had been feeling cold indeed; he rubbed his hands together, walked up and down, and then turned around to inform the other three, unnecessarily, that there was no choice but to spend the night in the waiting room.

The four men had just settled down with their luggage, and no one was speaking; all of them were intent on coping with their plight. Even a minute seemed a long while, and they had a long winter night ahead of them.

The contractor shifted in his chair and asked, “What’s the time?” He was wearing a watch, but he directed his question to the others, out of laziness or as a pretext for conversation.

The bureaucrat replied, “Twelve thirty-five.”

Thirty-five – at least half an hour had been killed since they’d gotten off the train! The contractor found another question.

“Are there arrangements for sleeping?”

“On the floor?” someone said, dubiously.

The contractor had no objection for his part, but he accepted that the others probably had higher standards, and so, kept going.

“No retiring room here?”

“No.”

It is usually difficult to make progress in a conversation after such monosyllabic replies, but fat people are sociable and gregarious; more words emerged from the depths of the easy chair.

“At least we have seats, think of the other passengers.”

There was no concurring reply, but, as though in response, the

sliding doors of the waiting room opened, and cold air immediately filled the room. All four passengers turned their eyes toward the door at this, even that wretched-seeming bookish man, who had been leaning to one side, his eyes shut.

Under the scrutiny of these four pairs of eyes, those who had caused the door to open paused. They were a couple. A young man stood with the door ajar: he was not fully visible but there were hints of a face, its skin chapped by the cold, a home-knitted brown pull-over and a cheap pair of trousers. A girl stood by his side, almost nestling against him, even more obscured. She could barely be seen: just a flash of black hair, a proud vermilion streak, a smooth, young-looking neck, white light on her cheek. They stood there for just a few moments, said something softly before they turned and left – but even that seemed to blow a breath of warm air through the wintry waiting room. They were clearly newlyweds, maybe a couple of months in, maybe a year, but they were lost – still – in their love for each other. That slight pause at the door, those soft words exchanged or maybe not exchanged, then their retreat; with all of this they made it amply clear to the middle-aged men that they were still inhabitants of heaven, that as long as they had each other they wanted nothing else, nobody else.

The door was closed again, and all that remained was the heartless, miserly waiting room and four middle-aged men, distraught that the train was not coming, with the lack of comfort, of sleep.

Again, the plump, gregarious man was the first to speak.

“Why did they go back?”

“They didn’t look like first-class passengers,” said the doctor.

“No, not because of that,” said the book lover with the furrowed brows, speaking from his corner for the first time since he’d entered the waiting room. “Not because of that. They went back when they saw us.”

A faint smile appeared on the smooth face of the bureaucrat. “I see. Honeymoon. In love. Well, tonight at least, they won’t be happy.”

“Not at all,” the reader of books replied carelessly. “They will find a cozy, private spot for themselves, they will enjoy it. They don’t want anything else, they just want privacy.”

“Theirs is really that special time of life!” The bureaucrat looked grave as he finished his proclamation. He seemed to be thinking of something else as he opened a tin of cigarettes.

The contractor sighed. “How cold it is!” After a moment, he told the tenuous man in the corner, “Privacy or not, won’t they be cold? We could have asked them to come in.”

“They wouldn’t have even if we had.”

The doctor smiled and said, “Then perhaps in the newlyweds’ honor we could . . .”

“Leave the waiting room to them?” The slim book lover stood up. Slight and wiry while also firm and workmanlike, darting about like a bird with shy but restless eyes, he didn’t seem to look directly at other people. Without another word he walked up to the door, then returned and sat down on the nearest available chair.

“I think we’re worrying too much about the newlyweds,” observed the Delhi man, offering his tin of cigarettes to the others.

“No, thanks,” said the doctor.

The other three lit up, and for a while, were sheathed in smoke. They started at the sound of the door opening again. A uniformed bearer entered to ask if the gentlemen wanted anything; the refreshment room was closing.

With nods from the rest, the bureaucrat said, “Coffee.”

Silence once more. All this while there had been sounds outside, people walking around, calling out. It hadn't been evident earlier, but as soon as the noise subsided everything seemed a little too quiet, unnaturally quiet for such a large station. Now the passengers had probably settled down for the night somewhere, wherever they could, however they could – those two had found a place for sure, they wouldn't be visiting the waiting room again. The line was closed, no more trains would be arriving that night, no bells would ring. Whether it was the porters, the hawkers or the cigarette vendors, the bustle was over for now. And it was so very cold. In the dim light of their waiting room, these four people who didn't even know one another, the subtle blue smoke of their cigarettes their only companions, felt as though the world outside had been obliterated, and that they had found shelter on an unwelcoming, comfortless island. They no longer seemed unfamiliar to each other; in fact, there was even a feeling that all four of them were probably thinking the same thing. That couple, who had only given them a glimpse of themselves at the door before disappearing, had left something behind; it was as though the bird of youth had shed a few feathers as it flew by: some sign, some warmth, some pleasure, sorrow or tremor that refused to dissipate, something

with which these four individuals – even if they did not speak, even if they only thought about it silently – would be able to survive this terrible night.

Suddenly the doctor said, “Perhaps it was rude of us.”

“Still thinking of them?” The Delhi man laughed, but it was obvious from his manner that he hadn’t forgotten them either.

“I was thinking – thinking of something else. I was wondering how long such days last for them.”

Now the Delhi man laughed out loud. “Is that anything to wonder about? Don’t we all know the answer?”

“Afterwards, all of us know it,” spoke the lean-faced book lover, “but at the time none of us does. For instance, can those two even imagine how short-lived it all is? Can they imagine that they will not continue much longer exactly this way? That is the most amazing part of this amazing illusion.”

“Amazing illusion! Well put!” the contractor nodded his agreement.

The coffee arrived.

“Is everything an illusion then?” A shadow of concern seemed to descend upon the contractor’s enormous face.

“At least this coffee is no illusion. The smoke is palpable. Sugar for you?” The elegant doctor busied himself, pouring out the coffee.

The contractor’s keen curiosity appeared to have overcome any languor; he abandoned his easy chair, and pulling a chair close to the other two, putting his hand on the chilled table, he leaned forward

and said to the book lover, “Is everything an illusion then? Nothing remains? You’re the writer – why don’t you tell us?”

The man seemed embarrassed at this, having the title of writer bestowed upon him, but did not delay in his response.

“The memory remains. Ultimately only the memory remains, nothing else.”

“What’s the value of the memory?”

“None!” the Delhi man announced cheerfully. “Eats into work, wastes time, makes you sad. Come, let’s have our coffee.”

Still the contractor persisted: “Is the memory of happiness that has passed happy or sad?”

A mocking smile emerged on the lips of the man from Delhi. “No point thinking about that, but if you’d tell us a story, the time would be well spent.”

“Story! Story of what?”

“I mean – we’re all old men here, there are no ladies, so speaking openly will not be indecent, will it?”

“What are you getting at?” The fat contractor seemed apprehensive.

“He’s saying,” the doctor explained, “we had our days too, like the ones that couple has now . . .”

“I didn’t,” the contractor protested, and immediately his stubbled cheek reddened in unseemly mortification.

“You too,” said the writer. “There’s no one who has never liked someone. What happened afterwards is not the point, the liking is

what counts. Maybe it's memory, too, that counts. Some kind of memory . . .”

“I haven't any,” the contractor protested loudly, waving his hand. “I'll listen to your stories instead.”

“Fine, we'll tell our stories too,” the doctor said solemnly, looking at his large, discomfited co-passenger. “But so must you. There's no hope of sleep tonight, let's listen to stories through the night. Let's start.”

“Are you talking to me?” About to lift his coffee cup up to his lips, the contractor paused. “I'm a businessman, I don't understand anything but business, things like that . . .”

“Yes, you, too, have your story,” the writer spoke confidently.

The contractor was silent, his head bowed, for a while. Then he said, “I don't have a story, but I know someone else's – a friend's . . .”

“Fine, let's hear his story.”

The contractor took a sip of coffee and began.