

Vedi

1982

I REMEMBER THE TRAIN WHISTLE. IT BLEW WITH A rush of steam. Hurriedly, Daddyji drew my palms together within his own huge ones, said the Hindi farewell, "*Namaste*," lifted me through the compartment window, and handed me to Cousin Prakash. "You are a man now," he said. This sentence of my father's was to become the beginning of my clear, conscious memory. In later years, I would recall it again and again, as if it were the injunction of my destiny. Cousin Prakash held me out just in time for Mamaji to kiss me before the train started moving.

What Daddyji would later remember about my going away in the train was the chill of the February day. Mamaji, however, would remember that she was oblivious of the cold as she held me tight against her chest at the station and felt my tears streaming down her neck; I seemed to sense that something awful was about to happen to me. "Vedi's not yet five," she said to Daddyji. "He's too young for a blind school."

"Do you want him always to be holding on to your sari?" he asked. "Or do you want him to make something of himself?"

She remembers that her impulse was to say, "I don't know if I want Vedi to make anything of himself," but she was a Hindu wife, and so she said nothing more. The train was hooting.

I remember that I didn't really understand until the train was moving forward—going ever faster, and

getting more regular-sounding through the open windows—that I was going away. I called for Mamaji and Daddyji. I cried. I slept. I forgot. I remembered. I kicked against the leather berth. I banged my fists against the compartment wall. I cried. I slept. I woke to hear Cousin Prakash say, out of nowhere, “This is an express train, Vedi.”

Cousin Prakash was a son of Daddyji’s only sister. He was going to Bombay to try his hand at writing scripts for the cinema—he kept on calling me, affectionately, Actor. He loved Daddyji as he loved his own father, and my brother and sisters and I all thought of him as a brother. He was fond of me, but he didn’t like looking after me; a bachelor, he didn’t know what to do with a small child. I’d never been alone with him before, and I didn’t like being with him on the train. He would say “Actor, why are you crying?” and “Actor, do you want to go to the bathroom?” and “Actor, would you like a glucose biscuit?” I couldn’t say why I was crying, but I always wanted to go to the bathroom and I always wanted a glucose biscuit.

I remember that we were on the train for a day and a night and more. The air blew in through the open windows, covering my clothes, my hair, my berth with more and more grit and soot let fly by the engine. I remember that at one station Cousin Prakash bought me, through the open window, a packet of anise seeds coated with sugar. I remember thinking how much I liked him, and feeling happy in a surge.

At the Victoria Terminus in Bombay, we took a closed tonga, which Cousin Prakash called a victoria. I

had never been in a closed tonga, and I asked him why the tonga and the station had the same name, but he was busy reading a newspaper and didn’t answer.

I tried to pull the newspaper from his hand. “Daddyji explains everything!” I cried, and I begged him to take me home. But he ignored me.

Finally, he said, brushing the train soot off his clothes, “School, Actor—they’ll teach you there how to read and write. You’ll be very happy in the nice school.”

As he spoke, the victoria slowed down. “This is the area, Sahib,” the victoriawallah said.

Cousin Prakash, as he later told me, was mildly surprised to see that Dadar was a low-lying industrial area with open drains. It appeared to consist of dirty tenements, small, rickety wooden market stalls, and two gigantic textile mills. The mills were surrounded by seemingly impregnable stone walls—broken only by heavy iron gates and topped with barbed wire—and had tall chimneys billowing smoke. In fact, there was such a sooty smell in the air that Dadar could have been just another compartment in a train.

As Cousin Prakash later told it, the victoriawallah almost drove past the school, because he took it for a tenement. The school—a narrow, three-story structure of dark-gray stone with a small bird’s nest of a tower—was wedged between the two mills and stood opposite some crumbling brick tenements, and laundry was hanging out of its windows. But the victoriawallah managed to bring the victoria to an abrupt stop just past the front of the school. We got down, and Cousin Prakash told the victoriawallah to wait. Even then,

Cousin Prakash says, he was not sure that we had been brought to the right place. But then, looking up, he saw a plaque next to a gate and read this:

To the Glory of God
Opened January 15, 1920
by
H. E. The Hon. Lady Lloyd
This Institution for the
Blind Standing on a Site
Provided by Government
Was Built from Funds Given
In Equal Proportions by
Many Interested Friends &
The Government of Bombay
Superintendent Miss A. L. Millard
Architectors Messrs Gregson
Batley and King
Clerk of the Works Mr. T. Gangaram