

Meera

Like a huge iron monster the train roared into Howrah station, Calcutta. It squealed to a stop and spat out its passengers onto the platform. Red-shirted porters rushed forward to carry luggage to and from the train.

"Come on, let's get in before all the seats are taken," Shomir urged Meera, who squeezed her way in with the crowd and managed to get a place by the window. Shomir was helping the porter to put their suitcases on the rack above the window, when a big, fat woman flopped down on the seat beside Meera. Shomir quickly paid the porter and sat down opposite his wife.

As the train slid out of the station, she fidgeted with the border of her sari. How thankful she felt to be sitting next to an open window. She could look out and watch the trees slipping past against the clear blue sky. She could avoid the inquisitive gaze of the other passengers. Most of all she could avoid looking at Shomir - her husband. How strange the word sounded. Was she really married to him - and going on a honeymoon? Two weeks seemed a long time to spend with someone she didn't even know. She stole a quick glance at him. He was smoking a cigarette and gazing lazily out of the window. She hadn't realized before that he smoked.

Turning once more to the window, Meera tried to concentrate on the scene outside, but she was acutely aware of Shomir, sitting across from her. The day that she first met him was clearly imprinted on her mind.

It was on a Tuesday, 17 July 1970, exactly twenty days ago. Rain had been falling steadily all morning. Her mother had come into her room. She put her arm around Meera and confided to her, "We are expecting some visitors this evening. A young man and his family are coming to take a look at you, and if they are pleased, they may make a proposal of marriage."

"But you and father will refuse it, won't you? Just like you did the others."

"I don't think so. You've just passed your M.A. It's time you were married, don't you think?"

"Why do I have to get married? Don't you want me anymore?" Meera had burst out, clenching her hands in fear.

"Of course we do. It's because we want to see you comfortably settled and married into a good family, that we are keen on this match. Your uncle knows these people, the son has just returned from England after spending three years there."

"How do I know if I'll like him?" Meera had demanded.

"Don't worry, if your father and I are impressed with him, I am sure you will be too. If we aren't satisfied, we'll refuse the proposal. After all, we do want you to be happy."

"But I'm quite happy here with you," Meera had said.

Her mother had laughed, "Come now, be a good girl and find something pretty to wear for this evening - maybe your green silk sari, and don't sulk."

After she had left, Meera had thought about what her mother had said. She knew that she would not disobey her parents because she loved them too much. She had always been a dutiful daughter and would do what was expected of her, even if she didn't agree with them at times.

How nervous Meera had been that evening as she sat close to her mother, her trembling hands folded in her lap. Mrs. Banerjee and her eldest daughter had asked her so many questions, "Can you sing? Do you play any musical instrument?"

"Yes." "No." She had answered in monosyllables, her voice sticking to her throat. Shomir had spoken to her father at the other end of the room. She had been overcome with shyness and

had not looked at him once.

Next to her, the fat lady coughed loudly breaking into Meera's reverie. Startled, she looked inside the train and her eyes met Shomir's. He smiled at her, but she did not respond. Instead, she turned to the window, but not without noting how attractive he was and what a nice suit he was wearing - dark blue.

She didn't remember what he wore at the wedding or the reception. They had been surrounded by relatives all the time. Even this morning, what a big crowd had been waiting to see them off on their honeymoon. Meera thought about it again. How she had clung to her mother and wept.

"I don't want to go, Ma, I'm afraid. Please let me go home with you," she had begged.

But her mother had whispered, "Hush, my child, you are married now. You must go with your husband and be a good wife. I will miss you too." Her eyes had filled with tears as she bid Meera good-bye.

In the taxi, Shomir had tried to console her. "You'll like Digha," he had ventured. "It's not so crowded at this time of the year. I guess people don't want to be caught in the Monsoon rains." But Meera had sat silently, looking out of the window and dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief from time to time.

She felt a little foolish now, as she thought of her behaviour this morning. What must Shomir think of her? she wondered unhappily. Did he think she was childish? In spite of feeling uneasy at being with him, Meera was experiencing a kind of excitement, too, which was so new to her. She didn't know why, but it was important to her to know that he approved of her.

An hour later, the train pulled into Karakpur station. They sat at a table and sipped hot tea in the station restaurant while they waited for the bus to Digha.

"Tired?" Shomir asked gently.

"No," she lied, staring into her cup.

"We'll have a good rest when we get to Digha," he smiled kindly. Toying nervously with her cup, Meera did not answer.

As Shomir left to see if the bus had arrived, Meera watched him furtively. How tall he was - at least six feet. She liked the way he walked - with an easy confident stride.

During the long bus journey they sat together; Meera was tired of looking through windows. Self-consciously she played with her gold bangles. After a while Shomir said, "Look through the window."

The trees and bushes had given way to the sandy beach. Soon the blue-green ocean came into full view. A little gasp of pleasure escaped Meera's lips as she took it in. She had never been to the sea-side before.

Moments later the bus stopped. As she climbed out, the wind caught at her rosy silk sari, exposing her painted toenails and slender feet in their red sandals. Using both arms, Meera held down her billowing sari as she walked towards the white, two-storeyed hotel with a neon sign over the entrance which read "Aloka." Shomir joined her after taking care of their luggage. They walked up the black stone stairs to their bedroom. Shomir closed the door, took off his coat, and flung himself down on the bed. "Phew, that feels good."

Meera looked at him, then at the other bed. She wanted to lie down, too, but she felt awkward with him there. She had always had a room to herself at home.

"Shall I order some lunch for us up here? I'm starving aren't you?"

"I think I'll have a shower first," Meera murmured. She felt so hot and sweaty after all that travelling. Her mouth was unusually dry, too. How self-conscious she felt as she walked to pick

up her suitcase. But Shomir was there before her.

“Let me do that for you. It’s quite heavy,” he said, putting it on the bed. Then he turned towards Meera. Cupping his hands around her face, he kissed her on the lips. She looked at him for a second, her brown eyes wide with surprise. No one had ever done that to her before. She rushed out of the room and stood gripping the white balcony. The sea stretched out in front of her. A fresh breeze fanned her burning face. She felt a slight movement behind her. Shomir had come out. He lit a cigarette. “I’m sorry if I upset you just now.”

She could hear concern in his voice. “Would you like to go down to the beach after lunch?”

Meera smiled slowly and nodded.

Later, they lazed on the sunlit beach teasing tiny little crabs which sidled cautiously out of their holes in the sand. When Meera or Shomir gently threw pebbles at them, they scuttled back into their holes, only to venture out again a little later. How Meera and Shomir laughed when a big wave caught them unawares and splashed them.

Meera was surprised to find that she was enjoying herself so much. Shomir was good company, too. He told her about England. “People are very polite there. They don’t shove and push to get into a bus or theatre, like they do here.”

“Why did you leave?” she asked shyly.

“I got homesick. I missed the crowds in the streets, my family, my friends and the sunshine.” He smiled at her, “Now that I know you, I’m even happier that I came back.”

Meera felt herself blushing. She looked towards the sea. The blood was rushing through her veins just like the waves rushing towards the shore. She didn’t feel afraid anymore, but she did feel her body tingle like ice one minute and burn like fire the next. It must be the sea air, she rationalized to herself, I’ve heard people say that it affects one this way.

That evening after dinner, they strolled along the beach. Day became night. The water turned from blue-green to a dark mysterious presence. Big clouds were massing in the sky.

“It looks as if it might rain,” Shomir murmured, “Let’s go back.”

Once they were safely back in their room, Shomir asked suddenly, “You don’t feel unhappy anymore, do you? I mean being here alone with me?”

“Oh, no I - I ...,” But Meera’s voice trailed off into silence. She couldn’t explain how she felt to Shomir. She even found it difficult to explain to herself.

Shomir came over to her. He tilted her face up so that their eyes met. “I’m going to kiss you again,” he warned “Promise you won’t run away this time.”

“I promise.” Meera heard her voice say with an eagerness she could not believe.

A new Meera seemed to be in control of her, someone she did not recognize - someone who appeared to be completely unpredictable.