

# *Sunset train. . .*

*By*

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*“Chinnu... Tell me something. What if we separate, what if we are never to see each other again. Ofcourse, you’ll marry someone. But will you name your daughter after me?”*

As I waited by the taxi outside her room to accompany her to the railway station, I could sense in me a sudden desire to erase everything that had happened between us till that day. The device in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, which erased selected people or things from one’s memory, came to my mind. I badly wanted that device because whatever pain I felt then seemed possible only because of whatever had happened between us in the past - in the last three years. Three short, lovely years! If I had not met her for the first time at my friend’s birthday, if I had not called a week after that and told her that I wanted to see her, if I had not seen her and revealed my love for her, and if I had not loved her, would I have felt whatever I felt then? Whatever the answer was, I had made up my mind to not see her again after that day. I had made a promise to her and to myself to never try to contact her after that evening... after that last trip to the station together.

She walked slowly to the taxi. As she bent into the backseat, I noticed her smile at me - a smile of greeting, or of love, or of mockery. I sat beside her and immediately felt sorry for myself. I felt I had missed an opportunity to make a statement by sitting in the front seat beside the driver. Then, one of two things would have happened. She would have asked me to come back, to which I would have given some obviously false excuse, or she would have just calmly looked out of the window, hurt. The taxi started with her calmly looking out of the window. The setting evening sun seemed larger and redder than usual, not the pleasant sun which happily held the light when we casually strolled along the streets of the colony every evening. The trees that bent over onto the road seemed to cast darker and longer shadows and the birds seemed to give out louder cries. It was as if they realized that she was leaving and were unhappy.

I turned towards her. She sat still with her face in the window, afraid that I might start a conversation on a forbidden topic. I knew that she would not turn until I said something. She was strong and she had always been so. As I looked at her, I realized that she looked much older. Her form was bent and her hands looked thin and weak. She wore a dark blue dress, which was gifted to her by her cousin whom, she told me a few weeks ago, she was getting married to. In her lap, she had placed a cover which I had not noticed when she got into the taxi, when I was busy trying to read her face, trying to find out if she was in tears for having to leave me and the city where we spent most of our time together. The cover had

two dolls peering out with their large, round plastic lifeless eyes. I immediately recognized those dolls I gifted on her birthday. I had given her two because she said that the first one, the one I liked most, looked shabby and torn. There was a purse – a pink something – in her left hand which was covered to the wrist by her *dupatta*. I hated the purse because that, along with the dress had been gifted to her by her fiancée. I wondered how she could be so insensitive as to be wearing that dress and carrying the purse with her when she knew that I would be accompanying her for the last time. She had her own ways of hurting me and she never failed.

The radio in the car suddenly started playing the song '*Aisi ulji nazar unse hatthi nahi... daant se reshmi dor katthi nahi...*' I turned towards the driver and asked him to turn off the radio.

She said, "It's your favourite song, isn't it?"

"It was..."

She said nothing for some time but held my eyes as if accusing me of saying something that made no sense in her simple straight world. I turned away from her and towards the window.

She said, "If you're going to behave in this manner, why did you come?"

I waited... I did not know what to say... Was there something not right with the way I was behaving? I did not ask her to take care of herself when she would be gone. I did not repeat that I would miss her, that I loved her and that I did not want her to leave. I slowly turned in her direction and found her staring silently, angrily at the road and at the vehicles in front of the car. There was something in the way she looked, and I badly wanted to get out of the car and run away. Did she not know the reason? Did she not know why I was the way I was? She knew.... But she wanted to hear it from me. But was I, at that moment, ready to give in? I had made a promise to myself that I would not cry that day, at least not in front of her. I had already done a lot of that in the last three days in my room and over the phone. No, I would not give in... but at that moment, I wanted to say something that would hurt her, and that would make her cry...I wanted her to cry.

"I am afraid I do not know..." I said, "Probably, one of the reasons is your leaving. Nothing to do with love! You don't have to worry about that. Also, there is an issue at office which I am unable to get out of."

I laughed theatrically and continued, "Anyway, I shall not allow office issues to come into personal life."

She remained silent. I asked, "By the way, you haven't forgotten anything, have you? Do you have the ticket?"

"Yes..."

"Good... As you know, I am terrified of journeys because I always forget to carry the ticket. I returned from the station many times to get it from the room. But it's usually not a big problem because I reach the station very early....Yeah ... Anyway, AC or Sleeper?"

"Sleeper."

"Oh yes... yes... I am sorry. I forgot that you do not like travelling in AC. In Sleeper, you say, people are friendlier. You can talk to them and spend time easily with nothing much to think or worry about." I was running out of words. "How is your brother? Will he come to station to receive you?"

"Yes..."

I could not continue further. I just stopped abruptly.

"You are not normal." She said.

"Aren't I?" I said, smiling.

"No."

"Yeah. I am sorry. I think these office issues are catching up. Seriously, I shouldn't have come. I am afraid I am spoiling your evening."

"I know it is not the office issue." She replied, not looking at me.

I wanted to stay silent but blurted out, "What else do you think?"

She just shrugged and said, "I don't know."

I got back to looking out of the window. The taxi stopped at a traffic signal and it was clear that it would take *some* time to get out of it. An old woman came hobbling to the window and stretched out her hand. Her spectacles were broken and her blouse was torn at the shoulders. I reached for my purse and as I struggled to get it out of the pocket, Swapna held out to me a ten rupee note. I pulled out a ten rupee note from my purse and gave it to the old woman. Swapna did not move and she still had the ten rupee note in her hand. I returned the purse back to the pocket and continued looking outside the window. The sun had already set and it was getting darker. Dark clouds floated lazily across the sky. There was a forecast of rain in the evening – not very unusual in Bangalore. Did I hurt Swapna by not taking her note? I kept thinking about it. I wanted to take the note from her, open the door, find the old lady and give it to her. But I did not. I sat looking out of the window. It is not always wise to do whatever you feel you have to. Wisdom is not only in doing what is right but also in rightly judging what is not.

The taxi started and as it turned left, I realized that we had already covered seventy percent of the distance. To the left, outside the window, was the *Blue Giants Exhibition*, where I had gone with her for the first time. She had said, "Chinnu, I love the exhibition. I want to go there with you. Shall we go?" We were there that evening and had visited all the stalls as we walked with her arm locked in mine. I remember her saying that she loved chocolates. She loved DAIRY MILK. I decided to buy her one at the station. She told me many times that she was afraid of the giant wheel and what she loved in an exhibition other than the stalls was the doggy-train which, as its name suggests had all its compartments in the shape of a dog and moved like one. She had wanted me to run with the train as she sat in it. I knew that she was joking until she one day asked, "What will you do if I am going away in a train? You must catch the train, only then will I be yours. What will you do?" I had answered, "Swapna... If you want me to catch the train, then you'll pull the chain. The choice will be yours whether to stay or to go away."

The city outside the taxi suddenly seemed empty to me. How was I going to live in it without her? We had visited almost every place and every restaurant in the city together. Wherever I go, her thoughts and the beautiful times I had shared with her would haunt me. I did not know why it suddenly seemed so difficult to live without her; it seemed as if I had not existed before I fell in love. During the three months before that evening, on more than one occasion, I had considered the option of leaving the city and getting away before she left. I had considered running away from her and regretted having fallen in love with her. But why did all this happen? Why? I never thought that she would call me one day to declare that she did not want me in her life, that her parents were not happy and that she could do nothing against their wishes. *She could do nothing against their wishes*. I continued looking out of the window. But why did I fall in love with her in the first place? I really did not know then... I do not know now. Perhaps it was love at first sight; however, I never believed that such things could happen. All I ever knew was that it was unbelievably beautiful. I had talked to her for only a few minutes on that day, but every word we had exchanged remained with me for the next three years. I had spent a week after our first meeting, dissecting my every feeling and analyzing my every thought. I had already taken her number but I was waiting for at least a week to pass before I called her. It was not part of any strategy. I just did not want to give her the impression that I was desperate.

We reached the station. I did not want to get out of the taxi... I knew that the next one hour would be very painful.

The railway station was a terrorizing huge structure with a large hall between the booking counters and the platforms. The hall had a number of steel chairs arranged in long rows. As we placed the luggage at one of the chairs, I told her that I needed to get a platform-ticket. She asked me if I had enough change. I nodded and left for the counter, and she settled down in the chair. It was not a weekend, and the station was not too crowded. There was a short queue at the counter, and I just joined it. I wanted to turn back to see if she was looking at me, but I could not bring myself to do it. I just looked straight at the counter. *What if I turned back and then found her crying for me? That would be so nice. But what if she were just talking to her cousin on phone, laughing, sharing an intimate joke?* It did not take me long to get the ticket. As I checked the date on it and turned around, I found her looking at me intently. As soon as our eyes met, she turned away. I shoved the ticket into my pocket and sat beside her. She told me that the train was already on the platform, but that there was a good half-an-hour before it departed. I smiled and said, "Nice... So, we have only half-an-hour more?" She nodded. My heart was being torn apart. I wanted to say something... "Coffee?" "Yes."

I got up and started walking towards the coffee-shop. There was an old couple, to my right, sitting on a bench. As I passed them, they stopped talking and stared fixedly at me. I could not figure out the expression on their faces. Was it one of surprise, or shock or wonder? I did not know how I could inspire such feelings in them. I suddenly realized that there were tears in my eyes. I hurriedly wiped them but tried not to rub them too hard. I was afraid that they'd turn red and betray the truth that I was crying. I wondered if she had seen those tears too. No... No... I would have known. I would have. . . I decided to be cheerful. I asked for two *coffees* and turned back. She was still looking at me. I waved at her joyfully and was sure that I tricked her into believing that I was happy. She smiled in return. I told myself that as long as I tried to forget that I loved her, I could be happy and cheerful. *So, I tried to forget that I loved her.* When I reached her with the coffees, I found a guy sitting diagonally opposite to her, ogling at her. I looked at him with extreme seriousness. On realizing that I was observing him, he turned away. But then something struck me – something that I had not considered until then. As she took the coffee from my hand, I kept thinking about this. Why did I look at that guy in that manner? What difference did it make anymore? This guy was just looking at

her, but her cousin would marry her, touch her, kiss her, sleep with her. Bloody hell!!!! The coffee fell on my shoe. She asked me if I was alright. I said, "Office issues..." "Shut up!" she said. I shut up...

Does that machine in that movie really work? Can we erase someone completely from our memories? Can I erase her completely from my memories? I just wondered if this was at all possible. Then what would become of the blankness and emptiness that her absence leaves in the space of memories? Does it look like a hole or like a blank image in a flawed photograph? A better solution would be to replace the person with something else – something or someone that could never be lost. But who could I replace her with? In the last three years, was there anything that could take her place, any friends, any avocation? I, with shock and surprise, realized that there was no one. In the last three years, everything that I had seen had her and only her in it. I also grasped the fact that at that moment what I was most afraid of was not losing her but leading a life without her. I wanted to shout out in frustration. I was losing it.... But it was not the time for emotions. I had made a promise to myself....I shall keep it.

"Only fifteen minutes left..." she said.

"Yes.. yes... Let's start moving. What's the platform number?"

"7"

We picked up the luggage and moved towards the platform. As we walked, she said, "Chinnu... I am sorry... Please be happy. Marry someone better than me and be happy." I did not know what to say. I wanted to slap her but also wanted to hug her and cry. Seriously, that was what I wanted to do... I did not and I kept walking. She continued, "I am really sorry." With great control, I asked, "Can you stay back and not marry him?" "No.. That I can't." "Then don't be sorry." She said nothing. It was all coming to an end. I could feel it. This was not the first time that I had accompanied her to the station but this was supposed to be our last. I did not hurry. There was time. She was silent for a few seconds and then asked, "Do you remember the question I asked you a few months ago?" "Which one?" "Will you name your daughter after me?" I wanted to cry out that she was torturing me with these questions. What difference would my answer make to her? She would not stay back. I stopped and looked at her, straight into her eyes. I wanted to kiss her and I tried to read from her eyes whether she wanted me to do it. I stood, holding the luggage, the grip on the bag tightening as emotion flooded me from inside. It was getting increasingly difficult. I had no courage to hold her. I did not want to cry.

"Which compartment?" I asked her. "S4", she answered.

As I walked towards the compartment with her following me, I suddenly realized why I had agreed to accompany her to the station. It was a sudden realization - it was something that I had kept hidden somewhere inside. I had been wondering all the while, why, in spite of all the pain, I wanted to be with her. It was not just because I loved her. There was something much more than that. I was there with her at the station because, even at that moment, I felt that she would change her mind and come back to me. I had all the while believed that her love for me was stronger than her desire to please her parents. But now, everything seemed drained away. I could no longer see her love for me. What I saw in her eyes was just pity for someone who was getting wasted away in his immense love for her. In the last three months, she had been successful in convincing herself that she did not love me. I knew this because she had told me that she did not love me anymore. She had said that she had suffered all the while trying to convince her parents and that she believed that she would be able to fall in love later with the one she would marry. Yes, she had said that and I had no idea if it was to hurt me, but I was not sure why she insisted on knowing the answer to her question.

"Swapna, do you love me?"

"Did I not answer before?"

"I do not remember your answer."

"No. I don't love you."

"Then please do not ask me to be happy. It should not matter to you anymore..."

We reached the compartment. I did not want to enter the train. So, I handed her the bags and she carried them inside. I realized that she had not taken any water bottle and so, bought it as she arranged her luggage inside the train. When I returned to the compartment, I found her settled in one of the windows waiting for me. I handed her the bottle. "I want my answer." She said. *She wanted her answer.* I looked at her, at her questioning eyes, at her quivering lips. Was she crying? "No Swapna. I'll not name my daughter after you." "Why not?". I thought about the question. Did I really need to answer the question? I waited. A lady announced that the train would start in a few minutes. I looked at her. *The promise... the promise to not cry. . .*

"Swapna... After today, everything will change. I'll try to forget everything that happened between us. I'll learn to hate you. Even now, at this moment, I do not hate you. But later, I will surely do. When I do not want to remember you, why would I name my daughter after you? Believe me, I want to forget you and

everything that happened between us." I paused for a few seconds and added, "Do me a favour. Don't let me know anything about you. I want to know nothing about you. Nothing at all... I don't want to imagine your happy life with him. I don't want to think about you when I sit here in this station for the next two hours trying to not think about you, but trying to relive the moment when you first kissed me, when you hugged me and asked me to promise that I'd never leave you. I don't want to think about you every night as I go to sleep reminding myself of the silly nothings you say on phone, kissing me Goodnight. No Swapna, I don't want this... Please.... Try to not come into my life again..."

I turned away from her. I did not want to think about what I had just said because I was afraid that I would feel sorry and then tell her that I did not mean it. I meant every word of what I had said. The train had started and I turned back in her direction and then, I realized that I had not bought her the chocolate – a DAIRY MILK. I ran. I ran for the nearest stall and bought the chocolate. The train had acquired speed; it was no longer slowly dragging itself. I kept running with the chocolate in my hand. She saw me running and hurried from the window to the door.

*What will you do if I am going away in a train? You must catch the train, only then will I be yours. What will you do?* The words kept ringing in my mind. I ran. I could see her waving at me. She did not understand why I was running. The train gained speed. I did not want to throw the chocolate because I still believed I would be able to reach her. The train ran faster and faster, out of the station. I kept running till the end of the platform and then stopped with my hands on my knees and the chocolate still in my hand. I sat down on the platform, tears flowing out of my eyes and words out of my mouth, "Swapna. . . Swapna. Come back. . . I love you."