

Whistle Stop

The man in the pale yellow shirt could be seen clearly against the backdrop of trees that skirted the open space at the edge of the village. Bhojo – that was what the village called itself, though no outsider really associated the name with it. Bhojo was, to anyone who traveled by train, a railway station. It had an open platform, sheltered partially by a corrugated tin roof along half its length. The only enclosed area was the little caged room that served as the ticket counter. It was an important stop on the local line of old trains pulled by coal-driven engines, but an insignificant one for the interstate trains bearing such important names as the Brahmaputra Mail and Kamrup Express. These stopped at Bhojo only long enough for a person, already waiting at the door with luggage, to throw them down and jump off. You couldn't get down to buy a Fanta and hop back on or anything like that. In any case, the station did not have a stand that sold Coca-Cola or Fanta, only one with colored sugar water in thick, clear bottles. Sometimes a villager would offer another choice – *daab*, the juice of a whole coconut, husk and all. The passenger would point to one, the top would be quickly chopped off, a flimsy straw stuck in, and an awkward exchange would take place over the top bar of the coach windows, the bottom two gaps being too narrow for a whole coconut to pass through.

Always, just as a train was about to arrive, Motiya the *chaiwallah* would hobble on to the platform, his wiry body weighed down by the wooden tray hanging from his neck by a thick coir rope. The tray carried about three dozen small earthenware cups – the kind you could throw out the window to break on the ground, where the pieces would lie till they became one with the earth again. The two kettles of steaming tea, already mixed with milk and sugar, he carried in his hands. He would walk up and down along the platform screaming “*Chaaaaai*”, hands would pop out the windows, and cups and money changed hands. The tray would nearly always empty out. This was tea country, and even the tea dust Motiya got hold of was stronger, fresher and better than anything you could get in the bigger towns and cities. Motiya's business was done in minutes, and by the time the train pulled out, he could be seen walking back to the village, on the

little path near the rivulet that swelled into a river when the rains came. He lived at the edge of the village, in a one-room hut. A little table was his tea stall, and this he kept next to the packed mud stoop of his house. He would sit there chewing betel nut, talking desultorily to the few villagers who stopped by for tea, or betel nuts or *beedis*, till it was time to make his tea and run to the station.

This was the way of the village. It was just a space between the station where people arrived and left, and the town people were leaving or going to; nothing happened there. A few of the villagers farmed their meager parcels of land; some others worked in the nearby tea estates that bordered the village. A few lucky ones worked in the big houses of the town that was about four miles away. The villagers' lives were punctuated by the daily bustle of the station – the Bhojo known to other people.

It was already the middle of summer, the day the man in the pale yellow shirt stood at the edge of the village. It was still very early in the morning, and dawn had not yet broken. The first birds had just started chittering softly, but hadn't left their nests yet. The air was very still, promising a very hot, humid day. The threat of thunderstorms always hung in the air, and even though these might cool the day, one day of continued rain could lead to floods. There was a golden red cast in the horizon to the north, not the sun, but the glow from the liquid petroleum gas fires that the distant oil companies burnt off. So the man could be seen quite clearly, and he was the first thing Biku saw as he approached the clumps of Lantana bushes that grew all around the little clearing. Biku and his friends called them shit-flowers, because that is what they did there. He had heard other people call them malaria bushes, because that is what you got if the mosquitoes that lived there bit you.

Biku had eaten too many lychees the evening before, and now, early in the morning with some time still left to sleep, he was paying the price. Still, he did not regret it. The prize of a broken branch bearing an abundance of lychees, which his sister had carried away from the big-house orchard, was too much to resist. The light goose-pimpled pink skin had broken easily and

the white fleshy fruit plopped deliciously into his mouth. Even as he bit into one, the juice dribbling down his chin, he had reached for another, and another. They had to finish the whole lot before coming home, or his mother would have yelled at him as usual.

“Thief! Good-for-nothing! Just because school is closed, you think you can roam around like a wild animal all day. Eleven years old, and you cannot lend your father a hand at the field. Do you not see how hard it is for him, all alone?”

She would ignore his older sister completely, and she was twelve!

Now he hurried towards the clumps of bushes where all the villagers on the edge relieved themselves. All over the countryside, the delicate, miniature pink and yellow flowers grew wild, never to be admired for their beauty, noticed only when someone squatted next to them.

As Biku sat, shielded by a bush in front of him, he watched the man sleepily, his eyes half open, waiting to see what would happen next. He didn't care if the man saw him from that distance, but he wanted to be done in case the man walked that way. As Biku watched, the man stayed where he was, his head bent forward slightly and his arms hanging slack by his side. Maybe he was dozing against the tree, Biku thought.

When Biku finished, he washed himself with the water he had carried in a little metal pot, and stood up. His movement did not make the man look up. Biku was wide awake now and ready to begin his day. Putting his pot down, Biku decided he would go see what the stranger was doing. Yes, he would walk right up and ask, “What are you standing there for?”

Biku skipped through the bushes, light on his feet now that his bowel was clear and he had something definite to do. In minutes he stood before the man. He looked straight at the half-open eyes that looked straight at him. Just as Biku was about to ask him what he was doing, he noticed the man's mouth. The man's mouth hung slightly open, the tongue sticking out a bit, bits of foamy blood around his mouth. A knot of black flies had settled on the blood. Biku took in the rope that hung around the man's neck, pushing his head forward a bit. Biku's mouth that had

started the words ‘What’ now opened wider. In a flash he turned and started to run, his mouth wide open, screaming, “Maa, O ma. Maa!”

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By noon the area around the tree was even busier than the local bazaar on market day. The two local constables – Bhanu and Kamal – were having a hard time keeping people away; they had to shoo them off with their *lathis*, the thick, long sticks the only weapons they were allowed to carry. They made a big show of yelling: “Move along now! What’re you gawking for? Haven’t you seen a dead person before?” But their eyes pleaded with the neighbors and friends they were chasing away. Bhanu shrugged at his uncle, gesturing with his head towards his boss, the OC, indicating that there was nothing else he could say now. The OC, the officer in command of the local station, was the most important person there. He stood with his hands on his hips, looking up at the man’s face.

Kamal sidled up to him. “Tch, tch. He’s so well dressed, and look at those fancy shoes. Why would he commit suicide?”

The OC huffed. “This is not a suicide. Look at his feet. They are touching the ground. How could he have hung himself?”

“Sir. What do you mean – not hung himself? He’s hanging by a rope; what else could it be?”

The OC turned away and snapped out, “Bhanu! And you, Kamal! Stay here and let no one come near this tree. Touch nothing! Do you hear me? If I find any of your hundred and one uncles and cousins near here, I’ll beat you with those sticks.”

Kamal came to attention, his eyes round and important. “But sir, where are you going? Aren’t we going to get him down?”

“No, this is a case for the higher-ups now. I have to phone them from the jeep,” the OC said walking away.

Within two minutes of his leaving, a buzz went up from the people who now stood about fifty yards away from the tree. “CID! CID!”

“He’s surely calling the CID if it is a murder!”

The villagers were thrilled at this new development. Murder! CID! The Criminal Investigation Division was something they saw in films and TV shows, not in their own little village.

Kamal and Bhanu stood guard, pretending to be above it all, looking at the man’s face.

“Oy, Bhanu. Look at him. A man from who knows where comes here and dies, and because of him, we get to work with CID!” Kamal’s eyes shone with sheer excitement.

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