

## GODHARA

Sita joined the increasing line of passengers outside Ticket Window One at Ayodhya railway station. Ahead of her, a lanky man shifted his feet. She knew why he was trying his best to maintain his distance: she smelled like rotten vegetables, a stench that lingered with her since she had started to work as a house-maid scrubbing dirty dishes. She could imagine the peevish expression on the man's face. Sita scuffed her feet, pulled up the canvas bag strap that was sliding down her shoulder, raised her eyelids, which a moment ago were focused on Pilu, her three-year-old son, and diverted her stare from the man. Sita looked up at the clock on the wall; it was half past twelve. She continually swatted away flies that swarmed around her, their buzz making her deaf to the hubbub of the railway station.

Sita held onto Pilu with one hand. With the other, she examined her leathery hands — hard to the touch, the tips of her fingers rough and textured, fingernails black with dirt, crooked as if she'd been gnawing on them. Pilu was mostly quiet, his gaunt figure showing traces of childhood by the occasional waddling he engaged in, thumping tiny feet on the dull mosaic railway station floor. Sita noticed the signs of malnutrition — a large, disproportionate head, a starved thin body, dark bowed legs — and smiled. *Pilu will be healthy like the other children.* The ticket to Ahmedabad would change their future. She blamed her husband Biju for the family's physical, mental and emotional deterioration, reflected in their destitute state. With a hopeful smile, dreaming of better days ahead, Sita looked at Pilu's innocent face, gently rubbed her hands down his scrawny cheeks. Her uncle in Ahmedabad had gotten Biju a job at a dry cleaning store. The job would pay three times what she presently earned, and both Sita and Biju embraced the idea of Ahmedabad, a passport to prosperity and better life. Sita recalled her uncle's assurance: "If Biju works hard at this new job, he can get frequent raises." She prayed that this opportunity would transform Biju, make him a responsible husband and a caring father.

Sita was sad to leave Ayodhya, where she had spent her entire life, but was also happy to bid her birthplace a final goodbye. Today she observed the railway station with a child-like

curiosity. In the afternoon, the station was busier than a bazaar. It buzzed with humanity: trains entering and exiting the station screeched, arrival and departure announcements blared in a monotone, luggaged passengers jostled amid the hustle–bustle of the railway station. Suddenly, a rush on another ticket window resulted in a fight when a passenger broke the line. People crawled in like ants, but the few policemen in khaki uniforms and porters in red were hard to miss. She'd been aware of the recent explosion in the number of rich and poor visitors to Ayodhya. Every day the crowds bearing orange flags multiplied; these people, she knew, had perhaps come to Ayodhya as part of a religious group.

Sita didn't often consciously think about politics or religion. But the thought of a comfortable life made her mind alive with things that were foreign to it. Or maybe it was optimism, which expanded her thoughts beyond her family and the perennial worry of food. Sita knew that the sudden increase in the railway traffic to Ayodhya was because it was the Hindu Lord *Rama's* birthplace. It was also her birthplace, she thought. How much had changed in Ayodhya since the politicians started exploiting the fact that Ayodhya was native to *Rama*. *Were the orange flags just a bunch of sanctimonious hypocrites?* She muttered a prayer for forgiveness the instant this thought crossed her mind. She was aware that the subtle communal tension between Hindus and Muslims could explode anytime. Sita was fortunate; neither she nor her family had ever been a victim of the civil unrest, but she always feared the worse. She could recall the riots that took place some years ago in December. Ayodhya was no longer a safe haven, this she knew. Sita felt relieved that her family would no longer live in the city. It was like living on the rim of a volcano.

Sita saw some children pulling at their mothers' saris, displaying a stubborn attitude, demanding a fifty-paisa coin to drop into the weighing scale. She glared at the scale as if suddenly jealous of the attention it was receiving. Its dimensions made it look like a monster that refused to work without devouring the fifty-paisa coin. When in operation, the scale looked enormous. It was balanced against a wall, tall as an average human being, with red, yellow,

blue and flashing green bald-headed bulbs. Money lit up the machine, Sita concluded on seeing the bulbs flash with the click of the coin dropping into the slot. For a second, she wanted to use the scale to read her future — the machine printed tickets with the weight on one side and future on the other, which was never a bad one. If anything, the future on the ticket would make her feel lighthearted. But leaving her spot in the ticket line meant losing it, and she was reluctant to take that risk.

Sita pulled Pilu closer to her. It troubled her to see his stunted growth. A glass of milk each day was what he needed. She succeeded in making him smile by saying, “Look! A moving train.” She picked Pilu up and planted a quick kiss on his cheek.

“Why don’t we ride a train every day, Ma?”

Sita paused. She hunted for a response to satisfy Pilu’s curiosity. “Riding trains every day will make you dizzy,” she told him.

Mention of the word “train” excited Pilu. He repeated it like a parrot. Sita was thrilled she could delight him without spending a single penny.

She was coming closer and closer to the ticket window, when suddenly a middle-aged man pushed against her and Pilu.

“Be in your spot,” said the middle-aged man to Sita in a surly manner, brushing his hand over an exceptionally odd long beard that reached halfway to his stomach. He tried to get ahead of Sita in the line in front of the ticket window.

“I am in line. Where else do you think I am?” Sita replied indignantly.

“You were behind me, and see how you’ve been trying to get ahead of me?” He looked toward the other people in the line: “All of us are here for a train ticket only. You aren’t anyone special!”

“Fear the Lord before accusing a lone woman. Just because I am a woman and am—”

Another man, a fairly aged one, interrupted Sita. “Don’t get into trouble, *beti*. Get your ticket and leave.”

Overcome by the reverential tone in his drawl, the experience in dealing with life reflecting from his haggard-looking skin and tiny eyes set deep down in their sockets, Sita felt compelled to adhere to the fatherly advice. She stayed in her spot, quiet and unwavering, waiting for her turn. She looked at the big wall clock in front of her and wished the clock hands would move faster. It was impossible for Sita to hear the tick-tock of the clock — it was lost in the hum of human and mechanical noises. She was keen to reach Ahmedabad sooner, to start a new life at a new place amongst an unknown set of people, and to forge a new identity.

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Sita's lemon-yellow blouse looked dull. Dirt had caked around the edge of her blouse's sleeves, sleeves that ended at her elbows, and at the folds. The rotten vegetable stench emanating from her became stronger when she lifted her hands, revealing discolored patches of semi-dried sweat at the armpits. Her burgundy polyester sari was frayed at the edges, smudged, covered with pills of fuzz. Because of the breeze created by the ceiling fan whizzing on full speed, the thin polyester fabric of Sita's sari often rippled and ballooned round her legs.

Sita felt uncomfortable in her dirty, rumpled clothes when she looked at the clean clothes of people surrounding her. She knew she looked disheveled and poor. She had free formal education until class five at a government-run school. At nine years of age, family circumstances made it necessary to quit school; she joined hands with her mother in working as a maid in people's houses, carrying on the family profession. At first, Sita was amazed at her mother's speed and efficiency. Her mother cleaned dishes, swept and mopped five houses in the time that Sita could barely do one. Sita was glad that she was taking a step toward a better life before her son reached school age. That she would be able to afford a decent education for him in Ahmedabad made her less regretful about her own incomplete schooling.

Just when she was daydreaming about her future in Ahmedabad, building castles in the thick air of the railway platform, Pilu stepped on a pool of vomit and broke into a whimper; it also

broke her reverie. Sita was sure she was not going to leave her spot and look for water to clean his foot, especially when she was only one place away from the ticket window.

In front of Sita, a stout woman, probably the wife of a well-to-do businessman, dressed in an expensive henna-green silk sari, was counting the change the man from inside the window had slipped onto her hand. Her exquisitely carved gold bangles clicked, producing a soft jingle. Sita looked at her own pair of glass bangles dangling on bony wrists. In a quest to calm Pilu down, Sita told him, "Papa will get peanuts for you. Stop crying." The mention of peanuts cheered up Pilu; the crying changing into a blubber and then to silence — Sita feared this, so unlike a child to be quiet, she thought — and he raised his foot from the ground. People behind Sita in the line distanced themselves from Pilu.

At last it was Sita's turn to buy a ticket.

"Two Sabarmati, till Ahmedabad," Sita spoke into the circle cut out in the glass window. She looked at the once transparent glass of the window, now a bearer of the testimony of passengers' fingerprints and sweaty hands.

"No reservation. Train full," a male voice from inside said matter-of-factly.

"I just want tickets, not reservation." Sita said to the man inside, her voice firm.

She knew even if there were reserved seats available on the train, she could not afford them.

"Hundred and eighty rupees," the man said from inside the ticket-window.

Sita pulled out a carefully wrapped and knotted handkerchief from under her left breast inside her blouse, undid the knot, and took out two bills of a hundred each. The green bills smelled of her sweat. She shoved the money into the window. There was a clamping sound. The man inside stamped two tickets and handed them over to Sita with fifteen rupees in change.

"I gave two hundred, this is just fifteen," Sita said, annoyed, demanding an explanation.

"No change. Next," the man replied nonchalantly and moved onto the next customer in the line.

Sita stared at the uniformed railway officer, his sky blue shirt with a black badge on the top left of his chest announcing his name, Vijay Kumar in capital letters, a framed poster of Mahatma Gandhi on the wall behind him saying "Truth Always Wins" in Hindi, and a calendar announcing February, 2000, in bold red. The air conditioner inside the ticket booth blew cool air. Calendar pages flapped. She drew in a puff of the cool air before turning her back on him. Sita knew she was not getting her five rupees back. She knew she could do nothing about it.

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The Sabarmati Express would arrive at Platform Number One. It was Sita's job to hold onto seats in the reserved compartment. The general coach would be crammed with people like her, people without reservations. "Get into the first second-class reserved compartment, and I'll join you," Biju had said to her. She was pleased that finally Biju demonstrated he had some concern for his family. She took pride in this decision of Biju's, a confident one, probably his first after their marriage. Without a reservation, she had reached Platform Number One way before the train would arrive. Thus she would be among the first few passengers to try to acquire a seat by paying the ticket checker. It would cost them a lot less than buying the reservation for all of them.

The vomit on Pilu's foot had thickened into a gel-like consistency. When he walked, his foot made a light slapping noise against the crisscross patterned white Hawai chappal sole. Sita was looking for a water tap, when suddenly her attention was glued to the TV hanging from the ceiling like a fan. The colorful screen relayed images of Hindus and Muslims attacking each other, Hindus armed with tridents and Muslims with anything from a spear to a gun. For a moment Sita was petrified. She recognized the site on TV as Ayodhya. *Biju, where is he?* She was worried, but relaxed the next moment, realizing the TV was playing a clip from riots that took place when she was a lot younger and unmarried. Ayodhya was no longer a peaceful abode on the banks of the holy Saryu. Followers of *Rama* were rapidly increasing. Scenes of

men dressed in orange clothes, wearing shawls saying *Rama* all over the fabric and carrying tridents had become ubiquitous. She saw several of them on the railway platform.

It was the end of February; evenings were still cooler and mostly pleasant. "Look for a window seat facing the platform," Biju had told her. As she recalled her husband's words, pent-up anger against him finally exploded in her mind. *Couldn't he come a little early to the railway station and reserve the seats?* Sita was infuriated. Biju didn't do anything besides play cards or loaf around the neighborhood. If only she could, she'd have walked out on him a long time ago. But this world would not let Pilu or Sita live if she left Biju. She wished leaving him were as simple as abandoning Ayodhya. Sita thought about how her life degraded after marriage, not that the pre-marriage life was any better.

She recalled how proud her parents had been when Biju agreed to marry their daughter. She was also ecstatic about quitting her job cleaning other people's houses, cleaning the dishes they'd cooked in and eaten from. She was happy to leave her parent's house, to leave the everyday burden of food and rent behind her. Sita remembered her mother's joyful face when she learned that Sita would not have to experience the same fate her mother had endured all her life. She would have a husband who had a well-paying job. Sita pretended to be modest when her mother told her how lucky she was to have Biju, who had agreed to marry her knowing that she was coming from a poverty-stricken household.

At eighteen, Sita's world changed. Changed completely. She was a married woman now, a cow lassoed to an unfeeling tree trunk. Sita was not happy to recall this part of her life, but was convinced in an eerie sort of way that recalling her bad moments would mean leaving them behind in Ayodhya. She had become pregnant soon after marriage, and truths surfaced one by one, truths that attacked her dreams, her youth, her nascent motherhood and turned her life into a barren, rancid desert. It took no time for Sita to discover that the clothes Biju wore so proudly were merely "a show off". They belonged to his affluent clients at the dry cleaner's shop where he gave new life and shine to dirty, crumpled clothes. Biju lost his job when he was

caught red-handed wearing the clothes his customers paid to get dry-cleaned. Even before their life as a husband and wife could get on track, Biju had ironed out the ripples of excitement Sita had first experienced with him.

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The clock at Platform Number One, neatly encased in the carved stone tower, struck five times. The Sabarmati Express was not due to arrive until six. Sita amused Pihu by showing him the clock tower. Pihu was excited to see the trains entering and leaving the station.

“A train set! Coaches, lots of them and an engine like the king leading them all,” Sita said and looked at Pihu.

“A train,” Pihu exclaimed. Sita looked into his eyes gleaming with the expectation of a new toy.

Sita pointed out to Pihu the maroon-colored train leaving the platform, asked him if he wanted a toy train like the one that just left them behind. Instead, Pihu wanted the blue train that had slowed to a stop on Platform Three.

“I want that,” he said.

“You’ll have that, The Rajdhani Express, little blue coaches, an electric engine. You’ll have it...your own train set to play with,” Sita said.

“No, I want this one. Ma, stop it! It’s going, it’s gone.” Pihu started to cry.

“Look over there.” Sita diverted Pihu’s attention to another train coming to a halt at Platform Two. “That’s yours.”

At the railway platform, while looking for a place to relax, Sita was careful not to step on the people sleeping under the benches or huddled close to each other on the platform. As soon as someone left, she quickly grabbed the opportunity and settled on the iron bench, squeezed Pihu between her and another passenger, and rested her legs on the canvas bag she was carrying with her. She watched a crowd of people carrying luggage. Very few rolled expensive



V.I.P. branded suitcases; instead most people carried metal trunks painted an absurd green or red with names and complete addresses on them. Uniformed soldiers carried black metal trunks. People also carried different types of water bottles: expensive insulated ones to keep water ice cold, cheap plastic ones, or even previously used mineral water or soft drink bottles. Sita was happy to spot fair-skinned foreigners, so unlike her, with heavy backpacks and very few clothes on, almost as few as most beggars had. She was always surprised by the fact that beggars clothed themselves sparsely because they had no choice, and the foreigners did so out of willingness. It was quite unusual for Sita to observe people, the items they carried, the clothes and shoes they wore. There were small shops, half the size of a regular cabin that sold newspapers, magazines, comics and other books. She bought a cup of chai from one of the peddlers moving along the platform with insulated containers of chai and plastic cups. Pihu had some of the chai she'd bought. She took one last look at the food stalls that prepared fresh breakfast, lunch or dinner besides selling soft drinks, tea, coffee and fresh juice.

Sita observed the beggars lined up at the railway station, a permanent rent-free shelter, the hope of receiving alms transparent in their expressive eyes staring at each passerby. She did not fear the pickpockets for whom a busy place like the railway station was an opportune site. *What do I have to fear?* She thought and perched on an iron bench under the square, white, lit sign that said "One"— for Platform Number One — in dark blue hanging over them. Pihu rested his head on Sita's legs and stretched the rest of his body on the bench. Close to them was a yellow sign erected on two green poles saying "Ayodhya" in capital English letters. Under the English name was the city's name in Hindi and Urdu.

She had already started to embrace the new life she would have. She made a mental list of the things she would want in her new house and life that would come with the move to Ahemadabad. Gazing at Pihu, she attributed this change to her son and the good karma he'd performed in his past life. She was careful not to move around too close to the walls stained with urine, which attracted flies, bugs and insects. A stray dog was licking stale food crumbs

from between the tracks. She wondered about the gap between people in society when she saw passengers flinging away food, banana peels, empty tea cups, glasses, plastic water bottles from moving trains onto the tracks. As a rule, she always looked away from those who were eating. She did not want to give an impression that she was starving and eyeing others' food.

Entering the platform from a curve, the Sabarmati Express appeared grand. To Sita, the approaching train was as graceful as a classical dancer. She saw some children scampering down the platform suddenly stop, cheer and wave to the passengers inside the moving train, and looked at her own son who, with hesitation, tried to imitate the actions of others his age. As soon as the train arrived on Platform One, people rushed and jostled each other to get inside. Reserved coach S 6 was right in front of Sita. The clock in the tower struck six times and the same announcement, *Attention passengers going to Ahemadabad, Anand, Godhara..Sabarmati Express is arriving on Platform One* was repeated umpteen times even after the train had arrived and halted. Passengers selfishly pushed and nudged one another in a bid to get inside the train. Activity at the station suddenly became fast-paced.

Sita shielded Pilu, holding tightly to his hands. Getting into the train, she looked carefully for an empty seat or two. With the eagerness of a hawk clutching its prey, she instantly occupied the two unclaimed seats she spotted at first and asked Pilu to spread his legs so that they could occupy both the seats completely. She placed her canvas bag next to her feet. A little later she fed him some rice mixed with vegetables, the leftover food one of the women she worked for had given her. In no time, the coach was full of people and a musty, decayed smell of food. Sita was comfortable with it because she smelled so bad. Distributing her attention between Pilu and the train window, she periodically looked out for Biju. He came in just when the train was leaving Ayodhya. In his blue jeans and faded black polo shirt, which Sita knew he had bought from the used clothes market, Biju seemed well-dressed. He looked different with his shaven face and clean clothes; Sita embraced the idea of making a fresh start in a new place.

After about half an hour into the journey, at Faizabad Junction another family with a child boarded the train. It turned out that the seats Sita and Biju had occupied were their seats.

“Twenty-eight, twenty-nine and thirty. These are our seats,” said the man who had boarded the train with his wife and a daughter. By the way the couple talked to each other, Sita knew that they were husband and wife and the little girl holding the man’s hand, their daughter. The daughter seemed to be the same age as Pilu.

“We have reservation,” the woman said furiously. Her black hair was tied tightly in a bun at the back of her head.

Biju said nothing and gave up his seat.

“I have a child and he is very tired. Please, I’ll sit in the corner,” Sita pleaded to the woman with the bun and almost bent down to touch her feet.

“Away,” the black-haired woman said, gesturing at Sita with her hand and continued, “These people will do anything to gain our sympathy. We spend all our money in getting reservations and they just want to grab our seats for free? Forget it. Go find some other place. We are not here for donating our seats.” After completing her sentence, the woman put her luggage on the seat that Biju had vacated.

The husband of the woman with the bun spoke: “Let her. She’ll sit in one corner. If it wasn’t for the little boy, I—” The man wore an oversized dark blue unbuttoned shirt and white pants. Sita could see his orange t-shirt peeking from between the buttons of the dark blue shirt.

“Now you don’t say anything. What if my child gets some unknown disease from this, her child, and wait, what’s that on his feet? *Chee!*” The woman had a disgusted expression. She pointed at Pilu’s foot, still covered in vomit. “Never! There is no way my daughter or I will sit near this woman and her child.” The woman with the bun relaxed further in the seat.

“Sheila. Our daughter will be safe. Didn’t you get all her vaccinations? Polio, cholera, tetanus, diphtheria, booster dose...”

“Yes. I did,” Sheila replied.

Sita said, "I'll clean his foot right away," and disappeared with Pilu. Before leaving to clean Pilu's foot, she turned toward Biju, who was looking out the window. Sita walked to the nearest toilet. In the tight space of the toilet, she lifted Pilu up with both hands and lowered his vomit-covered foot into the steel wash basin. Balancing Pilu on one hand, she pressed the spring-loaded button on the tap. The water came gushing out as long as she kept her thumb pressed against it. After Sita washed away the vomit, she dried Pilu's wet foot with a corner of her sari. She felt uncomfortable in the filthy bathroom that already smelled like a community latrine. She held her breath and dreamed of a clean, marble bathroom in her new house.

On Sita's return to the train cabin, there was silence until Sheila's daughter broke into a whimper. In her broken Hindi, she kept asking for a fish toy. Sheila finally gave in to her daughter and took out a bright pink plastic fish, the size of Sita's palm, from a jute bag saying Famous *Banarsi* Saris. Then Sita looked at Pilu, who stared at the whole tamasha without saying a word. The realization that Pilu's childhood lay buried under a cover of maturity hurt her. She blamed her destitute state for robbing him of his childhood.

After giving the plastic fish to her daughter, Sheila engrossed herself in reading a woman's magazine, *Manorama*. Sita took her silence as an opportunity to sit at the edge of the seat where the daughter was sitting, playing with her plastic fish. Sita observed that Sheila looked away from her magazine for a moment and moved her daughter closer to herself. Their daughter could hardly occupy half of the seat. A little later, Sita stood up and laid down Pilu, who was fast asleep, where she sat a while ago.

"Don't let him touch my daughter." Sheila's voice sounded mad with rage.

"I'll be careful," Sita responded calmly.

When Sita had sold the very little stuff they owned, she had collected a total of two hundred rupees. Sita saw the ticket-checker arrive. He was dressed in a black coat and pants with the tie hanging around his neck like a noose. After asking for passengers' tickets, he looked up their names and reservation numbers in his chart, and marked the ticket with a blue pen

before returning it. If there were any vacant seats, he would issue people a reservation by charging some money. When the ticket-checker approached Biju, he forwarded the two tickets to him.

“You know, this is a reservation coach?” The ticket-checker said to Biju annoyedly. The man kept his sight on his chart when he spoke to the passengers.

“Yes, Sahib. But you can do anything. I can give you the money I have, to get a seat,” Biju pleaded.

“Ok, I’ll see what I can do.” The ticket-checker moved toward Sita.

“And you? Are you with him too? This child? Yours?”

“Yes,” Sita said.

“If you people were without a reservation, why did you get on a reserved coach?” the ticket-checker asked.

When Biju did not say anything, Sita said, “Our son is too tired.”

At that time Biju pulled out a bill of fifty rupees from the back pocket of his blue jeans and tried to hand the money to the ticket-checker.

“Is that all you have?” the ticket-checker asked Biju.

Without waiting for a response, the ticket-checker moved down to the next passenger. After he left, Sita asked Biju why he couldn’t ask for a berth or even a seat. “Who has the money? Do you?” Biju sounded suspicious. Sita stayed quiet. Relaxing, Biju took out a pinch of tobacco from a tin box, pulled up his lower lip, placed the tobacco between his lip and the jaw, and began working at it.

Sheila warned him, “Now no *bidi* here.”

A packet of cheap cigarettes peeped out of Biju’s polo shirt pocket.

The other family in the cabin decided it was time to go to bed. Sheila spread printed sheets on their berths, one each for her husband, herself and her daughter. On the lower berth, which was for her daughter, she folded the sheet and covered just half of the berth with it.

Quite reluctantly, Sheila told Sita, "You can put your son to bed here, but be careful he doesn't get close to my daughter or even dirty the sheet."

Sita was grateful to her. The lights of their cabin were turned off, and very soon the sound of snoring filled the coach.

Sita asked Biju to look after their son while she went to the toilet. She lied to him; she went to look for the ticket-checker. She crossed the coach she and her husband were in and was relieved to spot the ticket-checker at the end of the next coach.

"Sahib, do you have any vacant berth or seat available? I have money. Even one will do," Sita implored.

The ticket-checker scanned her from head to toe and gave her a lewd stare she wasn't unfamiliar with. He said, "There is one in the next coach, the last seat of the cabin, the one right next to the toilet. You want to come?"

It took Sita no time to understand his intentions. She rapidly turned away from him, covered her chest with the frayed end of her sari and ran back to her seat.

"Eh, wait! I'm not asking for any money," he called behind her.

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It was pitch dark outside, and no fun to stare out of the train window. The *chuk, chuk, choo, choo* sound of the train became frightening with every passing night hour. Activity on the train too became dull and died. No one spoke. Any little sound that would have passed undistinguished during the day became prominent at night. When all the people in their cabin were asleep, Biju spread a shawl on the floor of the cabin.

"I am tired. Take care of Pilu," he said to Sita.

"What did you do the whole day?" Sita asked Biju.

"I...I don't remember, but is it important? I am tired and want to sleep," Biju said.

Sita did not say anything, and Biju covered his face with a sheet. Soon he was fast asleep and snoring. Sita wondered how he could relax. She could not imagine herself sleeping so soundly if she were the head of the family without a job.

Perched on the corner of the berth where Pilu slept, Sita tried not to fall asleep. She was worried that Pilu might fall off the berth, since he was almost at the end of it, or that he might wake up the couple's daughter.

Quite late in the night, Sita could still hear peals of laughter coming from the adjoining cabins. Her eyelids drooped and her head bobbed forward as she transitioned into sleep. She awoke with a start when the train jerked to a standstill at a station. It was around seven in the morning, but almost everyone in their coach was fast asleep. She checked on her son and gently kissed him on the forehead. She peered out of her cabin window, and saw the sign on the small platform, Godhara, that the Sabarmati Express slowly left. Hearing sounds of people, luggage and footsteps entering the train, she gathered the courage to walk to the toilet.

The train began to accelerate. The toilets in their coach appeared to be in use, and so she crossed into the next coach. As she locked the toilet from the inside, the train screeched and then halted abruptly. The physical shock almost brought her squatted body on the Indian-style latrine down to the floor. *An accident?* She dismissed her thought as soon as it had occurred. She heard subdued human voices and hurried footsteps. People always got off and on the train. The *mêlée*' continued and she heard what sounded like stones pelting on the toilet roof. She felt certain something was wrong. The first thing that came to her mind was her son. *Pilu, did he fall off the berth? He'd be fine*, she thought. She'd made a boundary of a sheet to act as a barricade for him. And then she'd also asked her husband to keep watch on him. But she also knew well not to trust an irresponsible man like Biju.

Sita pulled on the door handle to open the toilet but it was stuck, stuck as a tree to its roots. It simply would not open. The noises outside got louder; she pushed harder. It took her some time to realize that the door was jammed. "My son!" she screamed, yelling for someone to

open the door, hitting her fists against the door. "Open the door. My Pilu!" she shouted. No one answered. An acrid smell nauseated her. Petrol or kerosene, she didn't know which. Soon her screams were lost in the bigger commotion of other noises and stomping of feet coming from the outside. Excruciating bone-jarring cries of pain and horror multiplied her dread. Panic gripped her. Like a lunatic, Sita struggled to break the door or the window rails free. She banged the door with her fists, hands, legs, her frail body. She collapsed.

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Sita woke up and found herself in a hospital. It smelled strongly of phenyl. Moaning, whimpering, and sharp cries made the air inside the building thick. Sita looked at the blue walls and masked doctors and nurses, stethoscopes hanging round their necks.

A nurse in a white uniform told Sita that the Sabarmati Express had been attacked and burned. "Several people died and many are hospitalized."

"Pilu, my son, he was in S 6. Take me to him." Sita pulled at the nurse's uniform. "He was wearing a green shirt, black knickers, Hawai chappals. He is three. No troublemaker. No one will attack him, a child."

When the nurse didn't respond, Sita became hysterical, yelled her son's name and tried to run away.

"I want my son!"

A man with a white coat entered the ward. When he saw Sita, he came up to her. He was wearing a badge, Dr. Venugopal. He said to her in a matter-of-fact way, "You're not the only one. There are several others like you here who've lost a son, a daughter, a husband, relatives, friends. This is a hospital. Please let us do our work."

The doctor told the nurse that since Sita had no physical injuries — she had inhaled the petrol fumes and suffered a shortage of oxygen — she could be discharged. The beds were needed to accommodate other casualties that were pouring in. Sita immediately pulled out the



IV cord from her slender wrist, rushed out of the hospital ward, her burgundy sari crumpled and loose from the waist, her hair tangled like knitted yarn. The nurse and doctor did not run after her.

Outside the ward, a young man, who had a cloth bag hanging from his shoulder, approached Sita. On seeing him, she broke down into tears and told him her story. He said that he was a journalist with the local newspaper, *Janta*, and could take her to the railway station.

Sita made it to the Godhara railway station with the journalist. At the railway station, she heard a TV reporter say, "Fifty-seven dead, thirty injured. Coach S 6 of Sabarmati Express completely burned. A genocide. A horrible, terrifying act by man against man."

Because Sita was with the journalist, she had no problem entering the barricaded site at Godhara railway station. Her unkempt and disheveled state and the look of terror in her deep-set eyes made it clear to the authorities that she was a passenger on the Sabarmati Express. As she made her way through the cluster of liveried railway officers and armed khaki policemen like a steam of water forcing its way through paths carved between rocks and other impediments, she lost the journalist. What she saw at the railway station, the coach, S 6, was in no way similar to the one she had boarded with her son and husband almost twelve hours ago. *There are several other hospitals where the sick are, and Pilu could be in one of them or maybe he might have completely survived the attack. The attackers would spare the life of an innocent little boy. Pilu can't die; he has to live. How could he die before giving me a chance to make his life worth living?* With these thoughts in mind, Sita moved as close to the burnt coach as she was allowed. She didn't even want to think of Biju.

Aghast, Sita saw that the maroon paint of the train had peeled and burned to grey-black. The coach still smoldered four hours after the incident. Everything inside the coach was hazy. No one except the firemen or the police was allowed within six feet of S 6. Sita made a desperate effort to look into the coach through the window rails of the train. What she saw petrified her, parched her throat. Grey-black human remains, bodies burned and reduced to a

flimsy layer of carbon; a leg severed from below the knee; an arm that was looking for the shoulder it was once attached to; a body genuflecting; two or three bodies glued together — as if they had been over-baked in an oven; another disfigured as if it was a rotten fruit eaten by insects; a body whose abdominal cavity was burnt through.

Then she gazed at an object resembling Pilu's Hawai chappal, near what looked like a charred body. The chappal seemed intact and Sita felt her heart beat faster. Her eyes, cold stone pellets, paralyzed, refused to acknowledge what they saw. She imagined something, or was it real: she saw the plastic fish toy, the jute bag, the cover page of the magazine Sheila was reading devoured by a spark. She felt her feet morphing into wood, the reaction rapidly traveling to the rest of her body. Jolted, she forced herself to lift her feet, ran closer to the train, but the police dragged her back, dropped her a few feet away from the barricaded site, warned her not to go too close or else she'd be thrown out. Sita huddled her body like a fetus, stared at the policemen, the coach S 6, her mouth and eyes dry, her head buzzing with images and the drone of flies.

Just then she noticed that the journalist who had brought her to the site was busily clicking pictures of her. She rose up like Kali, shrieked at him, snatched the black loop hanging from his camera like a snake. The journalist pushed Sita away with a kick of his shoe. She fell. Other media personnel saw this and approached Sita, who lay flat on the ground. Soon the police gathered around her. The reporters demanded an interview: "You'll be on TV, all over the country, the world. Just say...say something. What did you see? What did you hear? How did you escape? Did you lose someone? Say something — anything — and you'll be famous."

