

Dilli

By Aurvi Sharma

I sighed noisily with irritation. It was a sultry afternoon in August. Clouds covered the sky, capturing the heat and turning Delhi into an oven. The roads rippled, producing myriad mirages. The warmth drowned the city in a hot soup and turned everything viscous. Sweat ran profusely and you could smell the tarmac burning. I had driven to the North Campus to visit my cousin Neha. Her friend Rohit was taking a ride back with me as far as Noida, where I lived. Desultory conversation followed between Rohit and me, the heat making us drowsy.

We were stopped at Rajghat by a huge traffic jam. Endless queues of typical Delhi traffic—sturdy DTC buses with sides streaked with vomit, squat yellow and green auto rickshaws, innumerable scooters and motor cycles, rickety Blue line buses tilted dangerously to one side, cars, cars and cars, snaked ahead, motionless and honking. I rolled my eyes at Rohit. He smiled, commiserating.

More haphazard conversation followed, both of us straining to see ahead. A few people had turned off their engines now and were beginning to stick their heads out of the windows, trying to discover the cause of the jam. In a few minutes, the place was awash with vendors trying to sell their paraphernalia. Glossy covers of Cosmopolitan and Vogue magazines jostled with cheap plastic toys at my window. A man was trying to peep in through the glass of my window to persuade me into buying his freshly cut coconut. I shook my head.

Rohit had struck up a conversation with a young beggar girl, eight or nine years old, and was playfully trying to persuade her to accept his Wrigley's chewing gum instead of money. Bhenchod!, sister fucker, she swore loudly in Hindi and left.

Wow, she has spunk, I said smiling, and leaned back into my seat. Rohit was disgruntled. He was talking to me now, something about the loss of morality in India. I was listening to the hum of his voice unfocusedly, eyes closed, waiting for the jam to break up.

The absence of his voice suddenly made me open my eyes. I looked at Rohit. He was staring straight ahead, his face rigid. I frowned and looked around. To my right, I saw a man crossing the road, oblivious of everyone around him. He was stark naked. He was made even queerer by his absolute lack of embarrassment. My first instinct was to look away. I stole a glance at Rohit who was starting to turn pink now, still staring ahead. I raised my eyes to the man. He was now passing in front of my car, moving towards the other side of the road.

The whole place was suddenly hushed. People stopped talking. Everyone was looking at him, while pretending not to. It was a strange sight. His hair was long and matted. The skin was dark with dirt marks on his buttocks and elbows. He was not fat but strangely misshapen with slim arms, a big paunch and beginnings of breasts. His legs were bent, with big thighs. As he passed my car and moved ahead, I could see his feet. He was walking barefoot on the sizzling road. His feet were dirty with a layer of mud caked around. The strangest part was his penis. It struggled to peep from beneath his paunch, shaking inadvertently as he walked. It was small and shriveled, retracted into his scrotum. I remember wondering what Rohit made of it.

I was sitting up now, my fingers clenching the steering wheel. I had never seen a naked man sauntering around on the roads. Nor, it seemed, had Rohit. The man finally was on the other side of the road now and climbed over the pavement. He walked into the trees surrounding Rajghat.

As if by magic, the traffic suddenly started moving. The spell broke. Engines stuttered to life, a few obligatory honks followed and the snake started shuffling forward. Rohit and I were silent as I put the car in first gear. Like the traffic, it was now our turn to hem and haw before we resumed normal conversation.

He must have been a Digambar saint, I said. Y'know, the ones belonging to the Jain sect who say that the world is their apparel? They don't wear clothes..

Oh yeah, like the naked statues of Mahavir in temples and stuff?, he said.

Uh-huh, I nodded.

Both of us were still not looking at each other, nodding gravely, trying to preserve some dignity.

Suddenly Rohit cracked a sheepish smile. I burst into laughter. Soon we were parked at the side of the road, shaded by the gardens lining the ring road, engulfed in fits of laughter.