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# One Night at the Call Centre

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Extract

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# Prologue

*THE NIGHT TRAIN FROM KANPUR TO DELHI was the most memorable journey of my life. Firstly, it gave me the idea for my book. And second, it is not every day you sit in an empty compartment and a young, pretty girl walks in.*

*Yes, you see it in the movies, you hear about it from friends' friends, but it never happens to you. When I was younger, I used to look at the names on the reservation chart stuck outside my train bogie to check out all the female passengers near my seat – F-17 to F-25 is what I'd look for most – yet it never happened. In most cases I shared my compartment with talkative aunties, snoring men and wailing infants.*

*But this night was different. Firstly, my compartment was empty: this new summer train had only just started running and nobody knew about it. Second, I was unable to sleep.*

*I had been to the Indian Institute of Technology in Kanpur to give a talk. Before leaving, I sat in the canteen*

*chatting with the students and drank four cups of coffee, which no doubt led to my eight hours of insomnia alone in my compartment. I had no magazines or books to read and could hardly see anything out of the window in the darkness. I prepared myself for a dull and silent night.*

*She walked in five minutes after the train had left the station. She opened the curtains of my enclosure and looked around puzzled.*

*'Is this coach A4, seat 63E?' she asked.*

*The yellow light bulb in my compartment was a moody one. It flickered as I looked up at her.*

*'Huh?' I said. It was difficult to withdraw from the gaze of her eyes.*

*'Actually it is. My seat is right in front of you,' she answered her own question and heaved her heavy suitcase onto the upper berth. She sat down opposite me and heaved a sigh of relief.*

*'I got into the wrong coach. Luckily the bogies are connected,' she said, adjusting her countless ringlets. I looked at her from the corner of my eye. She was young, perhaps early to mid-twenties, and her waist-length hair had a life of its own: a strand kept falling onto her forehead. I couldn't yet see her face in the bad light, but I could tell one thing – she was pretty. And her eyes – once you looked into them, you couldn't turn away. I kept my gaze down.*

*She rearranged stuff in her handbag while I looked out of the window. It was completely dark.*

*'So, this is a pretty empty train,' she said after ten minutes.*

*'Yes,' I said. 'It's the new holiday special. They've just started it without really announcing it.'*

*'No wonder. Otherwise, trains are always full at this time.'*

*'It will fill up. Don't worry. Just give it a few days,' I said and leaned forward. 'Hi. I am Chetan, by the way, Chetan Bhagat.'*

*'Hi,' she said and looked at me for a few seconds. 'Chetan . . . your name sounds familiar.'*

*Now this was cool. It meant she had heard of my first book. I'm rarely recognized, and never by a girl on a night train.*

*'You might have heard of my book,* Five Point Someone. *I'm the author,' I said.*

*'Oh yes,' she said and paused. 'Oh yes, of course. I've read your book. About the three underperformers and the professor's daughter, right?' she said.*

*'Yes. So, did you like it?'*

*'It was all right.'*

*I was taken aback. I could have done with a little more of a compliment here.*

*'Just all right?' I said, fishing a bit too obviously.*

*'Well . . .' she said, and paused.*

*'Well what?' I said after ten seconds.*

*'Well, yeah, just all right. An OK-OK type of book,' she said.*

*I kept quiet. She noticed the expression of mild disappointment on my face.*

*'Anyway, nice to meet you, Chetan. Where are you coming from? IIT Kanpur?'*

*'Yes,' I said, my voice less friendly than a few moments before. 'I had to give a talk there.'*

*'Oh really? About what?'*

*'About my book – you know, the OK-OK type one. Some people do want to hear about it,' I said, using a sweet tone to coat my sarcasm.*

*'Interesting,' she said and went quiet again.*

*I was quiet too. I didn't want to speak to her any more. I wanted my empty compartment back.*

*The flickering yellow light above was irritating me. I wondered if I should just turn it off, but it was still not that late.*

*'What's the next station? Is it a non-stop train?' she asked after five minutes, obviously to make conversation.*

*'I don't know,' I said and turned to look out of the window again, even though I couldn't see anything in the darkness.*

*'Is everything OK?' she asked softly.*

*'Yes, why?' I said.*

*'Nothing. You're upset about what I said about your book, aren't you?'*

*'Not really,' I said.*

*She laughed. I looked at her. Her smile was as arresting as her eyes. I knew she was laughing at me, but I wanted her to keep smiling. I dragged my eyes away again.*

*'Listen. I know your book did well. You are a sort of youth writer and everything. But at one level . . .'*

*'What?' I said.*

*'At one level, you are hardly a youth writer.'*

*I looked at her for a few seconds. Her magnetic eyes had a soft but insistent gaze.*

*'I thought I wrote a book about college kids. Isn't that youth?' I said.*

*'Yeah, right. So you wrote a book on the Indian Institute of Technology, an elite place where few people get to go. You think that represents the youth?' she asked and took out a box of mints from her bag. She offered me one, but I declined.*

*'So what are you trying to say? I had to start somewhere, so I wrote about my college experiences. And the story isn't all about IIT. It could have happened anywhere. Is that why you're trashing my book?'*

*'I'm not trashing it. I'm just saying it hardly represents Indian youth,' she said and shut the box of mints.*

*'Oh really—' I began, but was interrupted by noise as the train passed over a long bridge.*

*We didn't speak for the next three minutes, until the train had got back onto a smoother track.*

*'So what represents youth exactly?' I said.*

*'I don't know. You're the writer. You figure it out,' she said, and brushed aside a few curls that had fallen over her forehead.*

*'That's not fair,' I said. I sounded like a five-year-old throwing a tantrum. She saw me grumbling to myself and smiled. A few seconds later, she spoke again.*

*'Are you going to write another book?' she said.*

*'I'll try to.'*

*'So what's it going to be about this time? The Indian Institute of Medicine?' she asked.*

*'No.'*

*'Why not?'*

*'Because it doesn't represent the country's youth.'*

*She started laughing.*

*'See, I am taking feedback. And now you're laughing at me,' I said.*

*'No, no,' she said. 'I'm not laughing at you. Can you stop being so over-sensitive?'*

*'I am not over-sensitive,' I said and turned my face away.*

*'Well, now, let me explain. The whole IIT thing is cool and everything, but what does it mean in the broader sense? What is it all about?' she said.*

*'Well, what is it about?'*

*'If you want to write about youth, shouldn't you talk about young people who face real challenges?'*

*'Like who?'*

*'Just look around you. Who are the biggest group of young people facing a challenge in modern India?'*

*'I don't know. Students?'*

*'No, Mr Writer. Get away from the student campus of your first book now. Anything else you see that you find strange and interesting? I mean, what is the subject of your second novel?'*

*I turned to look at her carefully for the first time. Maybe it was the time of night, but I kid you not, she was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. Everything about her was perfect. Her face was like a child's and she wore a little*

*bindi, which was hard to focus on because her eyes got in the way.*

*I tried to concentrate on her question.*

*'Second novel? I haven't thought of a subject yet,' I said.*

*'Really? Don't you have any ideas?'*

*'I do. But nothing certain.'*

*'Inte . . . resting,' she drawled. 'Well, just bask in the success of your first book, then.'*

*We kept quiet for the next half an hour. I took out the contents of my overnight bag and rearranged them for no particular reason. I wondered if it even made sense to change into night wear. I wasn't going to fall asleep. Another train noisily trundled past us in the opposite direction, leaving us behind in even greater silence.*

*'I might have a story idea for you,' she said, startling me.*

*'Huh?' I was wary of what she was going to say, for no matter what her idea was, I had to appear interested.*

*'What is it?'*

*'It's a story about a call centre.'*

*'Really?' I said. 'Call centres as in "business process outsourcing centres?"'*

*'Yes. Do you know anything about them?'*

*I thought about it. I did know about call centres, mostly from my cousins who worked in one.*

*'Yes, I know something,' I said. 'Some 300,000 people work in the industry. They help US and European companies in the sales, service and maintenance of their operations. Usually younger people work there in night shifts. Quite interesting, actually.'*

*'Just interesting? Have you ever thought of what they all have to face?' she asked, her voice turning firm again.*

*'Uh, not really,' I said.*

*'Why? Aren't they the youth? Don't you want to write about them?' she was almost scolding me.*

*'Listen, let's not start arguing again.'*

*'I'm not arguing. I told you that I have a call-centre story for you.'*

*I looked at my watch. It was 12.30 a.m. A story would not be such a bad idea to kill time.*

*'Let's hear it, then,' I said.*

*'I'll tell you, but I have a condition,' she said.*

*Condition? I was intrigued. 'What? That I don't tell it to anyone else?' I asked.*

*'No. Just the opposite, in fact. You have to promise me to use it for your second book.'*

*'What?' I said, almost falling off my seat. 'Are you kidding? I can't promise that.'*

*'It's up to you,' she said and turned silent.*

*I waited for ten seconds. She did not speak.*

*'Can't I decide after you've told me the story?' I asked. 'If it's interesting, I may do it. But how can I decide without hearing it first?'*

*'No. This is not about choice. If I tell you, you have to use it,' she said.*

*'For a whole book . . . ?' I asked again.*

*'Yes. As if it's your own story. I'll give you the contacts of the people in the story. You can meet them, do your research, whatever it takes, but make it your second book.'*

*'Well, then, I think it's better if you don't tell me,' I said.*

*'OK,' she said and turned quiet again. She got up to spread a bed sheet on her berth, and then arranged her pillow and blanket.*

*I checked my watch again. It was 1:00 a.m. and I was still wide awake. This was a non-stop train and there were no stations to look forward to until Delhi in the morning. She switched off the flickering yellow light. Now the only light in the compartment was an eerie blue one; I couldn't figure out where the bulb was. It felt strange, as though we were the only two people in the universe.*

*As she was sliding under her blanket, I asked, 'What is the story about? At least tell me a little bit more.'*

*'Will you do it then?'*

*I shrugged in the semi-darkness. 'Can't say. Don't tell me the story yet, just tell me what it's about.'*

*She nodded and sat up. Folding her legs beneath her, she began talking.*

*'All right,' she said, 'it's a story about six people in a call centre on one night.'*

*'Just one night? Like this one?' I interrupted.*

*'Yes, one night.'*

*'Are you sure that could fill a whole book? I mean, what's so special about this night?'*

*She heaved a sigh and took a sip from her bottle of mineral water.*

*'You see,' she said, 'it wasn't like any other night. It was the night of the phone call.'*

*'What?' I said and burst out laughing. 'So a call centre gets a phone call. That's the special part?'*

*She did not smile back. She waited for me to stop laughing and then continued as if I hadn't said anything. 'You see, it wasn't an ordinary phone call. It was the night . . . it was the night there was a phone call from God.'*

*Her words made me spring to attention.*

*'What?'*

*'You heard me. That night there was a phone call from God,' she said.*

*'What exactly are you talking about?'*

*'I'm not telling you any more. Now you know what it's about, if you want to hear the story, you know my condition.'*

*'It's a tough condition,' I said.*

*'I know. It's up to you,' she said and lifted her blanket again. She lay down and closed her eyes.*

*Six people. One night. Call centre. Call from God. The phrases kept repeating themselves in my head as another hour passed. At 2:00 a.m. she woke up to have a sip of water.*

*'Not sleeping?' she asked, her eyes only half open.*

*Maybe there was a voltage problem, but this time even the blue light in the compartment started flickering.*

*'No, I'm not sleepy at all,' I said.*

*'OK, goodnight anyway,' she said, and lay down again.*

*'Listen,' I said. 'Get up.'*

*'Huh?' she said, rubbing her eyes. 'Why?'*

*'Tell me the story,' I said.*

*'So you'll write it?'*

*'Yes,' I said, with a slight hesitation.*

*'Good,' she said, and sat up again. She was back in her cross-legged position.*

*For the rest of the night, she told me the story that begins on the next page. I chose to tell the story through Shyam's eyes because, after I met him, I realized he was the most similar to me as a person. The rest of the people, and what happened that night, well, I'll let Shyam tell you.*

# Chapter 1

# 8.31 p.m.

I WAS SPLASHING MY HANDS HELPLESSLY IN THE SEA. I can't even swim in a pond, let alone in the Indian Ocean. While I was in the water, my boss Bakshi was in a boat next to me. He was pushing my head down in the water. I saw Priyanka drifting away in a lifeboat. I screamed as Bakshi used both his hands to keep my head submerged. Salt water was filling my mouth and nostrils when I heard loud beeps in the distance.

My nightmare ended as my cellphone alarm rang hard in my left ear and I woke up to its 'Last Christmas' ring tone. The ring tone was a gift from Shefali, my new semi-girlfriend. I squinted through a half-shut eye to see 8:32 p.m. surrounded by little bells flashing on the screen.

'Damn,' I said and jumped out of bed.

I would have loved to analyse my dream and its significance in my insignificant life, but I had to get dressed for work.

'Man, the Qualis will be here in twenty minutes,' I thought, digging matter out of my eye. Qualis was the make of car that picked us all up individually and drove us together to the centre. I was still tired, but afraid of staying in bed any longer in case I was late. Besides, there was a serious risk of Bakshi making a comeback in my dreams.

By the way, I am Shyam Mehra, or Sam Marcy as they call me at my workplace, the Connexions call centre in Gurgaon. American tongues have trouble saying my real name and prefer Sam. If you want, you can give me another name, too. I really don't care.

Anyway, I'm a call-centre agent. There are hundreds of thousands, probably millions of agents like me. But this total pain-in-the neck author chose me, of all the agents in the country. He met me and told me to help him with his second book. In fact, he pretty much wanted me to write the book for him. I declined, saying I can't even write my own CV, so there was no way I could write a whole book. I explained to him how my promotion to the position of team leader had been postponed for one year because my manager Bakshi had told me I don't have the 'required skills set' yet. In my review, Bakshi wrote that I was 'not a go-getter'. I don't even know what 'go-getter' means, so I guess I'm definitely not one.

But this author said he didn't care. He had promised someone he'd write this story so I'd better cooperate or he would keep on pestering me. I tried my best to wriggle out of it, but he wouldn't let go. I finally relented and

that's why I'm stuck with this assignment, while you are stuck with me.

I also want to give you one more warning. My English is not that great – actually, nothing about me is great. So, if you're looking for something sophisticated and high-brow, then I suggest you read another book with plenty of long words. I know only one big word: 'management'. But we'll get to that later. I told the author about my limited English. However, he said big emotions don't come from big words, so I had no choice but to do the job. I hate authors.

Now let's get back to the story. If you remember, I had just woken up.

There was a noise in the living room. Some relatives were in town to attend a family wedding. My neighbour was getting married to his cousin ... er, sorry, I'm a bit groggy, my cousin was getting married to his neighbour. But I had to work, so I couldn't go to the wedding. It didn't matter, though, all marriages are the same, more or less.

I reached the bathroom still half-asleep. It was occupied.

The bathroom door was open. I saw five of my aunts scrambling to get a few square inches of the washbasin mirror. One aunt was cursing her daughter for leaving the matching bindis at home. Another aunt had lost the little screw of her gold earring and was flipping out.

'It's pure gold, where is it?' she screamed into my face.

'Has the maid stolen it?' Like the maid has nothing better to do than steal one tiny screw. Wouldn't she steal the whole set? I thought.

'Auntie, can I use the bathroom for five minutes? I need to get ready for the office,' I said.

'Oh hello, Shyam. Woke up finally?' my mother's sister said. 'Office? Aren't you coming to the wedding?'

'No, I have to work. Can I have the bath—'

'Look how big Shyam has become,' my maternal aunt said. 'We need to find a girl for him soon.'

Everyone burst into giggles. It was their biggest joke of the day.

'Can I please—' I said.

'Shyam, leave the ladies alone,' one of my older cousins interrupted. 'What are you doing here with the women? We are already late for the wedding.'

'But I have to go to work. I need to get dressed,' I protested, trying to elbow my way to the bathroom tap.

'You work in a call centre, don't you?' my cousin said.

'Yes.'

'Your work is all on the phone. Why do you need to dress up? Who's going to see you?'

I didn't answer.

'Use the kitchen sink,' an aunt suggested and handed me my toothbrush.

I gave them all a dirty look. Nobody noticed. I passed by the living room on my way to the kitchen. The uncles were outside, on their second whiskey and soda. One uncle said something about how it would be better

if my father were still alive and around this evening.

I reached the kitchen. The floor was so cold I felt like I'd stepped on an ice tray. I realized I had forgotten the soap. I went back but the bathroom door was bolted. There was no hot water in the kitchen, so my face froze as I washed it with cold water. Winter in Delhi is a bitch. I brushed my teeth and used the steel plates as a mirror to comb my hair. Shyam had turned into Sam and Sam's day had just begun.

I was hungry, but there was nothing to eat in the house. They'd be getting food at the wedding, so my mother had felt there was no need to cook at home.

The Qualis horn screamed at 8:55 p.m.

As I was about to leave, I realized I had forgotten my ID. I went to my room, but couldn't find it. I tried to find my mother instead. She was in her bedroom, lost among aunties, saris and jewellery sets. She and my aunts were comparing whose set was heaviest. Usually the heaviest aunt had the heaviest set.

'Mum, have you seen my ID?' I said. Everyone ignored me. I went back to my room as the Qualis honked for the fourth time.

'Damn, there it is,' I said reaching under my bed. I pulled it out by its strap and strung it around my neck.

I waved a goodbye to everyone, but no one acknowledged me. It wasn't surprising. My cousins are all on their way to becoming doctors or engineers. You could say I am the black sheep of my family. In fact, the only reason people even talk to me is because I have a job and get a

salary at the end of the month. You see, I used to work in the website department of an ad agency before this call-centre job. However, the ad agency paid really badly, and all the people there were pseudos, more interested in office politics than websites. I left and all hell broke loose at home. That's when I became the black sheep. I saved myself by joining Connexions. With money in your wallet the world gives you some respect and lets you breathe. Connexions was also the natural choice for me as Priyanka worked there. Of course, that reason was no longer relevant.

My aunt finally found the gold screw trapped in her fake-hair bun.

The Qualis's horn screamed again.

'I'm coming,' I shouted as I ran out of the house.