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The Travel Companion

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You wish you wouldn't run into her today, as you run to the fourth compartment door to get in. You purposely stood twenty meters away from where you stood yesterday because you wanted to get into a different compartment. But you see her, waving at you from inside the compartment, having already claimed her space near a pole. And now, you can't not go near her.

'Hi!' you say drawing an excited smile and she gives you even a bigger smile.

'I saw you running to the door, in your saree' she laughs.

'I didn't see you standing in the platform' you say.

'I got in from the other compartment and walked here from the inside' she says triumphantly. You know she likes small small achievements like that.

'Right' you say, making a mental note to stand forty meters ahead, tomorrow. Or maybe you should just take the bus.

She looks at your saree and says it's pretty. She does not say it looks good on you. She says it would have been prettier if you had pleated it, and worn it the way a saree is supposed to be worn. You tell her you like it this way. She says it looks like a bedsheet being carried on the shoulder, back to the house from the cloth line, and you both laugh, your laugh fake, but hers, very real. Her laugh is very much loud and you're embarrassed. In a morning office train compartment with people packed like rice in a dry piece of milk-rice, you can hear even what people think. You want her to stop laughing but she does not. So you take out your mobile phone and pretend to type something. She looks away. You feel sad for her.

You used to be good friends, a couple of months ago. You discussed weather and politics from Gampaha to Colombo Fort. But somewhere, in between your books and dramatic stories, she turned into somebody different. Day by day, she became intolerable. Somewhere deep inside, you know it was you who did that. The first day you spoke of the MA

programme you got selected to, she was happy for you. But when you told her how they got you promised you would quit your job if it comes to that, she thought that was insane. She asked how she could have fed her kids if it was her. She said, with the government property loan that she had taken and the housing loan her husband had taken, she could not consider that even in a dream. You wanted to tell her you had no government property loan to pay back, or a housing loan to make a husband pay it back, or, even a husband at that. You wanted to remind her you had no kids to feed, that you were a kid yourself. When you told her about the amount of articles you had to read every week, she asked how they expected a mother to do that, with all her children's work and household chores. You didn't tell her there were no mothers in your batch. When you went on study leave, she did not approve of it, she said your job was too good to risk for something as stupid as your MA. She thought studying too much would make you go mad, like the lecturers you spoke so highly of. She asked you not to end up like them. But when you kept on defending them, she wanted to see them and you showed pictures – the ones taken lying in the Independence Square, at literary festivals and cafes. She wanted you to clearly point at the lecturers with your fingers because she sure could not distinguish them from the students. She was surprised to see them in clothes that for her looked like pyjamas and earrings made out of feathers and coconut shells, instead of rich kandyan sarees and neat hair buns with konda kooru ending with agasti stones. She saw how too much education had ruined them. And she was even more certain you should not end up like them.

You kept on telling her about Laura Mulvy and Judith Butler because something came over her every time you did that – her voice raised and her tone became assertive. You found joy in doing that. She thought Mulvy may not have had a proper childhood and Butler may not have been able to find a good man for herself. You laughed from Ragama to Horape that day, and counted fingers till you shared that with your Gender Studies class the following week. She asked if there were more like that and you willingly told her about de Beauvoir, Bechdel and Angelou. She thought Angelou was one confused woman. But, when you read Mulvy and Butler during exams, in an airtight compartment, lifting your weight from one foot to the other, she always fought and got you a seat. She looked over your notes and read them with you, but laughing every time you looked up. But, when your office issued a circular banning sleeveless saree jackets, she said ‘they don’t want de Beauvoirs!’ and laughed. Although she added, ‘aiyo, crazy people’, you sensed contentment in her tone. Her eyes gleamed the first day you came to the platform in a sleeved saree jacket. ‘Your posh look is gone now’ is the only thing she said with a wink, followed by a laugh.

It is Ragama and more people get in. After all the small air gaps around you are completely filled and the compartment is sealed like an ice-cube tray, she starts speaking.

She tells you about a friend who had called her last night.

‘She and I used to fight for the first place in the class back in school’ she says, a little bit loud with a laugh. ‘She’s a clerk in a private law firm and her voice changed when I told her I work at the Customs’ she says, still laughing, still loud. You smile.

You can't tolerate her accent. You want to throw up when she accentuates the 't' but you give her a graceful smile. And you're glad you have something to add to the Phonology class next week. You think about how you would tell them about her. A friend? No. The travel companion would be better, you think. You have a good reputation there because you studied in a convent, you can't possibly ruin that.

As the train hits a break between Wanawasala and Kelaniya, she drags you towards her. She says something with her eyes but you don't get that. She says she will tell you later and looks away. As people get down from Kelaniya and you have enough Oxygen to breathe, she tells you that a man was trying to purposely fall on you, that the break was a stimulus for the pervert, specifically a duwana ballanta umbalakada walin gasima, for him. 'An MA will never teach you that' she says, and laughs. However, she is a little bit dismayed you knew the meaning of the proverb.

She shows you the flat she stayed at while she was studying for her Advanced Level exam. She calls it an apartment. She takes pride in her school. Though not quite famous, she's proud it is within the Colombo city limits, unlike your school. She says your school is the place which has given you your first strokes of madness, and that it is not very different from your MA group, and, probably the reason you keep on being attracted to mad groups. You know she is right. You make a face and she laughs.

As the train reaches Dematagoda, you tell her about your assignment marks. You tell her your scores were good this time. 'Congratulations!', she shouts, all excited and quite loud.

And she tells you how unsatisfied she is with her kids. How her eldest daughter who is in Grade Four has got only eighty-three marks for English out of hundred this term, and being a mother who always speaks to her children in English and pays a fortune for their Elocution Exams and classes, she is very disappointed.

'Unless you score more than ninety for all the subjects next term, your father will not get you a dart board' she has told her.

'I'm a tough mother, I am, and I'm proud of that. Education is very important to me' she says aloud, looking around and you are embarrassed. 'If she gets into a State University, that is enough for me' she adds. 'Well, I will never make her do an MA' she says giggling, 'she will end up crazy, like you'. She laughs aloud. You give her a fake laugh, again. And as the train gets the first glimpse of the twisted railway lines in Maradana, you know you are close to the end and you are relieved.

The train stops at the Maradana Station for a long time and you take out a note on Language and Identity. You read about Social Identity Theory while she makes calls around to confirm her three kids and her husband have reached schools and work safely. She tells the school van driver that her eldest daughter has a tuition class and son has an after-school swimming class so it is only the other daughter he has to pick up from school. As you listen to her speaking in Sinhala, you don't sense the confidence she has when she speaks in English. You juxtapose the relaxed way she speaks in Sinhala, with the high pitched accentuated way she speaks in English.

You notice something about the way she speaks in Sinhala – something similar to a trace of the old friend in this new travel companion. Sociolinguistics, you think. You're glad you now have enough knowledge to analyse people like her.

When the train shudders to leave the Maradana Station, she urges you to put the note in your handbag which she calls the malla, to go near the door. You know it is too early but she can not tolerate your cursive-lettered note anymore. She takes the first step. You hold on to the note as long as you can and you go stand near her. You take out your mobile phone. When you can go on Instagram or Facebook, you choose to check your emails. You click on the already read mail announcing a Conference on Humanities which is expected to be held in August because you know she is looking at your mobile phone. You show it to her and you tell her about the paper on 'Phenomenal Woman', 'Woman Work' and 'Still I Rise' that you wish to submit and she smiles and says ok. But when you tell her that those poems are by Maya Angelou, she laughs because she knows her.

'The confused woman' she says with excited eyes. You laugh with her, this time real. 'I want to read Woman Work' she adds. You smile. When at that instant, the compartment makes a rattling noise and people are thrown from left to right, you feel sorry you told her all of that – the conference, Angelou, Woman Work, the MA.

The train suddenly stops. And everyone sighs and starts scolding the government.

In a second, the train howls and starts hobbling towards the Colombo Fort station. While putting the mobile phone back into the handbag, you say, 'it might rain today'.

'Yes. Rain these days is like Sri Lankan politics, very predictable' she replies, laughing, 'I will reserve seats for both of us in the evening' she adds.



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Ciara is a Sri Lankan writer. Her collections of short stories *The Red Brick Wall* (manuscript) and *The Lanka Box* were shortlisted for the Gratiaen Prize, the most coveted award given for Sri Lankan writing in English, consecutively in 2020 and 2021. Her writing has appeared in several international journals including *Southeast Asian Review of English*, *Riptide Journal*, *Midway Journal*, *The Bombay Review*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, and she has work forthcoming in *Queen's Quarterly* and *MockingOwl Roost*.

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