

<https://jyotiwrites.files.wordpress.com/2015/11/one-cold-night-by-jyoti-singh-reading-hour-sept-oct-2015.pdf>

The car's headlights worked in vain against the thickest fog the season had seen. Children of the pavements were cuddled all together in one corner, in a heap. The cars of the city's rich zoomed past. I was not drunk enough, not as compared to the other nights, not like those nights had demanded.

I hadn't known these kids very long, but they were the only people I knew in the city that night – a bunch of high school kids awaiting the transition to college. Saying they were drunk would be an understatement. They weren't people any more. They were like blind pet dogs. The driver was from my part of the world, I guessed. If he weren't employed by one of their parents (I didn't know whose), he would have spat on them. He had a familiar disgusted air about him. I asked him if he was sure he could drive. It was a five minute drive, two rights and one round about. Sure, he could manage that! Being a non-driver I didn't argue. About fifteen minutes later we arrived. With the help of the driver, I dragged all five, one by one, into a large bedroom.

He said if I didn't mind, he'd like to stay until one of them woke up and he could be relieved, or until their parents came in the morning. It wasn't my house, but I said yes anyway.

It could have been the presence of a stranger in a strange house; I thought I was better off awake and I decided to stay up. Or maybe, if there was to be a tomorrow, I wanted to see it come in. After all, that nomadic winter I was nursing my first broken heart, landing up anywhere I was remotely invited. College was shut and friends were gone. I had decided to lurk around and skip home.

Two minutes of silence and then he got up and left without a word. I didn't know whether he was coming back. My senses bristled. I started hearing sounds that had not been audible before. I had never shared silence with a man like him: dark-skinned, well-built, a blue-collar village migrant in a big city. A driver who back home would be a small time seasonal farmer. The awareness of our differences pulsated at the back of my right ear. I sat slightly at an angle so I could see him if he walked back in through the door. Five minutes later he appeared with tea in two plastic cups.

Sitting in the balcony overlooking a hopeful, dimly lit tea stall that I hadn't noticed before, I learnt that his name was Janta and that he was from a village close to my grandmother's birthplace (a fact that surprised him, but I'd guessed right). Now he spoke to me in the familiar tone that a sense of tribalism induces in people. He must have been just 3 years older than me though looked a decade older. He had a baby boy, a wife, perhaps younger than I was, and a younger brother who kept it all together back home while he made a living away. He was leaving for his village by the 8 a.m. Gorakhpur Express. This was his last night on the job. So, a holiday, I thought. To him, however, holidays meant days between an old job and a new one. That's how he had lived and worked for years. All this information was volunteered. Then there was silence, which I took it upon myself to fill. I asked my first question, in an attempt to show interest and to keep him from asking any. Was there

something important that he had to go visit his folks for? He told me that his wife had given birth to a stillborn child fifteen days ago, a baby girl. Fully aware that insincerity in a mother tongue does not work, I was still struggling with an inept translation, when he told me there was another matter as well, an important one. Childbirth was a practical matter not emotional, I understood. He had a court hearing to attend and his presence was imperative, for they expected a judgement.

“You see they’ve accused me of murder,” he said. I held my face as it was for the two minutes or so that he took to explain an age-old neighbourly fight about property. It had all started forty years ago when his father as a young boy threw bits of *roti* in the contentious strip of land which was part of his neighbours’ property thanks to his grandfather’s benignity. They raised a big hue and cry about the *roti* and his family decided to go to court for the piece of land. “My grandfather was a generous man, but petty people saw this as a sign of weakness. Finally he had to resort to the courts and he wasn’t very happy doing so. “So that’s when it all started.” He looked up and asked, “Are you hungry?”

I unfroze my face and muttered something between yes and no. He picked yes and walked to the kitchen. It was 3 a.m. I sat where I was reassuring myself with the operative word ‘accused’. A few minutes later I was served a tomato-onion omelette sprinkled with more green chilies than I could handle. By then I knew better than to displease him. I reminded myself of the boarding school warden who used to say if it’s on your plate it’s edible!

“You must be wondering if my employers know.” Was that what I was wondering! Sure, I nodded a yes and a no. He picked yes again. “You see, they don’t have a witness; it can go on forever. How do you expect a man to earn a living if he goes around announcing he is awaiting a decision on murder?” I wanted to lift the teacup to my face and hide behind it. I couldn’t. It was the first time I realized how naked our eyes are.

“This man, my neighbour’s son – he is older than me – at the break of the dawn, he used to bathe at his well. The well overlooks our boundary. One afternoon he was found in it. I had only come back home the day before, after a year. I was driving a tempo for a trader in Ghaziabad at the time,” he stopped. Silence. I again looked at the teacup for rescue.

“My brother manages all that, he pays all the fees. I am lucky. In this day and age which brother does that? My father was full of stories of how brothers kill one another over property. Perhaps he told us these stories as deterrence. We grew up thick.” He stopped. “I love my brother,” he said, a little desperately.

“Tell me what are you doing with this lot?” I knew this was coming. Perhaps people were closer in origin than apart in class. After all I was just two generations removed from his village. Unlike the company I kept, to him I was very conspicuous in my otherness.

“These people with their incessant Thank you’s and Sorry’s! I’ve heard it when I hold it for him while he pees, inebriated, and when she waits in the car having worn the wrong shoes while I fetch her the right ones.” He took my empty tea cup and slid both to a corner. “There used to be a *Zamindar* whose fields my father ploughed. He succumbed to throat cancer, but

nobody ever saw him so much as cough.” His eyes glowed with pride. “Then there is this lot, showering around this sham respect. I wish they kept some of it for themselves.” The modern world of western Indianism was distasteful to him.

“What kind of people are these? They go to parties leaving their kids behind on their own to have their own party. Living in mutual inconvenience! These are not real families.” He was livid. “They have no clue what some people have done for their families.” He rubbed his palms together, not because of any outside cold but perhaps the chill within. He stayed quiet for a while.

“Do you think your own blood can betray you?” I repeated my yes and no routine on which I had survived so far. He picked no this time! “That’s what I think!” He paused to catch a breath. “He would still be alive, that man, had he not said such vile things about my family. I don’t think much of women. They make men weak. My wife is just a woman... But I love my brother.” His love for his brother had become a plea now, but my hackles had risen before that. From “did he” it turned to “would he”. Fear of physical danger had transformed into a more palpable one, sexual. I started imagining a bathroom somewhere to lock myself into. The sky had turned blue with some grey flakes. Soon it’ll be morning, I told myself and breathed.

“Prison would at least put an end to this,” he continued, completely unaware of me. I braved a look at his face. “This life of humiliation.” This was the most confused the 21 year-old me had ever been. His eyes were moist and distant. He didn’t make any attempt to hide anything. He sat crying, hands on his knees, like he was tired. I had never seen a grown man cry before. It filled me with another kind of fear, a fear I had battled before, an ashamed fear. How could I have feared a pathetic man like him? I relaxed my spine.

“Lies make it easy to get by.” He wasn’t talking to me anymore. He was alone. “Truth sits like a snake in your gut, coiling and uncoiling. Not even the gods can free us from truth.”

Within seconds the air turned yellow; first the crows acknowledged it and then the sparrows. Rain followed, as though someone had uncorked the clouds by accident. I pulled myself from the balcony to the doorway. He didn’t. Morning *azaan* and the first rays of the sun and the honking from the masters of the house, all coincided in an announcement of sorts. Tomorrow had come all at once, in a rush. It felt like a lot was going to happen and yet if nothing happened no one was going to feel cheated. For a night so heavy with possibilities, the day itself was the promise.

He picked up an airbag tucked behind the door. It had been there all night, and I hadn’t noticed it. He slung it on his shoulder. Perhaps it was the rain, or the daylight, or his tears, but his face seemed different now. His eyes less intense and his lips parted harmlessly. He looked like a man all ready to go nowhere, holding a ticket without a destination stamp.

The masters walked up. He gave the car key to the madam. She was surprised to see him there, “Oh you didn’t have to wait for us! But thank you, Janta.” I looked closely, he didn’t wince. Sir and madam smiled at him. He looked at me wordlessly in goodbye. Something of

a nod and something of a wave of his hand, and he was gone. One of the kids had just woken up and walked into the living room. Sir and madam got busy with making much of the baby. I said my goodbye. They asked me to wait for breakfast. I told them I had an early class. They asked the baby who I was. He did not know me and mumbled, "A friend of a friend." I didn't elaborate.

I walked to the bus stop, then looked at my wallet and hailed an auto-rickshaw. I wasn't in a mood to fight the molesters on the bus. Some days I just wasn't. I switched on my phone.

On my way back, still mulling the strange few hours I'd spend in the balcony turned confessional, I kept spotting men like Janta— hundreds of them, invisible in the cityscape, submerged in stories of home and away, us and them, honour and shame, now and back when.

At some point when I was nearing the campus, my phone rang. My mother asked me where I had been. She insisted on the truth. I hung up. I wasn't interested in truth.