

## MYSTERY SHORT STORY BY ABHISHEK INDORIA

*Summary: A lecturer finds himself spellbound by a haunting story told by a raggedy roadside traveler about his life as he waits for the next bus in a small town in a foreign country.*

I cursed as I swatted another mosquito from my neck, moving swiftly towards the window to see if I got the bastard. I bitten by more mosquitoes in the past hour than in the entirety of year, which included trips to various countries. Just an hour or more, I told myself.

I was a lecturer in history and mythology and I had just disembarked from a long journey from Glasgow. Our college had a small yet prestigious staff and a solid reputation producing fine students in history. Last week, a university in western India requested a lecture. They were paying handsomely, and so it fell upon me out of our rotating staff of four to go out and give this lecture in Diu.

I looked at the bleary sky through the window. Clouds were forming towards the west and the usual beautiful sunset you get to hear so much about was nowhere to be seen. I currently stayed in a guest room at a house, er...a mansion of a prominent priest in the town of Amreli.

I had to reach Diu before nine in the morning, at best quarter past nine. I was still beating myself up for the fact that I missed a bus by ten minutes which led directly to Diu. If I called the bus-station earlier I could have changed the reservation to pick me up here instead of rerouting through Somnath, which added a few extra hours to my journey. The bus left at 10:50 PM. It was currently 9:00 PM.

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If I had told the priest I am pretty sure he would have gotten me to Diu somehow. Hell, he could have paid for my fare and lodgings too! He even offered to lend me a car for the time period but I declined out of politeness. Foolish, I muttered.

I packed light, only a small bag. I went to the corner of the road, where a sign said “BUS STOP” on a rusty plate. There were no chairs, just a few stone boulders. I set my bag on one and sat on the other, sighing. I wished I would not end up at the lecture with dozens of mosquito bites and a heatstroke. Coincidentally, I could smell the storm which was about to rain down on me.

“Namaskar!” I heard behind my back. I turned and saw a thin, scrawny man with round glasses and wild black hair. He stopped when he saw me, hesitated, and then pointed at my bag.

“Mind if I sit down?” he said with a thick accent.

“Of course.” I took the bag and carefully placed it between my knees.

“Where are you off to, sir?” he asked preemptively.

“Diu.” I mumbled. “I am waiting for the 10:50 to Somnath, then taking the bus to Diu.”

“Aaaah!” He smiled broadly. “Do you have a reservation?”

“Made one this morning.”

“You made a mistake then.” He spoke, squinting at the sky, “It’s getting quite... How do you say... Stormy? And there was a bus which went directly to Diu. I’m afraid you missed it.”

“That I know,” I said, smiling half-heartedly. “I didn’t know much about the buses here you see. It’s sort of hard.”

“I can see that,” he said, looking at me. “You’ll reach there soon enough, there’s another bus. It’s a matter of a few kilometers. All you’ll lose is time and money.”

I sighed. “I think I’ve earned that much.”

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Suddenly there was a flash of light on the right side of the road and I jumped up. “Do I have to give him a hand or does the bus stop here regularly?”

He squinted towards the set of lights for a bit and then relaxed. “It’s okay, sit down, it’s just a car,” he said, “There are two buses, one goes at 9:30, but it is very slow and stops frequently. It’ll take you there even later than the bus which comes at 10:50. It doesn’t stop anywhere else.”

The lights just crossed in front of me. Car. I was surprised how accurately he had been able to tell what vehicle it was.

“Have you been outside of India?” I asked, curious.

“No,” he said. “Why do you ask?”

“You speak good English.”

He laughed. “And Portuguese, and Hindi, and Bangla. I make do.” Shrugging, he pulled a waterskin out of his bag and took a long swig. “I have been around. I don’t have a particular place I belong to. I don’t even know where my parents were from, and what language they spoke.”

“How so?” I asked with a bit of hesitation.

“Ah, it’s an old story.” he stretched his feet. “A long time ago, approximately fifty-two years back there was an accident at this Amreli-Somnath road. I don’t think,” he paused, his eyes scanning my face, “Yes, I don’t think you were born back then.

“Anyway! You should really travel here during the daytime. It is one of the most beautiful routes in all of India. There are plains, coast, mountains and there are a lot of animals you get to see in the farms. It’s even more excellent when it’s raining,” he said, nodding towards the storm.

“You were talking about an accident.” I reminded him.

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“Oh, yes yes, approximately fifty-two years ago there was an accident. The road takes a dangerous U-turn halfway to Somnath. That’s where it happened.”

There was another set of lights on the route and I looked up, curious.

“Truck.” He grunted.

“I am sorry.” I stammered. “Please, go on.”

“It was a bus overflowing with people. More than the guy should have taken in, but that’s India for you. Well, no one knows what exactly happened, but I am going to make a guess and say that the driver couldn’t turn it properly at that U-turn. There was an about 2000-foot drop right next to the road.”

I grimaced.

He nodded. “The bus was on fire before it even reached the surface. Everyone burned to death. No one survived.” He made a face. “No one but a child of about a year and a half.”

I looked up at him, surprised. I heard a loud sound and turned in time to see that the vehicle was in fact, a truck.

“It’s a surprise. Was he injured?”

“No, not injured. Not even a concussion. It was talk of all the village.

“It was strange. There was one explanation many have contemplated. There is a flowery tree near the road. Well, not one, but there are many trees scattered around this road of that kind. It was possible that the child was reaching out of the window for the flowers and it was a strange coincidence that he grabbed a branch as soon as the bus lurched towards the drop.

“When the villagers heard the sound of the explosion, they hurried towards the bus. It was then they found the child hanging from the tree. Judging from the clothes of the child, it seemed as if he was from a rich family. He could, however, say absolutely nothing except

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“mom” and “dad”. It was hard to find out who he was exactly. The police were trying to search the bus for anything that might belong to the child but they could not find anything.” He paused. “This is a truck as well.”

“What happened to the child?” I asked.

“The next day the newspapers had every single detail about the explosion as well as a big picture of the child. However even after several days, there was nothing. Nobody came to claim the child. Yes, several people, villagers in fact, came forward to adopt the child, however they could not because of a legal issue. The problem was, the child had to be completely abandoned for him to be eligible for adoption. Nobody knew if anyone would come in the future claiming the child as theirs. Hence the magistrate ruled that the child was to be sent to an orphanage.”

As the truck passed in front of my eyes I started to wonder what kind of man could identify vehicles at night, and from such a distance.

“Do you know who the child was?”

I looked at him, realisation dawning on me.

“Ah yes.” He took out a small picture from a wallet and handed it to me. “This was me at the time of the accident.”

“Did...you find out something else?”

“No, I could not. I lived in the orphanage for about six years before I ran away. It wasn't a good orphanage. The owners beat us, and they made us beg for food. They made us steal. If anybody refused they would stick hot iron rods on our hands.” He said showing me his scarred hands. “That one, is a bus.”