

Ranjani Rao

Made in Mumbai – From *Train Friends* – a collection of essays (buy it [here](#))

The privilege to travel alone on local trains marked a major coming of age milestone. The summer I turned sixteen, I took the 6.03 a.m. Churchgate slow train from Andheri to Dadar to reach Agarwal classes, the coveted tuition center, in time for the 7 a.m. vacation batch Mathematics class. I waited on platform two for the train to arrive, intently studying the stiff, rectangular ticket in my hands. My comfort zone until then had been a small area circumscribed by the BEST bus route that stopped right in front of my all-girls school in Andheri.

To my relief, the early morning train was not crowded. A pleasant breeze streamed into the ladies compartment as the train picked up speed. Finding a window seat, I looked around at my fellow travelers; fisherwomen with snugly wrapped saris that enabled them to move around gracefully with their large baskets, a few sleepy office goers catching a few more minutes of sleep and a gaggle of college girls.

On the return trip, I made friends with a few classmates who agreed to meet each morning for the same train. Time went by much quicker with conversations centered around exams and questions papers. I thought ahead about the kind of work life I would have in Mumbai, whether I would become a regular commuter on these trains like my aunts, whether I would experience train friendships that would endure the test of time. Who knew that life would have different plans for me?

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My first job as a research scientist at a large multinational company in California was located at a site that could be reached only by car. I had acquired the necessary skill of driving a car during my student years in America. I loved my new solitary morning commute on streets that meandered through Sunnyvale, Mountain View and Los Altos before ending in a beautiful, green campus in Palo Alto. Each day I savored the skillful control I exerted over the vehicle, pleased by the mere fact of car ownership, a luxury I could not have imagined in my middle-class life back in Bombay. Although I drove a ten-year-old Toyota Corolla, its perfectly functioning radio brought me my favorite shows such as Fresh Air with Terri Gross and All Things Considered.

The solitude gave me space to ponder, a luxury that eluded me at work and at home. But no matter how interesting a radio show, having a virtual voice talk to you in a car is not the same as a live person engaging you in conversation. There was so much going on in my life that I needed to vent but couldn't, for lack of a receptive ear. It wasn't until I faced the crushing loneliness of commuting alone in a car in the US that I realized how valuable a "train friend" would have been.

The camaraderie and catharsis of knowing that you will meet someone each day, frequently enough to be interested in the details of your life and remote enough to refrain from providing unsolicited advice, would have been a welcome addition to my life. Unlike the anonymity of long distance train travel where you disclose details to a fellow passenger knowing you would never meet them again, or the reliability of a therapist who you visit on a regular basis but pay for the privilege of unburdening yourself, friendships forged on Mumbai local trains provide a happy mix of the two – free therapy sessions with a reliable fellow commuter. Train friends don't dissect your life.

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They don't solve problems. By being a witness, a compassionate listener, a genuine well-wisher, a train friend gives you the best gift of all - unconditional presence.

On my return to India after spending fourteen years in America, I moved to Hyderabad. Mumbai continued to remain my hometown, because my parents lived there. Mumbai, therefore, was my destination for long holidays and short visits, the place where I could be myself.

The Hussainsagar express train dropped me off at Dadar station at about six in the morning. I carried my light bag to the local train platform, determined to prove to my parents that I didn't need to be escorted home. I was, after all, a Mumbaikar and everyone knows that Mumbai trains are a safe option, even at that early hour. A group of college students were the only evidence of life on an otherwise deserted platform. They talked and poked each other in the ribs, laughing aloud at their inside jokes. I was transported back to my Agarwal class days, wondering if my group had been equally boisterous. My reverie was interrupted by a hoarse voice.

"Aunty, Bandra kaun se side aayega?" Which side will Bandra come?

The question was a common one, one that I had often asked others. But had this boy really called me Aunty? Me? Aunty!!

In typical Mumbai style, the response rose in my throat involuntarily.

"Aunty hogi teri maa." Your mother is an aunty.

After a sixteen hour journey, with a night spent tossing around on a train berth, in my crumpled salwar kameez and messy hair, I knew I wasn't looking my best. But. Aunty??

In my mind, I was still a teenager, In real life, I was in my mid-thirties. Outside Mumbai, I was an adult but entering Mumbai meant shedding that artificial, worldly-wise

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persona and once again turning into that diffident teenager who had stood on platform number two in Andheri station, tightly clutching her train ticket, not knowing which train went to Churchgate and which went to Borivali. Of course, the poor boy didn't know all this.

I smiled at him and replied honestly. "I don't know."

Even though I no longer knew, or had forgotten many details about Mumbai locals, I felt gratified that on some level I still came across as a true Mumbaikar. Although the schoolboy could not know any of this, I had crossed continents by plane and by train. I had seen, and forgotten, more than he knew. But by asking me the quintessentially Mumbai question, he had shown me that here, in Mumbai, I was no different from any other commuter. I was home.

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