**Wadekar’s World**

Dug-a-dig-a-dog... Dug-a-dig-a-dog...

Sandhurst Road passed them by on the Harbour Line from Chhtrapathi Shivaji Terminus to Wadala.

Dilip Wadekar formed a thin sandwich filling between two stout women commuters. He attempted now to see if he could see ‘the Stoic of Sandhurst’. It was something he had to do. The stoic gave him a feeling of homeliness: he was such a happy landmark, the *only* happy one; a vagabond lying philosophically on his stolen surgical cot on the platform. The man, the cot and Wadekar had grown older together and the niceness of it all was that the authorities hadn’t been able to evict any of them from their respective positions.

Wadekar was a clerk in the Central Railway office and it didn’t matter that the Indian Railway world had moved into the Internet Age. He held on tenaciously to his trusty manual typewriter and refused to touch an electronic mouse as though afraid that it might nip him. At home though, it was different. Wadekar of the Central Railway Office and the Wadekar who resided in *Jhansi Castle* had nothing much to do with each other. Every morning one dressed in a safari suit and left for the suburban railway station to take a fast local to office. He returned in the evening, changed into jeans one size too small and one of his fake Tommy Hilfiger T shirts, and became the *other* Wadekar.

Dug-a-dig-a-dog... Dug-a-dig-a-dog...

They were approaching Cotton Green, sorrowful and wet in the rain. That was the place where the young man had ‘dropped out of life’. Wadekar disliked unpleasantness and had mastered the art of using euphemisms - even to himself. He wondered about the young man’s death between grinding wheels and glistening railway tracks. He wasn’t sure whether the youth had 1) been shoved out to a grisly end by rushing-crushing-pushing-fussing commuters 2) grown tired of holding on for dear life to the rusted bars of suburban train doors, or 3) grown tired of holding on to dear life itself....

*Ah...too many people. T-o-o many. Nothing like a suburban train in Mumbai to introduce one to the woes and the weight of the population of India. Nothing.*

*What were the numbers at the last count?*

Wadekar floated away on a piece of mind. It was a skill he had refined over years of suburban train travel. It had got him into trouble occasionally like the time when a woman commuter, a formidable one, had filthy-mouthed him for having run his fingers searchingly along the back of her saree blouse. He could hardly explain that he was only surfing for the right T.V. channel. How hard it was that the wall between the inside of his head and the world outside was as floating and insubstantial as virtual space.

He joggled memory and found what he was looking for.

“This is All India Radio. This is Ratnamani Manoharan Balakrishnan giving you the news. According to the latest census---”

The southern accent rolling thickly in his brain was more than he could bear. He commenced listening to Stephen Cole’s news report, instead. “This is BBC World News. This is Stephen Cole reporting from New Delhi. According to the National Census for 1997, the population of India has touched 990.5 million, second only to that of the People’s Republic of China which stands at 1.23 billion. Ah well, there’s safety in numbers...”

*Charming.*

Wadekar loved the way Cole used words and gestures. The gentle asides; the - *what was that?* - ah yes, the ‘innuendoes’ (he had looked up the meaning in his late father’s dictionary); the little mannerisms. He’d tried it out once – putting his finger into his collar to loosen it the way Cole sometimes did when the New Delhi studio grew too blistering for a man used to London in winter. But his wife had asked Wadekar whether he’d got ringworm itch or what from travelling on suburban trains and promptly changed his bath soap from the modestly perfumed Rexona to the (cheaper) heavy-duty Lifebuoy Carbolic used by the garage mechanics who ran an unlicensed workshop at the head of the lane that led to *Jhansi Castle*.

After that, while Wadekar shaved or had his bath, he took to practicing Cole’s accent and style: “Ah weell,...tish-mish, tish-mish, swish-a-swish, there’s safetay in numbahs.” And again, “Oh crikey! Crikey!” However, he suspected that his mother-in-law had begun listening in at the keyhole and wasn’t entirely sure about the status of his mental health. After that the poor, old dear shadowed him while he watched T.V., listened to the radio, had his meals or went for a pee. After all their two-bedroom flat in *Jhansi Castle* had several windows and two convenient balconies. And it was a long way to the ground.

Dug-a-dig-a-dog... Dug- a-dig-a-dog...

Sewri, churned up by the south-west monsoons, made its presence smelt. Dilip Wadekar decided that he altogether preferred the warm rancidity of the Great Unwashed inside the train to the odour of fresh phenyl and stale urine emanating from the platform.

*What was that Limbale had said once?*

Ashok Limbale was the office wit and Dilip Wadekar and he had their tea breaks together in the canteen. Limbale lived in Sewri and had said that you could get *anything* in the worldthere – even bubonic plague! Yes, yes that time in ’94 when there was a plague scare in India, Limbale and many others were told to stay at home so as not to spread the contagion because the Press had reported a case of plague in a private hospital in Sewri.

It was rather exciting the way the Greater Mumbai Corporation had swung into action and gone around making announcements on megaphones about unexplained fevers, swollen glands, hacking coughs and dead rats, cleaning years’ worth of garbage, and spraying the place with banned pesticides. There had been emergency meetings of doctors, public health officials, administrators, and the police. Wadekar had secretly hoped that Central Railway would declare a crisis and decide to work on a skeleton staff so that he could stay at home and pursue whatever was at the time his latest hobby.

Then it was declared that the whole thing had been a hoax designed to spread terror in India, ruin the nation’s image and paralyze normal life. Wadekar was mildly disappointed that life hadn’t actually been paralyzed, but agreed that the cleaning up hadn’t been a bad job.

Dug-a-dig-a-dog... Dug- a-dig-a-dog...

The train was slowing down like a shaft of lazy rain. He was home – almost. He felt his heart lurch in anticipation of his evening’s pursuit always undertaken when his wife went to the temple and his mother-in-law had a pre-dinner nap.

*“Hello Suhana, Jacky here...”*

He tried it out, under his breath, at various tempos and frequencies: taffeta-toned and persuasive; confident and brash Bollywood. The stout woman commuter turned around and withered him with a glare. It took Wadekar a few seconds to un-shrivel.

It had all started with Limbale and his endeavour to find himself a wife on an Internet matrimonial site. Matrimonial Sites were the Internet’s latest offerings to India’s urban population. It was socially acceptable – not at all like the shameless ‘Blind Dating Services’ and ‘Friendz Chat Circles’ that were to follow. Limbale had registered his name, uploaded his photograph and ‘bio data’ and seemed to be having a rip roaring time courting several ‘possibles’ at the same time. Wadekar thought, slightly resentfully, that his own prospects stretched in unending dreariness to the skyline of his Mumbai suburb.

Life was an unwashed mosquito net.

Then it came to Wadekar: his accent, his *‘Stephen Cole’ accent* was perfect! Why not start a phone romance? There was nothing wrong in it – just a bit of good, old-fashioned fun, something to look forward to that would stretch the evenings out amiably. He could always ‘pack up and leave’ whenever he had wanted to. That was the thing about an incoherent metropolis. You could always disappear!

Jacky Chandani, 26 year old Sindhi Diamond Merchant with business links in South Africa, Singapore and Hong Kong was born shortly thereafter. He’d been educated in Hong Kong which explained his British accent. (It was important to work out all the explanations first.)

Wadekar leafed slyly through the pages of his directory and came upon it – a working women’s hostel. Not run by nuns; he knew he’d never get past nuns. It was just some Trust or the other. The place wasn’t situated too far away so he could always detour on his way back from the railway station and check out *his* ‘possibles’ – young, pretty, chatty. He had made one mistake in the early days by starting a ‘phone friendship’ with a woman who had a lisping, quilt-like voice and a high flirtatious giggle and then discovered, after meticulous detective work, that she was a spinster in her late sixties, with ill-fitting dentures....

The hostel thing turned out to be a good idea. Each room had its own phone. The corner chai shop owner was helpful with insider information. The prettiest girl was in Room 405.

The first call was ‘an error in dialling’ – Jacky Chandani meant to speak to the proprietor of *Bhimji Zaveri and Sons,* Diamond Merchants in Zaveri Bazar, and he was terribly sorry. Crikey! Crikey!

Suhana was as light-weight and lovely as you could get. It was just as well because he didn’t want the heavy, masterful kind. This was only a pastime, nothing that could turn unpleasant - or serious.

Suhana and he spoke to each other now for half an hour everyday from six to six-thirty in the evening. It was refreshing, but he did wonder what he’d do when she decided that she’d like to meet him. He wasn’t ready to disappear yet. But forty years of age would sit oddly on Jacky Chandani.

*Umm..um...um...Hair colouring might help and workouts at ‘Lucky Gym’.*

Still, how would he explain the sudden appearance of six-pack abs to the Mrs.?

Dug- a-dig-a-dog... Dug- a-dig-a-dog...

Wadala.

He didn’t alight. He was ejected from the railway carriage – as always – by those behind him. He found himself under a lopsided hoarding advertising ‘Raja Silk Mills’ in Vijaywada, Andhra Pradesh: “Tired of Life? Sick of your employer? Then kick your job! Raja Silk Mills awaits you!” He was often tempted to take their advice about the boss and the kicking. But he had other things on his mind now.

The monsoon waters rose fierce and filthy. They’d flood soon. Not so bad – a flood once in a way. Wadekar waded his way across the road.

“Compound walls have collapsed, it seems!” a man in muddy gumboots announced to the world in general as he squelched past.

*Where? Not in Jhansi Castle, surely. Oh, oh, oh. Then the Mrs would be at....*

*Better practice trying to sound pleasantly surprised. “You’re at home...ah?”*

*“And where did you expect me to be? On the roof or what? It’s flooding already, see here on T.V.”*

*“I thought maybe you would have gone for the Ganpati Puja....”*

Wadekar hurried after Gumboots, “Walls collapsed, you said?”

“Also telephone lines, and some small, small shops. All illegal structures. Very good. Serves the Corporation right!” Gumboots was still grimly satisfied when he boarded a bus and disappeared into the monsoon blue.

*Small shops...The... corner chai place?*

*And the Working Women’s Hostel next to it! Could it be...?*

*Keep calm! Keep calm!*

*But what about the residents?*

Suhana misted into Wadekar’s mind and out of it.

*What would Jacky do now?? Crikey! Crikey!*

No time to be wasted. He must check it out personally. He hurried left at the traffic lights instead of taking the right which he customarily did to *Jhansi Castle.*

The whole world smelt like an armpit.

Another hundred metres and he’d be there.... Wadekar stumbled around a street corner and onto a slime path, his ears assailed by the grumbling grind of earthmovers.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*