

THE JOURNEY TO GROWING UP...

This was my first independent bus journey. After all, I was eleven years old now, *grown-up*.

My parents had finally allowed me to go alone to visit my uncle, who lived in a town, seventy kilometres away. The bus journey would take about 3 hours on the hill roads and the ticket would cost rupees twenty-six, quite a fortune considering that my weekly pocket money was seven rupees.

I packed a couple of dresses, a little snacks and a bottle of water in a plastic bag and checked the money that I had distributed in three different pockets. This was a precaution against pick-pocketing: even if one pocket was picked, I still would have some money left to reach home safely. I rehearsed all the steps and precautions in my mind and set-off.

In spite of being worried about motion-sickness, I was thrilled. I felt a profound sense of achievement and adven-

ture. I anticipated the journey to be even more enjoyable than meeting my cousins.

I had never walked so quickly to bus station, yet I found no time for enquiry as the bus to my destination was already exiting the bus station. I knew that there was only one bus plying to my destination each day and so I had to jostle in.

Once inside, I found the bus over-crowded; not only with people but with goats and chicken and sacks. An obnoxious smell vitiated the atmosphere. I had never been in such close contact with so many people before. I was sweating profusely and feeling dizzy as I tried to find stable footing.

In my struggle to negotiate constant acceleration and deceleration around the twists and turns of hill roads, I lost the grip on my bag. I told myself not to panic. I tried to locate my bag, but it was impossible to see anything beyond the human wall I was within. I tried to think as grown-ups do. I felt that someone would try to sneak away with my bag and I decided I would keep an eye on any passenger who alighted, and later, when the bus stopped for refreshment break, I'd find my bag. I was pleased with my presence of mind.

The bus rattled on interrupted by a number of halts. Time seemed to have become a viscous jelly; it hardly flowed. Even more people wanted to give us company on the journey and the bus got more crowded at every little village. Once, somebody was falsely convinced that his luggage had fallen off from the roof of the bus and forced a stop. Eventually, the bus broke down due to a 'minor problem'.

Never during any of the stops were passengers allowed to alight for a fresh breath of air. The driver thought that this would delay our arrival to the destination. If they had allowed us to alight maybe I could have found my bag. But there was literally no room for argument, as voices would easily be absorbed by the human-wall.

After sometime, the journey re-commenced. Meanwhile, I continuously jockeyed for a more comfortable position and managed to get a view from the window. I saw milestones with decreasing numbers pass by; my mind was calculating what fraction of journey remained at every stone. With every milestone, I was feeling more relaxed.

Suddenly after completing 9/14th of the journey, the bus slowed down and eventually ground to a halt. Two men with a bag and a register forced their way inside the bus. The conductor looked pale. The gentlemen were

demanding tickets from the passengers. There was a lot of whispering going on in the bus. Soon it became clear that it was a 'flying' inspection squad from the transport department.

I realized that in the hurry to board the bus at the gate, I had forgotten to purchase the ticket. Oh my God! What do they do to people who travel without a ticket? Will they make me de-board at this desolate spot? And there is no bus to follow.....

As I was dreading the consequences and formulating plans to counter them, I saw something reassuring. A stencilled message near the luggage rack on the wall of the bus said, "Travelling without a valid ticket is an offence. Ticketless travellers will be fined rupees 50 in excess of the fare." I had that much money, thank God!

Meanwhile, the inspectors were having a tough time wading through the crowd to check tickets in the bus. I felt I could evade them in the bus. If I managed to evade them, I would save money equivalent of 10 weeks and six days' allowance. But would it be right to do so? How should a *grown-up* behave?

Soon, the inspectors got frustrated by ploughing through the crowd. They got down and ordered everyone

to alight and then show them the tickets. How I longed to get down and breathe fresh air... !

Some standing passengers reluctantly got down, but others were unwilling to give up their seats or vantage standing points. Alighting meant reshuffling of seats and positions. Amidst this confusion, I sighted my plastic bag near the feet of a seated passenger, two rows in front of me. Apparently, no one thought much of it; it had been trampled upon. I quickly repossessed my belongings. Nothing was missing but my snacks had become inedible and hunger was gnawing.

The relief of finding my bag was clouded by the ticket conundrum. I was still unable to decide if I should alight, draw in some fresh air and declare myself ticketless or hang on and evade the ticket inspectors.

The ambience and the ticket inspector's mood were increasingly darkening. They were unable to force all the passengers out of the bus and unable to force their way to the back of the bus. Wading through the crowd must have felt like an impossible obstacle race; one riddled with animals, sacks, humans and an unbearable stench.

They decided to do something fast. They declared that fine will no longer be levied; passengers could voluntarily

declare that they did not have a ticket and simply purchase one from them.

I could not procrastinate any longer. I had to decide. How would a *grown up* act?

I did not know what a *grown up* would have done. My decision was informed partly by my conscience, partly by my craving for a breath of fresh air, partly because the stakes were lowered from 10 weeks and six days to 3 weeks and five days, and partly because I wanted to thank God for delivering my bag safely to me. I shouted – “I don’t have a ticket.”

Immediately, I felt a sharp blow on my back and a searing pinch on the back of my thigh. I heard two voices admonishing me and ordering me to keep shut. Only, they used an unfamiliar name.

As I turned around to see who and what caused this unpleasantness, I was greeted by a sheepishly surprised couple.

They were surprised because they had mistaken me to be their son, who apparently had the same ticket status as me. They apologized profoundly and the ticket inspector smiled knowingly and looked away.

Now I knew how *grown-ups* thought... ..
