

Circle Line

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It took him a moment to understand that a mobile in the neighbouring carriage had caught his attention, that somehow it had penetrated the bubble he kept around himself. Its jangling ringtone had stopped him short, unsettled him, and disturbed him. And because of that it had stirred his curiosity and made him break cover.

Why did it catch his attention? he wondered. A handphone buzzing in the underground was a common thing. Every moment of everyday somewhere in the world a handphone went off in the underground. What was so special about this?

He surveyed the passengers in his carriage and made a quick calculation. Before looking over to investigate he wanted to get his numbers right. There were sixty-two seats in his train car. Around half of the seats were filled. A gaggle of students cramped the open space by the forward exit. Another group stood cluttered round the doors in the middle but the remaining two exits were clear of bodies. Seven, no, eight passengers stood dangling from the suspension straps strung between the two banks of seats. For some reason these recalcitrant individuals preferred to stand. As the train took a curve, they started to tilt and to pivot. Their bodies went into a shallow incline and he felt himself respond in kind as the centre of gravity shifted in him.

If he had to estimate he would say fifty. There were around fifty persons in his carriage.

For comparison's sake, he would assume that the car next door held the same number of passengers. He would assume that everyone there had a handphone. All their handphones were switched on.

Out of fifty handphones, the probability that one would go off during a trip was quite high. So why did it catch his attention? Why did it disturb his peace?

He was the kind of person who liked to brood and to ponder, to mull over the small things in life. Now he fretted over this mystery with his eyebrows pulled together in a great frown and his eyes glazed over in concentration. He didn't smile or laugh, but now and then he shook his thighs and rocked himself gently backwards and forwards. He rubbed the back of his neck, scratched at his ear with

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one hand and flicked his tongue back and forth between his lips. He left his tongue dangling over his lower lip and clenched his teeth over the dense sponge-like muscle. A fine, soft light crept into his eyes and every inch of him went taut with concentration and deliberation.

All at once the truth dawned on him. “Of course” sprang into his head and a lugubrious smile appeared on his face. He straightened up in his seat and murmured, “Of course, yes, of course!”

The ringtone was standard and regular! It was the standard ringtone found on every land line, the one that went bling bling... bling bling. That was why it caught his attention. Millions of phones around the world used it. It wasn't a fancy jazz tune, an elaborate jingle, or some snatch of synthesised melody pinched from a violin concerto. It was an ordinary, garden variety ringtone, the kind you get in homes and offices.

When everyone in the world used a distinctive ringtone on his mobile set, the old-fashioned bling bling became immediately unique. It became *sui generis* because it refused to change with the times. It became singular because it remained the same.

He thought: The owner of that handphone didn't need a special ringtone to stand out in a crowd. But this alone made him special. This alone proclaimed a manner of handling the world.

He thought: There's a place for dinosaurs in the world. Dinosaurs can survive and maybe even flourish. They don't have to go extinct.

Finally he allowed himself to scrutinise the neighbouring compartment. He peered through the connecting passageway between the two carriages. He was right, the number of passengers there was roughly the same as in his carriage. A couple in their thirties stood leaning against the gently swerving walls of the passageway. They gave each other caressing smiles and nodded and preened but he dismissed them as belonging neither to his train car or the neighbouring train car. They were miscellaneous items.

From where he was sitting, he could see a bank of seats stretching past the exits in the middle of the compartment. He had to crane his neck to see further down the row. It took him a while to find the person he was looking for, the one talking on the phone. With a start he realised that it was a girl. She was tall, about his age, slack-jawed and stately, with large expressive eyes loaded with mascara. She wore a white linen blouse, denim jeans and a pair of stiletto heels. A fat pink scar on her left cheek gave her face an odd unbalanced aspect but she didn't try to hide it. Her shoulder length hair was tied back from her face and forehead. Her gestures were relaxed and open as she nodded into the mouthpiece of her phone. Her lips moved with amusement as she spoke and her eyes shone with intelligence.

He thought: a scar like that made many people shuffle through life with nervous, downcast eyes, pretending to be invisible. But this girl carried herself like a goddess. She behaved as if a scar on a cheek was the most natural thing in the world. As if it didn't exist. And furthermore she didn't need to punch up a special ringtone to make herself substantial and real. She didn't mind being innocuous like that.

Perhaps she had the gift of insight? She saw into the heart of things and

flinched at the idea of nine to five? She didn't fall for the Shenton Way trick, didn't want to spend her life peddling stocks and shares like his father?

She didn't want to run in a rat race? To compete in a mouse marathon? A rodent sprint?

He laughed at this train of thought. He was projecting himself on her.

Worse, he was making what psychologists called an attribution error. He attributed personality-based factors for her behaviour when in all likelihood it was a result of environmental factors, or even accidental. She wasn't trying to be a rebel, a Jeya or a Chee. It was just that work-wise she was super-busy. She had just bought the phone and the shopgirl had set an old-fashioned ringtone for her. She hadn't gotten around to changing the setting yet, so she was stuck with it for a while.

Or else the phone didn't belong to her. It belonged to a friend. She had borrowed it for a few days.

He considered her a fellow traveller but for all he knew she was studying to be a chartered financial accountant. She was a fully paid up member of the club of self-helpers, effective-habitors and makers-of-the-best-first-impressioners. With a CFA under her belt she became a master of the universe. She went to the top of the pile, the head of the list; she became a priority case member.

What was in store for her in the grand scheme of things? he wondered. Perhaps she would drop dead at sixty-five leaving behind a single child who was polite but distant when she walked the earth, a child who didn't cry at her funeral? Maybe she would turn out to be like his mother, an intelligent woman trapped in a loveless marriage, a woman cowed by a lifetime's dependence on another person for money and outside interests?

Or maybe she was happy with her life, such as it was? Maybe she couldn't be happier and it was presumptuous – ridiculous – of him to judge her? He didn't have a right to do that. What was wrong with her life? People have a right to their lives! He should look at himself first! He was the one messed up both inside and outside!

He was unrealistic, impractical, conceited. He was a good-for-nothing wastrel.

Who was she talking to? he wondered. Girlfriend? Boyfriend? Husband? Going by the way she smiled and nodded, the person seemed to give her pleasure. Was she off to a romantic encounter of some kind, a rendezvous or a tryst, a romp? Or maybe she was going to church? To Sunday school? To mass?

At that moment the train lurched above ground and the carriage filled with a fine, soft light. From where he was sitting the sun seemed to climb straight up behind her. A circle of light appeared, winked, flickered a little, winked some more, and grew into a fiery nimbus about her head and neck. It threw her face and hair into relief and each strand was caught in a fierce, iridescent blaze, alive with energy. A rush went through him and in the same instant he felt himself swallowed up and melted down.

He was struck by a vision of her as a saint in a church, or as Mary, mother of Christ. Or maybe she was Avalokitesvara, also called Guanyin. She was the bodhisattva of compassion incarnated in the flesh right before him, the one who

listened to the cries of the world, the pleas for succour and relief. She was pure, undamaged, and praiseworthy. She was everything perfect, everything good.

Watchfulness and caution were inlaid into his being but now he stirred with an emotion generated by a presentiment of safety and refuge. Suddenly he knew grace, he knew the meaning of grace.

I'm having a spiritual trip! he told himself. In a land that worships gold I look for spirituality. In a country that makes a deity of supply-chain management I seek deliverance and contemplation! He giggled a little at his cynicism, but all at once an oceanic feeling overwhelmed him again and he felt himself swimming and floating away at the same time.

The handphone in her left hand was a willow branch. Her right hand held a rosary made of rosewood scented with myrrh. The beads on the rosary represented all living things and the turning of the beads symbolised the goddess leading them out of their state of misery and their repeated rounds of rebirth into Nirvana.

She turned to him and smiled. Hope entered his heart and the world became clear and still. He understood that there was something better than doubt, better than mistrust and suspicion – how could there not be? The knowledge that there was something better than his intelligence and his style hit him, wouldn't leave him.

He swallowed the lump in his throat, blinked a few times in quick succession and started to tremble. Never in his life had he undergone a conversion experience but here he was close, might never be closer. After a life time looking for it he was on the brink of something unprecedented, something singular. Out of this moment a thousand possibilities surged, rolled and pitched him head first into the future, into a growing point in his life. He felt himself weightless, suspended like a body in a pool of water, gravity overthrown for an instant. Like a full moon gleaming on a cloudless night a moment of full unexpurgated lucidity was granted to him. For the first time in his twenty-four-year-existence, he saw into the secret heart of things.

And in response, his innermost heart opened up: Of course, he thought. Of course...

Many things matter. Many things matter, she seemed to be saying in a low, throaty voice, the words forming an incantation in his head.

Many things matter, Nat. Find them...

Find them, you will be all right, peace will come, anxiety will go away. Peace will come, I promise.

He blinked again in shock and astonishment. He checked the other passengers but no one had caught the interchange between them. He looked back at the girl but her head was turned away and she was again absorbed in conversation. Did she really smile at him? Did she smile and grant him a vision? Was he dreaming? Would he wake up suddenly in his bedroom, groggy and unrefreshed, with sunlight streaming through his louver windows? Would he remember nothing, not even the special ringtone?

He was dreaming that he was on the underground, minding his own business. A mobile phone rang in the neighbouring train car and caught his attention. A pretty girl wearing jeans, a white blouse and a single ruby-red clip in

her hair turned to him and smiled. When she smiled the caterpillar on her face began to change, to shape shift. All at once it grew wings and became a butterfly. In that way she became a symbol of hope. She represented life, represented the idea that life will find a way.

He gave a little snort and swore under his breathe. Yeah, right, she represents a better tomorrow, he whispered and nearly burst out laughing. Then he caught himself and stopped. This was getting irritating. All this pondering was getting him nowhere. From the corner of his eyes he examined his neighbours. Across from him a pair of teenagers was engrossed with each other. The seat next to him was empty. Further down the carriage two mothers were busy with young children. An elderly man scrutinised a horse-racing magazine. A boy in army camouflage sat with his head bent back, mouth open, eyes closed, snoring. A man in a long-sleeved shirt adjusted his collar, stared angrily at his watch.

The walls of the carriage were covered with pictures of two athletes jogging one behind the other. They were running cross country on a path that went through a patch of forest. There was a clearing on one side and the leaves on the trees were speckled red, yellow and orange – a gorgeous autumn scene. The first athlete was about fifty metres ahead of the second one. His shoulders were slumped and he seemed to be tiring. The second athlete – framed in a waist-high shot from the back – appeared more energetic. There was more spring to his steps.

Every inch of the train car was covered with this strange advertisement. It was stuck on the walls and panels and window-glass and on the partitions between doorways and seats. Even the metal poles were not spared, for somehow a sliver of the ad had been twisted cleverly round their exposed surfaces.

In all directions, wall-to-wall, two men chased each other.

“The guy in front is there to be overtaken,” the caption said.

Again he swore under his breathe. “The guy in front?” he murmured trying to understand the slogan. What on earth did that mean? What an odd thing to say! Who was this guy running in front and where was he going? And who was this guy at the back? Why couldn’t he see their faces? Suddenly he stopped short and checked the faces of his neighbours. No one had seen him swear out loud, he told himself. No one heard him use the F word, he heaved a sigh of relief. On the other hand maybe they were ignoring him? They heard him, but pretended not to hear him? His neighbours were busy with their lives, absorbed in their fears and their concerns. That army boy sleeping with his mouth open, that punter with the racing magazine, the two young mothers. Everyone had their individual demons to smite. Everyone had a cross to bear. Why should they care about him?

They must be busy thinking about the advert, he thought. The way they plaster it wall to wall you can’t really escape its mystery or its peculiarity. It captures your attention like a word you’re trying to remember and without a solution it keeps bugging you but it comes to you in the middle of the night when your guard is down – that’s when you get the answer.

He glanced into the next carriage and caught the girl turning away. She had been staring at him, studying him. She was telling him again that many things matter and that his job was to find them, not to think about adverts. But before he could react to her homily, the world began to change, to alter and to shape shift.

Again, a feeling of weightlessness swept over him. Time seemed to thin out and spread and slow down. Things in his line of sight grew hazy and indistinct. A voice speaking through a thick door spoke. Someone announced the destination. The train slid to a stop.

The next moment he was trailing after the girl out on the platform, moving briskly towards the exit. He kept a few paces behind her. His eyes locked onto the back of her neck, right over her throat. He imagined her flesh against his lips, his tongue on her skin. He imagined his fingers caressing, probing and exerting pressure. A picture of himself biting into her throat came into his head, his arms around her midriff, her body a shallow bow braced for impact, her head tilted sideways, her eyes pleading, fearful, frantic – and finally the smell and the heft of her torso slack in his arms.

But this was insane! He was supposed to get off at the next stop and here he was chasing after a girl. Thinking about crazy things!

“Excuse me...”

She turned, a smile playing about her lips. She’s used to this, he thought. And then – she’s not the type to be rude. She might even give him a telephone number, write something down, anything, just to send him away and protect herself.

On the other hand she might give him her *real* seven-digit Singtel number? He would call her on her handphone and he would get a standard, no frills, garden variety ringtone? They would speak heart to heart and she would tell him – what? – many things?

The possibilities reeled in his head.

“I, sorry... eh... ah.....” He gave a low, hard grunt, coughed, and fell silent. He looked down at his trainers. “Air power,” his trainers said, right at the back, right behind the heels. It was a present from his father the stock analyst, the one who spent his time extolling the virtues of fundamental analysis.

A feeling of self-disgust swept over him as he studied his footwear. Usually he double-knotted his shoelaces to stop them from coming loose. Today he had forgotten to do that.

He wanted to say: “I’m not a pervert or a sex maniac. You’re pretty, but it’s not like that. You see, I need your advice. I recently lost all my adrenalin. I can’t concentrate in class for more than five minutes. After that everything sounds like a fire engine going off in my head. My head starts to swim. Migraine, burst, pain, everything falls apart, everything disconnects. My stomach churns and I feel like vomiting. I can’t breathe and I start to heave. So, you see, I decided not to attend classes anymore. Every time I step on campus I see people grinning. It gives me a choking pain in the chest and lungs and worse than the choking pain I get heartburn and gastric and I have to take my medication but unfortunately they make me drowsy because my doctor refuses to reduce the dosage, you know what I mean?”

“Anyway, I spend all my time nowadays riding on the MRT. I ride from one terminal to another, from sunrise to sunset. I usually take the East-West line, but once they finish the Circle line I can take that so I don’t even have to U-turn back. I can loop around again and again without having to change trains.

“Please understand that I usually sit in the second-last carriage. Today I decided to take a seat in the middle but usually I sit in the section where there are only two seats, side by side. I spend all my time studying faces and, as you can imagine, I happened to notice something special about you. From the way you sit and smile, but most of all from the way you hold yourself, I think you know something secret.

“I was wondering if you would like to share your secret. I think you should.”

All this took maybe two seconds to flash through his head, not the full details enumerated on a clipboard for some psychologist to sort through but an emotion, a need to connect, to take root. But in words nothing came out. In actual dictionary words nothing could be said, nothing grasped. So he growled and grunted but his tongue stayed frozen, as if someone stood by his elbow ready to slice it off with a cleaver.

When he looked up from his trainers she had walked off. He looked down the platform at her retreating back and saw it stiffen with resentment. He started to mumble under his breath: “Is it really mad to think that someone who doesn’t need a special ringtone might know something? Is it really mad? For God’s sake if you know something why don’t you share it?”

Why don’t you share for God’s sake!

He was shouting. The faces told him he was shouting. He saw on one face a frisson of fear, an excited gleam in the eyes of another, pleasure and nastiness in a third, then irritation, impatience, and a quick hardening into indifference. He too was filled with delirious fear. What was wrong with him? How did the words slip out? Why were they staring at him? What were they doing? Then a sly, furtive air stole into his features as he realised something else. His face became shrewd and secretive, and he almost smacked his lips in glee. He looked around quickly to make sure that the others didn’t catch the idea floating in his head: a standard ringtone on a mobile set wasn’t a fashion statement yet, but soon enough it would be. Then she wouldn’t be special, everyone would have it on their handphone. Then the cycle begins anew.

When the station attendant came he punched him in the face. He felt bone crack under his knuckles. Pain shot through his upper arm and shoulders. He began to run. His legs grew wings. He leaped over the turnstile in front of him and his canter became a dash and a sprint. He realised he wouldn’t be riding the underground anymore. He understood for the rest of his life he would be running. He would run and run because he was different from everyone else.

But he was no longer afraid.

And he would let no one overtake him.

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