

**B**ombay was chock-full of hidden surprises that never failed to delight me when I stumbled upon them. From postage-stamp public gardens to funky restaurants tucked away down back alleys, it was a city of a thousand faces. Even if I were to live there several lifetimes, I wouldn't know them all. That a large tract of natural bushland existed in this urban cauldron didn't make sense, except that this particular area was a stone's throw from one of the most fashionable suburbs. No doubt a lot of money had changed hands to make sure this precious buffer zone remained. This evening I was very glad of its existence. Finding a private space in which to act out my fantasies would soon become an all-consuming priority in my life. In this, I shared much in common with many Indians. But they had one other skill I was yet to acquire—finding ways of being sexually active in public places.

After about a kilometer, we approached the lower reaches of the park. There were no signs or benches, only a few rough-hewn paths heading off in different directions into the undergrowth. I dutifully followed my companion who chose one of the less-used tracks. As we trudged up the hillside over knotted roots and mossy gravel, it grew considerably darker under the forest canopy that provided us with a cover for our clandestine activities, but which also made me uneasy. Finally, he pointed to a fallen tree trunk in a little niche just off the path.

'You sure it's OK here?' I asked.

'No problem.'

No problem for whom, I wondered. The only exit I could see was the path we had taken to get there. Above us it took an abrupt turn, so there was no way you could see anyone approaching. I was on edge, but my burgeoning desire took care of that.

He motioned me to sit on the log beside him. A twig snapped up the hill and a crow let out a raucous cry. The thunderous roar of the city had been quelled to a rolling hum where the forest began. It gave me a momentary sense of security, enough for me to reach over towards him, gently lift his T-shirt, and slide my hand around his waist. I stroked his back several times before venturing to his front. He didn't protest, so I decided to up the ante and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. He pulled away, as if in disgust. Instead, he reached over and unzipped me. I was already fully stoked and ready to fire. I took this as my cue and did the same to him.

Just as we were reaching a mutual crescendo, he turned his head away. I was puzzled. Had I done something to offend him? I was about to ask, when he whispered, 'Someone coming!'

He quickly withdrew his hand and pushed mine away, and zipped up with a swiftness that suggested he had this routine down pat. It was then I heard footsteps a few meters away, accompanied by a rush of Hindi. Before I knew what was happening, two men had turned the corner and were headed straight towards us, while a third mysteriously appeared from the path below, sandwiching us. My companion leaped up and darted down the hillside like a startled rabbit. One of the men went racing after him, while the other two closed in on me.

'Aap yahaan kya karte hain?' snapped the older of the two men.

'I don't speak Hindi.'

'What you do here?'

'My friend and I were taking a walk.'

'Don't lie! I know what you do. Sala kutta!'

With that, he slapped me across the face with the back of his right hand, sending a sharp pain rippling through my body and throwing me off balance. As I tried to regain my footing,

the other man grabbed my left hand and tugged at my watch. Instinctively, I tried to pull away but was no match for the two of them. He ripped the watch from my wrist, grazing my skin with its metal band. As I looked down to check if I was bleeding, I noticed my umbrella lying on the ground. While my attacker was distracted admiring his prize, I snatched the umbrella. Years of fencing practice suddenly resurfaced and with a vigor that surprised even me, I lunged at the man and whacked him across the shoulder blades, then spun around and caught the other one with a blow to the head. 'Pagal!' he screamed, convinced I was crazy. Then, turning to his cohort, he commanded 'chalo' and the two of them bounded down the hill, leaving me shaking as I slumped onto the log.

I don't know who those men were—plainclothes cops, goondas or just friends out for a bit of fun. It even crossed my mind this may have been a set-up, but it seemed unlikely. I was angry at having allowed myself to be led into such a dangerous situation and vowed never to do so again. But, as I would come to discover, my proclamations were no match for my proclivities.