

Melanie Singh won first prize in a writing competition, organised by the Lycée Fenélon during 2009 for students in OIB anglophone sections. The task was to write about “The day that changed your life”. Extracts of Melanie’s story were printed in the November 2009 issue of Insites. Here is the full version.

2:00 in the morning. My eyes blink open. I am awake. Slowly, the vivid memories slither back into my mind like they always do.

I was happy to be finally leaving Bombay to join Mum and Morgane at Mamy’s. They had left earlier because my grandmother was ill; and my sister having finished school before me, my mother who was impatient to be at Mamy’s side, brought her along to France. We were to join them two weeks later, when my father had finished his lecture season and I had finished with school.

The memory is a daunting shadow at my shoulder, creeping onto me in its thick furry coat of death and dismay, its perfume a nauseating danger.

Dad was relieved too, I think, to be taking a holiday, I could see his stress wrinkles smoothing, retiring away like the tides of the sea I could see on the beach. Waving goodbye at nanny Shanti, we stepped out of the little black and yellow taxi, heading into Bandra Station to take the train that would lead us to the airport. It was a lovely usual Indian summer afternoon, the sky shined bright blue like it was rejoicing in its happiness, and I was partly sad to leave this wonderful atmosphere of warmth and peacefulness, to enter the bustling world of public transport.

I can feel my heart beat faster, the drummer controlling it is passionately accelerating the rhythm, louder and louder, faster and faster, like Swami the Cook when he hits and hits the rats he finds in the kitchen with his “chupal”. His friend, the guitarist is pulling on the strings which hold my serenity together like a chained man; each note resonating in my mind like the tune from hell, each sound bringing the dreaded memories closer.

I looked around me: I had gone past Bandra Station many times, and seen it often, but I had never properly looked at it. It was the second time I was going to Europe, the first time being when I was only three years old, I did not remember much of it. Therefore, I wanted this trip to be exceptional; I had decided to take special notice of everything around me to remember it in detail. I observed carefully the old wooden building. The columns on the front porch were painted a lively red, and the linings under the roofs were the colour of the sky when the monsoon has dried up its tears. The sparkling multicolour saris of the ladies queuing to the women’s compartment recalled the rainbows I used to love drawing. A big white board hung from the balcony with written in capital letters “Bandra” expressing a sense of pride and importance. Even with the variety of bright colours, charming people, continual chatter, there seemed to be a feeling of peace which emanated from the place; everything and everyone seemed happy and joyous of either leaving for a trip or being reunited with their loved ones.

I know it is all coming back to me. I feel it. The despair, the fear, the nightmare is back.

Dad and I pushed our way through the crowd of animated people to the ticket booth; we had already bought our tickets but still had to retrieve them. He asked the ticket agent, who asked us our names and checked through the list. He lifted his face up anxiously, I could see him bite his lip and bend his eyebrows with a worried look as he uttered the words: "I'm very sorry Sir, but Sir, there's been a mistake Sir, there are no places left in first class Sir".

"What? Exclaimed my father, whose temper even I am scared of, how are we to get to the airport then young man?" His eyebrows, unlike the vendor's, rose up in fury, his lips thinned till they became one firm line.

"We're going to put you in the wagon right behind first class Sir, and will pay your fare in compensation Sir. We are very sorry to cause such inconveniences Sir," replied the alarmed agent.

My father was angry at not receiving the tickets he had paid for, but calmed down, agreeing to the ticket agent's suggestion. As we waded our way through the horde of people, my father muttered under his breath how inefficient the system was; we did not know that we would later be exceedingly thankful to the inefficiency of the system.

No! No! Not them again! I try to push the memories back, by thinking of happy stories. Snow White... Cinderella... But the train keeps rushing back towards me, right on track.

I did not mind being in first class or not, I did not think my father did either, and we decided to relax till the train arrived. The platform was much more crowded than usual it seemed, but the show was much more interesting. All types of people were standing, sitting on benches, discussing loudly where they were going; I could feel the excitement in the air. The atmosphere was lively and light, perfect for a "siesta".

Suddenly, heavy drops of rain tumbled down onto the rails. I knew the monsoon season was not over, but I was nevertheless disappointed it would rain on my last day in India. The rain brought a cool breeze leaving me a little chilly, so Dad offered to walk along the platform. I checked the panel for the train arrivals. "July 11th 2006", I read, "6:20"; the train was to arrive in a minute. A carrier hurried to us as the train approached to bring our bags next to our seats. I was thrilled to be finally leaving, to go to France at last, I could not wait to arrive. I stepped into the train with trepidation, excitement overpowering me. I was wondering how long it would take to put everyone on the train.

It was amazing to see how many people could all climb into the train in the space of a minute, the crowd herded in like sheep following their train conductor. Inside the narrow train, the noise was even greater, the activity, and the smell of this bustling made me feel uncomfortable, but my excitement did not diminish as the train started.

We were sitting right in front of the wagon, behind the first class carriage, and I tried to imagine how different the feeling was in the different compartments. Here, I felt that people were living, the commotion, the racket, the smell, all conveyed the sense of presence and life, whereas I remembered the stillness and serenity in the other carriage as quiet and unexciting. I was increasingly glad to be where I was, and I observed with intense pleasure the mimics and expressions of the other voyagers.

We were now going through a tunnel, I looked out of the window but I could not see anything. I was telling my father so when It happened...

It was back. Terror swoons over me as I see it again in my head. Again and again. The wails, the screams, the tortured yells, the overwhelming silence.

Suddenly, all went dark: we were jerked backwards as a deafening sound burst out. A titanic detonation. A lifetime of shouts in agony. A shower of splinters. Panic. Fire. Smoke. All in my carriage were distressed; screeches and terrified howls immediately followed the explosion. Nonetheless, the shrieks came to a quick halt after the blast, we did not utter a noise and listened in shock to the wails and whimpers of the poor victims on the other side.

Then a man about thirty years old, dressed modestly, spoke calmly and clearly: “We should go out silently, one by one and find out what happened,” he said. In a more pressed manner he asked two men to open the compartment’s doors, and called upon all who had a mobile phone to call the emergencies. My father, still swept in shock, acted as he was told.

Once the doors were open, the nauseating smell of blood and smoke slithered its way to our nostrils so that everyone pulled their clothes over their mouths and noses to breathe. It was fascinating to see how different all these people appeared, now that horror had struck, all were serious and calm. Dad later told me that they were only calm because they were in shock, but the difference remained the same.

The stench was unbearable, and I could not suppress a torrent of coughs, disturbing the strange silence. Being a girl and amongst the youngest, the man, who I learnt was called Ganesh, made me step out of the wagon fifth. The two steps I had enjoyed so much going up, believing they were my first move on my trip to Europe, now represented the path to an unknown danger.

Even then, I did not realise the horror, the spectacle of death I was about to witness. All I knew was from the sounds and smells I could feel. And I can feel them now, the anger grips my heart, and I have the impression that a firm and decided hand is squeezing it like a lemon.

Stepping down into the unlit tunnel was like stepping into the blazing Kingdom of the Devil. The stench overwhelmed me, my head was spinning, and yet I struggled to be calm. I knew there were people so close, too close, who were suffering from an agony I could not even imagine.

In five minutes, which in my mind stretched into an eternity, all the passengers were out. My father, Ganesh, and a few other men walked towards the first class wagon. We could hear each of their heavy steps pondering their way through the debris. From where I stood, I could spy some glazing peaces of wood thrashed around the big dark hole, illuminating the glinting blood soaking the ground.

The moans of the victims stung my ears like wasp bites, I felt like vomiting. “Sahayata! Madad!” They cried for help.

These words resonate in my ears even now; the laments of despair and pain overtake my mind, till they turn into the relentless burst of cannon balls over a war field. I cannot do anything. I shake uncontrollably in my bed; anguish and distress are one irrevocable and unbearable feeling. It seems like there is a filter in my head letting only those terrible memories seep through.

An oppressing feeling overpowered me; I wanted to go help the wounded, but another part of me just wanted to run away, flee this place of disaster and misery. I feared approaching the bombsite, the injured people, but a strange curiosity was luring me towards the place and I joined my father anyway, each step bringing me closer to a vision no human being is ready to see.

I gasped in my T-Shirt, in shock, at the sight that stood before me. My father told me to go back, but I knew I had to stay and help after having seen It. It was incredibly hot, all the seats having gone on fire, I felt like I was sitting in an oven waiting for the mean witch to shut the door. The men covered the seats with their jackets to stop the fire from spreading and to save the deadly wounded victims. I imagined it was a nightmare, but stepping on a blazing piece of metal reminded me of the reality of our situation.

The carriage's wall was completely destroyed; some pieces of metal still gleamed in the dark place. Everything was broken, the comfortable seats I used to adore had burnt and fallen onto the ground, the tables, which I had thought were firmly stuck to the ground, had been blown to smithereens, pieces of wood, cutlery, newspaper, glass carpeted the floor.

The crowd around me had doubled, but watched in silence as Ganesh and two other men called Kumar and Anthony, who wore closed shoes, penetrated into the carriage to help those who could walk to go to safety.

Pity and compassion overwhelmed me, but I knew I could do nothing to help. We had to wait for the emergencies to come to deliver the poor people from their infernal cell. Some travellers took their coats off to make a soft bed for those injured, while others held their mobile phones up for light. The other passengers started picking up the cold pieces of metal to make the ground more comfortable and easy to walk on. I followed suit.

Anthony and Ganesh came down from the carriage with the first survivor, his arms and face were covered in blood, and yet still bleeding. I could not take my eyes of the horrible sight of the unfortunate man who had suffered such a tragedy. The blood spilled onto Anthony's clothes and body as he lay him down onto the bed of clothes we had made.

I see the blood everywhere, the revolting vision blinds my eyes, I feel my stomach churn. The terror is still the same: I imagine that this man could have been me if we had travelled in that wagon as we were supposed to. I know that; I also know that if I had been there, this man would not have had to be in Ganesh's arms, would not have endured the pain, would not have nearly seen death.

"Pani... pani..." he whispered. Hearing the words, I remembered I had brought a bottle of water in my backpack. Grateful to leave the blood curdling scene, I ran to our carriage to fetch it.

I get up and head to the bathroom to freshen myself up. It has been three years now. I have to let these memories go, but they keep coming back. Ten minutes later I return to my bed and think of what I would be like if I had not lived through such a disaster.

I would still live in India: after Dad learnt that there had been several more bombs attacks on the trains that same day, my parents decided it was not safe to live in Mumbai anymore. Therefore, we moved to Paris for the next school year. My life is very different now: I live in another continent, and people have different habits and traditions I had to get used to. We do not go to India often anymore, and I miss the friendly, colourful atmosphere of my native country. I miss the monsoon, the weather, and the generosity of India.

I feel like my life is separated into two parts now: the time when I was a young half-French girl living happily, with sweet dreams in a magical country; and now I am a half-Indian whose dark memories haunt her most nights.

However, I am happy to live in France, it just feels colder and different. I have learnt to love her like my country: she is special and dear to me like India. I finally feel united with both my origins, having experienced life in both countries. There is this one experience nevertheless, for which I would give all my happiness away not to have lived it. Witnessing these inhuman bomb attacks, having seen death so close has traumatised me for a long time. I

would do anything to erase this terrifying episode from my life, but I believe it was fate which brought me face-to-face with this situation, the same way it was fate which decided it was not our turn to die that day.