

Fear's Touch

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Mumbai. The temperature today is 20°C, and the local time is eight pm. The date is November 26th, 2008. We hope you had a pleasant flight, and thank you for choosing United Airlines. We hope you fly with us again soon." The crowd on the airplane slowly started to move ahead after the airhostess's short goodbye speech. I had come to visit my birthplace and my home country Mumbai, India from Chicago, which was where I lived. I was excited to come to Mumbai, since the last time I came I was only a baby, and I hadn't seen my cousins since they came to visit us in Chicago.

"Taj Mahal Hotel," my father told the taxi driver at the airport. I peered out of the dirty taxi window and took in my unfamiliar surroundings. There were beggars at almost every traffic signal, and they would come knocking at the windows. I felt very sorry for them, but the taxi driver said not to pay any attention to them. There would be cars everywhere I looked; the city was packed with bustling people. There was so much traffic that it took us almost an hour to get to the hotel. By the time we got there it was almost ten o'clock, and all of us were exhausted.

As soon as we reached the hotel, I lay down on the cool sheets and fell into a deep sleep.

Boom! There were people screaming and running around everywhere. Where was I? Suddenly all I saw was blackness, and I woke up, sweating from my nightmare. But for some reason I felt like it was real. I could hear gunshots being fired and people yelling. At the same time my parents woke up, and my mother said:

"Quick! We have to get out of here!"

"What's going on?" I asked groggily.

"I think it's a terrorist attack," my father said.

"What!"

"Don't scare her, it's probably something smaller than that," my mother replied.

"Let's get out of here, fast," my father said. And I started to grab my bag.

"Don't!" my father shouted. "Leave everything here and go!" But I still managed to grab my bag before we rushed out of the room. We ran all the way down the stairs, and reached the lobby. It was chaos there. People were running around like maniacs, just like in my nightmare. There were armed men, open firing, and the loud gunshots blurred my mind. I could vaguely hear my name being called, but I was frozen, glued to the spot, and I couldn't move. Where were my parents? I looked around wildly, but I could not see them.

Suddenly there was an ear-splitting burst, and the building burst into fire. That was all I remembered before everything went black.

I don't know how long I was unconscious, but I woke up after what felt like a long time. My lips were cracked and my mouth was parched. For a second I blanked out, and then I remembered everything. But what had happened after that? I slowly sat up and took in my surroundings. I was in a dark enclosed space, and there was rubble everywhere. I could faintly smell smoke, and my hands were covered with ashes.

I tried calling out, but it was useless. My mouth was so dry that I couldn't even make a sound, and there was probably no one around for miles. I was so helpless and weak, but at the same time I was frustrated. Why was this happening to me? I wanted to cry and yell, but all the tears inside me had dried up, and I wasn't even in a state to move.

I don't know how many days I had been there, but it felt like a really long time. I would black out for long periods at a time, and by each hour I was becoming weaker and frailer. The next time I woke up I was feeling extremely weak. I needed water desperately. But what could I do? There was no place where I could get it... Suddenly I remembered. My bag! I had taken it with me. Why hadn't I realized before? Surely there would be something in there. I rummaged around my bag, and found a bottle of water that had been given to me on the flight. I quickly took a few small gulps, but I was careful to save the rest for later. Who knew how long we were going to be here? After that I felt a bit better, so I tried to dig through the rubble, but it just made it worse, and more ashes started falling down on me. I stopped and sat there with my eyes closed, thinking again for the millionth time when and how I would get out and smell fresh air instead of smoke and burnt objects.

"Hello! Anyone there?" I heard voices. I must be dreaming. Had someone really come to rescue me? I sat up, and saw sunlight streaming through. It looked like a rescue team. I tried to yell, but I couldn't. My voice was too hoarse. But suddenly one of the men spotted me.

"Look! There's someone there!" he said. A few other men came and carried me out on a stretcher. I gratefully took in gulps of fresh air, and I was taken to the hospital. There I was given fresh food and water, and even though all I ate was a few slices of stale bread, nothing had ever tasted better.

After eating, I was allowed to roam around the hospital. I tried to discover the whereabouts of my parents, and I found out that they were in the same hospital, and they were not seriously injured. I considered myself very lucky to have escaped, and also because my family escaped, but others were not as lucky. There were people weeping all over the hospital, and bodies were being brought in everyday.

We left for Chicago in a week, and by then everyone was okay. Fear had touched me strongly, and with it left a horrible wound that hasn't healed since the attacks.