FICTION

THE RUSH

SALMA ABU BAKER

"Where's the train heading to Cox Bazar?" we asked.

"Platform eight!" the in-charge responded.

"Oh no! Platform five," he corrected himself.

I stood on the platform, beaming as the long-awaited journey to Cox's Bazar was finally about to begin. My siblings swarmed around me, chattering non-stop about all the things that were left to do. I, on the other hand, had only one thing on my mind: the comfortable bed and blanket waiting for me in the cold five-star suite.

My mind drifted through the pages of Malice, which I had brought along for the journey. Acting on impulse, I decided to saunter off to the washroom for a quick touch-up. Well aware of the condition of train station toilets, I handed my bag to my younger brother, Chotu.

10 minutes later, I returned to the platform to find them all gone.

My siblings.

My bag.

Everything.

The train was supposed to depart at 3:10. Where had everybody gone?

I borrowed the phone of a passer-by and called Chotu.

"Appi, the train is leaving! We're at Platform eight. Head to Umo!"

Instantly, the train in front of me began to move. Its wheels ground against the tracks, and the pistons sounded like an alarm. Who knew what they were trying to say?

I handed the phone back, broke into a run, and jumped into the carriage, landing on the bogey floor.

Phew.

That was a close shave.

I began making my way towards Umo.

But something was gnawing at me. Was it my still-palpitating heart, or was it a strange feeling that something was terribly wrong?

Randomly, I stopped and asked someone drinking tea, "*Bhai*, is this train heading to Cox's Bazar?"

His furrowed brow sent a shiver down my spine.

"No," he replied. "This is a one-stop train to Feni."

The floor beneath me suddenly felt as though it no longer existed.

My chest tightened.

For a moment, everything became a blur — faces, voices, thoughts. I could not understand what was happening. Lost and panicked, I began pacing through the corridor, blocking people along the way, muttering under my breath.

As I turned around, I bumped into a man dressed in white. Panting, I asked to borrow his phone.

Sensing that something was wrong, he dialled the number for me.

"What? Platform five? Mistake….?" I stammered, barely able to speak.

For a moment, he looked just as lost as I was. But explanations would have to wait. I was running out of time. Nervousness began eating away at me from within. My body shook as I begged one of the uniformed railway staff to do something.

My money.

My house keys.

My phone.

They were all travelling to Cox's Bazar from Platform five.

The man in white looked at me, his confused eyes meeting mine. I dialled the numbers again and finally resigned myself to the situation. "I'm heading to Feni," I said. "I'll find a way back!"



ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

"Do you want to go home, or do you want to meet the others?" the man in white asked.

"The others?" I asked, perplexed.

He took that as his answer.

Picking up the phone, he gave an order: "Stop the train."

Within seconds, the train began to slow down. About a minute later, it came to a stop.

A set of instructions was relayed to me in what sounded like a robotic voice.

"Take... and go... to Sholoshahar Station. Your train will make a stop there in 20 minutes. I've informed them."

My stressed mind could only pick up a few words here and there. The man led me to the door.

Then I remembered. No money!

I mumbled uncertainly, "Could you lend me 200 taka? I'll find a way to send it back."

He fished out a note and silently signaled towards the tracks.

I splashed along the cobbled pathway in ankle-deep water in the middle of nowhere.

Different shades of green stretched out before me. This was uncharted territory, a place I had never visited before.

Following directions, I eventually reached the road. All the while, I made call after call using the phones of anyone willing to help.

No one declined.

I had to leave a trail.

Every time I borrowed a phone, I repeated the same instructions: "If the person calls back, tell them I've moved ahead."

Finally, I jumped into a CNG. My heart was screaming louder than the traffic.

At 3:48, the CNG stopped outside Sholoshahar Station. I sped across the tracks and jumped onto the platform, panting, "Has the train to Cox's Bazar arrived?" I asked breathlessly.

"No," someone replied.

In the distance, I heard the train whistle.

And just like that, it came screeching into the station. I rushed in alongside the sea of strangers streaming in. Finally, inside the train, a new tension haunted me. What if they get down to look for me? Through the window, I spotted a uniformed railway officer standing on the platform.

"Call this number… and tell them I'm on the train. Now!" The train began moving again.

Still bewildered, he made the call, and I watched his lips move.

I began elbowing my way towards Umo.

Just as I reached the compartment, the corner of my eyes caught sight of someone in blue, his head sticking out of the door. It was Chotu.

I let out a long sigh of relief.

Slumping into my seat after a nerve-racking hour, I sat still for a good while, trying to process what had just happened.

Silent prayers. Sudden intuitions. Strangers who became saviours.

Somehow, all of them had led me back to the train.

I rummaged through my bag for my phone, wondering whether the entire incident should be called an adventure or simply marked down as a terrible mistake. Perhaps not everything in life moves with clockwork precision, I thought. And perhaps, sometimes, you simply have to trust your instincts and run.

I made a mental note before the raw experience slipped away, and the questions came pouring in.

Carry your phone in a sling bag.

Keep some petty cash tucked inside your phone case.

Don't jump into a moving train. Life isn't *Jab We Met*.

Trust your instincts.

Guard your brain.

That afternoon, the primacy effect seemed to have stolen the show. The first piece of information we heard — Platform eight — lodged itself firmly in our minds. In the confusion and tension of the moment, our brains only held on to the first piece of information. In the end, however, I was on my way to Cox's Bazar, my siblings swarming around me, chattering non-stop about things that were left to do.