



## Walking Alone as a Woman in India: We Need to Reclaim Our Streets

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**It's ubiquitous. On the street, in cafes, at the gym. It's delivery guys, shopkeepers, colleagues, partners...**

I enjoy a wealth of independence. I have had the best education. I am never going to be 'married off.' I have a good career. I drive. I know how lucky I am. But often, there are days when none of that matters, especially when the streets seem deceptively safe, and I'm more acutely aware of the subtle compromises I'm making.



Maybe I've had a tough day. Maybe I'm PMSing. Maybe I'm tired of people telling me others have it 'worse'. While the ability to be free in the city is a closer reality than before, wherever you are and however privileged you may be, you've been here:

## **Walk On**

You begin the five-minute walk to a rickshaw, earphone in one ear. Your bag is tucked tightly under your arm, protecting part of your bosom. Dodging the crowd and potholes is natural, in tune with the music. You've had a hard day, but the walk clears your head.

You inadvertently hold your breath in the darkened lane as the three-men-on-a-bike zoom closer. You cross the road unconsciously to avoid your second impediment. It's a ritual, not to walk too close. You press your earphone in tighter to drown out the leers, but you need one ear open – just in case. Some days the group won't notice you. These are the best days.

Under the bright city lights, the lane opens out to the deafening sounds. You're at one of the most organised crossroads, so you're still upbeat. A '90s playlist is on the radio. A little breeze blows past for good measure. You weave comfortably through a crowd that keeps mostly to themselves, almost at the finish line. Two gentlemen move to let you pass. Chivalry isn't dead, you think.

And then, there it is. The sharp, intentional jab into your left breast. By the time you turn your head he's gone – the crowd swallowing him whole.

Suddenly, everyone is a suspect.

You look down, just to see what you're wearing; immediately infuriated about having to consider that.

By the time you get home, you're exhausted. All you want to do is curl up and disappear.

## **“Roll With it”**

An ex-colleague tells you she takes different routes home every day – so you try it out. You're avoiding the crossing because you're angry just looking at it, and so is your left breast, still sore from the jab.

The new route is longer, but passes through a gated society and a lane where no one looks up. You're invisible – a blissful feeling.



Spirits high, you succeed again on day two. Of course, the longer you wait for a rickshaw, the more your cloak of invisibility slips.

When you turn to see if the signal has broken, a man in khaki flashes a smile, tobacco stained teeth on display. You avert your eyes but feel him staring, trying to engage the girl next to you, who scurries away. You follow. You're competitors for the next rickshaw but in that moment, there is solidarity. When she gets the next ride, you consider forgetting about the surcharge and calling an Uber, but a rickshaw approaches, slowing to a halt. There they are, those tobacco stained teeth again. You begin to walk forward, remember how creeps do the slow drive alongside, and back away instead.

The rest of your journey is uneventful – but by the time you're home, you're exhausted.

## **Caffeine Rush**

You've settled in for a coffee, ignoring street kids buzzing around and appreciative of the watchman who prevents them from reaching for your cup. It's a pleasant evening, and you like watching the city go by.

You've been here so often the barista knows you. It's one of your safe zones.

But today, between the man who sits on a bike and stares and one who brushes your fingers as he pretends to lean over the table, you begin to feel more uncomfortable. Ignore them.

You feel like a zoo animal; you can't wait for a seat inside to clear. The watchman, sensing discomfort, is nice enough to tell you the minute one does. You finish your book in relative peace, but the evening is ruined.

## **Don't Speak**

After a recent fall, walking to the X-Ray clinic seems challenging. But, you're not even thinking of the daily creep.

Holding your mother's hand, in a scene reminiscent of primary school, you take it slow. Still fuzzy from painkillers, you almost forget the usual twist and dodge technique, but this is home base. Everything is familiar. Still, never let your guard down, girls.

It happens so quickly. Someone reaches out to brush your bottom, your mum is pouncing on said offender before you can turn. As far as cowards go, this one disappears as predicted.



Everyone parts in a wave to let him pass.

Your room is safe haven. When the door is closed and you can smell lavender wafting through the serene shades of blue, you're at peace. You can dance like no one's watching. Let your guard down. Breathe.

*(Rhea edits a features supplement for a daily newspaper in Mumbai, writes poetry, fiction and features for various platforms and is the author of Poetry through Time. She can be reached @WriterRee. This is a personal blog and the views expressed above are the author's own. **The Quint** neither endorses nor is responsible for the same.)*

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