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Complete creative and life writing

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Horticultural Interruptus
Michael Armstrong.

Thomas sat on the terrace and thought about leaving his wife. It seemed silly – itch or no itch – to break-up a seven-year marriage because he wanted to mow lawns, but the thought would not die. He had considered mowing other lawns to sate his desire, but he knew Emma would smell it on him and he didn’t want a confrontation. She’d laughed when he’d tried to discuss it with her; and when her mocking laughter had died, she’d whispered that he’d have ‘all the lawn he wanted’ when her mother recovered. Then she’d pecked him on the cheek like some old aunt.

Thomas heard the familiar sound of hard rubber on brick paving and he adjusted his chair so that he could see over the perimeter fence into the cottage next door. He had never seen the young woman cutting her lawn and assumed she’d paid to have it done. They’d never spoken, only waved when their cars met on the street. Her lawn was thick and lush, but Thomas knew the interval since its last cut had been too long. An injudicious cut would expose the immature foliage just above the surface, and the sun would burn the lawn brown before sunset. Thomas watched her bend over the lawnmower and tug ferociously at the starter cord; she’d forgotten to give it a prime. He winced, collected the newspaper from the table and pretended to read. Moans and inaudible curses drifted across the fence, and when a loud ‘shit’ cut the air and Thomas dropped his newspaper, the girl was staring at him.

Thomas often had Sunday mornings to himself. He’d sit, upright, on a wrought iron chair, the walls hiding him from the street and the morning sun shining down so that he could close his eyes and let it warm his face. The Sunday newspaper would rest on a wrought iron table, unread: a coaster for his lukewarm coffee. It had been three years since he and Emma had moved into the townhouse. And it was three years and a day since he’d given the lawnmower a run.

Their townhouse was paved, front and rear. The only vegetation was shrubbery along the edge of the driveway and the succulents and roses in terracotta pots parallel to the balustrade that cordoned off the terrace from the French doors to the living room. The terrazzo floors, the heavy wrought iron furniture, the Santorini scenes painted on the courtyard walls by Emma’s art teacher, the old door that reminded her of Florence, the formal shrubs and pert roses: it was an amalgam of Emma’s fantasies about herself. None of it pleased Thomas, so he often sat outside, closed his eyes, and pretended he was somewhere else. He thought the terrace was manufactured and sterile, and, of course, it was. The wife of a colleague at Emma’s work knew a great landscaper and he’d designed and constructed the terrace in two weeks after they’d moved in. Emma said it was sleek and chic.

Thomas had argued strongly against ‘the move’, but Emma rejected his superior reasoning without the hint of rebuttal. She disagreed and did what she always did: organised their lives and presented Thomas with faits accomplis. He never knew whether he was angry at her stunning hubris or at his sulky impotence.

‘Horticultural Interruptus,’ Michael Armstrong. 
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He knew Emma had hated the lawns that surrounded their old home in the suburbs. He knew when she’d silently railed against his fertiliser, lawn seed or mower-oil purchases that it had nothing to do with their finances. She’d hated that Thomas cared for the lawn, how he had gently laid new seed and top-dressed in the spring, fertilised religiously in the summer, and cheated when there were water restrictions. It seemed to her that he loved the garden more than he loved her – if he loved her at all.

But Emma didn’t understand how Thomas loved. His wasn’t simply an aesthetic appreciation. Love, to him, was physical, too. A real garden couldn’t be planned and constructed in a few weeks. It had to be natural, laborious; you had to get your hands dirty.

Rarely had a day at their new townhouse passed without Thomas thinking about his horticultural pursuits in the suburbs. Mostly, he missed mowing the grass; and often, usually on Sunday mornings, his mind would be consumed by the gentle curves of the lawns that sloped away from the old house. A lawn-cutting day usually began with a check of the fluid levels and a delicate prime to get the juice flowing. Then he’d pull firmly on the starter and the lawnmower would come to life like a feral cat, spitting and screaming. He loved the strain on his muscles as he humped it up the incline of their block, and the throbbing vibrations of the engine as it kept a steady rhythm until he was done. He even enjoyed the hot and sweaty days when he thought he’d collapse from the heat, and the relief at the end when his body was bombarded with endorphins. Then he’d have a smoke or a beer and sit in the shade and look out at the green, satisfied he’d created something beautiful out of the wild. And it was beautiful, like Emma when they’d first met at university.

When Emma first showed her disdain for horticulture, Thomas thought she was bored with his gardening routine. He thought about buying some bulbs or taking her to a wildflower exhibition, something different to get her interested again. During their courtship, he’d assumed she’d liked what he’d liked: she’d accompanied him to the hardware store and the nursery; she’d helped him mulch the pubescent palms in the courtyard of his old flat; and she’d never once questioned his gardening expenditure. But after a few years of marriage, he realised she had reverted to the anti-horticulturist she’d been before they’d met. Before they’d married, he hadn’t asked if she’d liked lawns or gardening, so her deceit, although wicked, was not impeachable.

They’d moved into the townhouse at Emma’s insistence: her mother was sick and Emma wanted to be close to the hospital in the city. Yet, Emma never seemed to visit Mrs Sharp with greater frequency once they’d moved.

His cold coffee often made him think of Emma enjoying her Sunday morning rituals. He had been once or twice – at her insistence – and had scrutinised the sermons and the tea-sipping afterwards. All the little fingers were in the air and the frocked one nodded sagely at anyone who said anything. It seemed he thought his piety was increased by the light steps he took and the firm pats he gave to the padded shoulders that surrounded him. At dinner parties with Emma’s friends, Thomas often made some excuse and went home early without her. None of her friends seemed to think it strange for a man to leave without his wife. Maybe they knew her as well as he did. At Christmas and birthdays, he sat in a corner, drank scotch with Emma’s father and compared notes about their spouses.
‘Do you know anything about lawnmowers?’ the young woman asked, and Thomas put the newspaper on the table.

For two hours, Thomas mowed Lola’s lawn, trimmed her edges, mulched her poinsettias and fertilised her eggplant and tomato vines. He taught her to prune, showed her how to use newspaper to keep her beds moist, and he made a net out of old stockings to stop the birds ravaging her seedlings. She seemed to enjoy the morning as much as Thomas, and he agreed to help her every Sunday morning. By twelve o’clock, he had showered, shaved and deodorised, and his incriminating clothes had been washed and were hanging on the line in the rear courtyard.

When Emma walked through the front door, the scent of freshly cut grass followed her into the house and Thomas panicked; he was certain she’d smell it on him. But Emma said nothing. She smiled, walked through the French doors and sat on the terrace. She lit a cigarette, even though she rarely smoked, and stared at the park across the road, her gaze fixed and the smile on her lips fading.

An hour later, Emma came downstairs after her shower and the scent had gone.
Ayesha the Obeyed
Matt Constable

A dry hot wind drove scents across the plains. They were scents of the wild, of dust and grass, animals and their droppings, and the stench of rotting flesh.

After a long day the blazing sun had reached the horizon. Enormous animals roamed the plain their long shadows moving across the arid ground. Calls and roars echoed like distant thunder, a reminder of the power that the living beings of this continent possessed. Fear was a real thing in this place and it was not just a pride of lions that could evoke it. Herds of elephants with their bulks of grey flesh or charging herds of hippopotamuses could arouse a sense of terror along with wonder.

A solitary figure, standing on a rocky outcrop, experienced these feelings as he stared out at the spectacular sight presented before him like a vast canvas spread out and painted by the Lord Himself.

Up above the sky had caught fire, burning the deepest scarlet as the orange globe sank beyond the infinite horizon. Below the plains had become a dark shade of lavender as the shadows merged to become one. Here in these latitudes twilight was a swift transition as quick as a striking predator.

Darkness descended and the stars appeared. Brighter than anywhere else on earth, they were beyond mere points of white, they were red, yellow, a few blue. A huge streak of these emerged in the sky appearing like an elegant stream of water reflecting sunlight. And the night became cooler as the day was dry with heat the night was frosted with cold. The animals of the plains continued to call out, as the full moon ascended the distant mountains. Black clouds danced across it, blocking the light, indifferent to its silvery beauty. Time had slipped away from this place like a handful of red earth carried on the wind.

A knock on his office door brought Horace Holly back from his daydream and to his present reality. Thoughts of the travels he had experienced through Africa, that strange Dark Continent, would come back later. For now he turned to the door of his office to see who had interrupted him.

‘Leo,’ he said when he saw who stood at the open door. ‘Come in, please. How can I help you?’

‘Afternoon, Uncle Holly,’ Leo greeted. Although he referred to him as Uncle, Leo was not related to Horace by blood. Their relationship had commenced twenty years previous, as Horace was busy studying to gain his fellowship to Cambridge as a professor of archaeology. At this time his only friend Mark Vincey, knowing he was about to die, had instructed Horace to raise his son, Leo, as his own. Alone and unmarried, Horace had taken what he saw as the only opportunity to have a family and successfully raised Leo to become an academic and a gentleman in his own right. Along with raising the boy, Horace had also taken charge of a Vincey family heirloom. On Leo’s twenty-fifth birthday, both men had opened the heirloom, a chest containing directions to an unexplored area of Africa’s eastern coast. And thus their adventure of discovery had begun.

‘Ayesha the Obeyed.’ Matt Constable.
Transnational Literature Vol. 7 no. 1, November 2014.
'You gave me a letter to read,' Leo declared.

He walked into the university office and sat down in one of the spare chairs in front of the desk. He took out of his jacket pocket a folded piece of paper and handed it to Holly. ‘You wanted my opinion. I hope I haven’t interrupted anything.’

‘No, these student papers have made me particularly bored. I was just remembering an African sunset. But to the letter, what did you think?’

‘Interesting, both subject and sender,’ Leo began. ‘I thought the man had died and yet here he is writing to you of all people, no offense meant, and asking about the most peculiar of individuals. Where is he now?’

‘Dom Pedro the Second, last Emperor of Brazil, is living his days of exile in France. Alone and forgotten it would seem from his letters.’

‘How many are there? Letters?’

‘Several, and they are here if you want to look at them.’ Holly retrieved the rest of the letters that had been sent to him by Pedro II and handed them over to his ward. Leo took them enthusiastically. ‘We have been in correspondence for a time now,’ Holly continued. ‘But I wish to end it today.’

‘The reason?’ Leo was examining the letters.

‘I have lied on many occasions in order to hide the whole truth,’ Holly confessed. ‘I believe it would be too dangerous to do so but he has been persistent and, I admit, persuasive. Pedro undoubtedly enjoyed my recount of our journey and has taken the story of Ayesha, as she told it to us, to heart. Her story has the potential to rewrite history, religion, and our entire knowledge of life; and that has taken his attention and compelled him to reach out.

‘Who would believe any of it though? Most think your work is fiction, a fable of a made-up past. I was there and I hardly believe it.’

‘The Emperor has all too willingly accepted her story as fact. I am afraid that I have been giving the man comfort in place of proper information. There seemed no harm in my doing so. I exaggerated the truth and in some cases created pure fantasies. There is no doubt that he is confused on some matters. I do not know whether to set him straight or continue to present falsities to him.’

‘He would appreciate only the truth,’ Leo speculated. ‘Any man in that position would. But we swore never to reveal fully what we encountered. People would react dangerously in their confusion and paranoia; they always have in cases of the supernatural.’

‘He wants to know about Ayesha,’ Horace stated. ‘Nothing else.’

‘The woman who must be obeyed.’

‘Surely I can provide answers about how she ruled her tribe, what she had to say on history,’ Holly said. ‘Anyone would want to know more about her, it’s only natural.’

‘She was too unreal to be true,’ Leo stated.

‘The Emperor has been quite taken by her,’ Holly replied. ‘It would not be right to shatter his delusion of her.’

‘Especially if we share it.’ Leo had become very tense. ‘She was real, I do not doubt that, but how much of her story was, her past?’ He held his breath and watched as his adopted father started searching his desk for a clean sheet of paper and pen, finding both, refusing to answer the question.

‘I had the dream again,’ Leo finally confessed and it was at once a relief and a
death sentence. He breathed deeper and his body relaxed.

‘I know,’ Holly replied

‘Are you sure it is Tibet?’

‘My sources are faultless,’ Holly said.

‘Is it her?’

‘Who else could it be?’

‘Her story may be more true than we imagined. What are we going to do then?’

‘My choice,’ Holly replied ‘is that we do nothing. We have no obligation to do anything in the matter of shared dreams. If you still doubt what she told us of her past, then it would be a fool’s errand to track her down. However if you wish to believe everything she told us, accept as fact all that we saw, then perhaps my choice is wrong and we should leave everything behind, track her down, finally reveal her to the world for all to see. But I think not. I have one more letter to write.’ He dipped his pen in the ink bottle and began to write. ‘I owe this Emperor that much.’

‘What are you going to write?’ Leo asked.

‘Half-truths, lies, comforts,’ Holly listed. ‘Goodbye.’

Leo sat in silence as his stepfather wrote his final letter to Emperor Pedro II. He looked through the other letters and his thoughts were all on Ayesha. What had been real about her? What had been false, if indeed any of it had been false? She had died when she stepped into the flames; the same flames she claimed had given her two thousand years of youthful existence. Had the flames taken back what they had once gifted? Leo thought about the mysterious woman as only the sound of the pen gliding across the paper could be heard.

Once Horace Holly had written the last words, he read through the letter, folded it, and nodded in satisfaction. He slipped it into an envelope already addressed to the hotel the Emperor had made his home in his exile.

‘Would you do me a favour and send it for me?’ Holly asked handing the envelope over. Leo took it without hesitation.

‘Is there anything else you want me to do?” he asked.

‘Yes,’ Holly said and he opened the lowest drawer on his desk, staring down at the lock of black hair, its only contents. ‘Once you have sent the letter, pack for a long journey. I’ve changed my mind and we’ve an old friend to find.’

8th November 1891

Dear Pedro II, Emperor

Previously I have spoken of my regrets, the times when I made the wrong decision or took a course of action I shouldn’t have. And now I feel regret writing this letter. I am to leave soon, perhaps forever, for this shall be a journey into unknown places in pursuit of a mystery. Although I wish that this correspondence could continue and that you yourself may want to write back, there will be no way for me to send another letter or receive one. This then is the last letter. As such I wish to reflect on our correspondence before explaining in more detail my imminent departure.

Although it has never completely left me, Africa has been on my mind lately. Your enthusiasm for the Dark Continent and your curiosity about its many buried secrets gave me a refreshing perspective. I have been most eager in our correspondence when detailing the land I left long ago. You would understand the
urge to return to a place more than I would ever know. Brazil sounds like a unique and wonderful place. I believe this from all you have said of the empire you ruled. Thank you for making me reflect on the time I spent in Africa. I have been delighted to answer all your questions about the time I spent in Africa and on that most mysterious of women, Ayesha.

In the land that she ruled, she was known as she-who-must-be-obeyed, a remarkable woman who, according to the history she told us, has seen the empires of the world rise up only to collapse back into nothing. There is a quality to her charisma and presence that no one else possesses and a uniqueness that makes her at once awesome and terrible. And she is most definitely a being that originates from a place beyond what we as mortal men could ever imagine. She commands her people with nothing more than her looks and her will, and her knowledge demonstrates an understanding of place and time that no one else has ever experienced. You are quite right to be fascinated. I confess that I have kept much secret from you in my early letters.

There are aspects to Ayesha’s personality and supernatural elements surrounding her that even I have trouble believing, and I spent more time with her than most people have. You may recall from the story I wrote on her that she possessed a water basin that could show images of the past, the present and the future? This was not a fabrication, this basin was real, and I saw the impossible. Whether she truly was as old as she claimed, no one can ever tell, but I know the manner of her death was real. She climbed into the flames as a young woman and emerged an aged wreck. A trick? A deception? Or did she truly pass from this world? I do not know, but from her corpse I retrieved a lock of her black hair just in time just before she turned to ash before our eyes. At that moment I believed she was dead.

In your last letter you referred to dreams that had disturbed your sleep and I confess that I have suffered the same. I cannot explain or fathom the extent of their meaning and the effect is rather troubling. They begin in darkness a single flame grows into a tongue and from it a vision of a woman forms. She quickly glides away from sight and I find myself following her. We glide together through the air, crossing the seas, the deserts, until we come to the frozen mountains of Tibet, and find ourselves on a plain with a solitary hill. Another fire births the symbol of life of the Egyptians. I awaken.

In telling you of my dreams, I have given you the reason for why I am leaving my home. You may find it strange that I would travel the globe in search of a vision of a woman but Leo has had them too. Nothing in our daily activities has contributed to our dreams, they are vision sent to us by something more powerful than anyone can imagine. We are sharing the same visions and it is by mutual agreement that we believe the woman born in flames to be that magnificent Ayesha. To us it would appear that she has not perished from this world and may yet be seen again in another form. Though this is a rather thin reason to risk one’s life, we are strongly compelled to act. Further it must be said that we have seen far stranger things in this world and so perhaps our ambition may not be so foolish.

In the years that have followed since our return from Africa and our experiences there, my son Leo Vincey and myself have been preoccupied with thoughts of Ayesha. That she has clearly entered both our sleeping minds indicates that we are either obsessed to the point of psychosis or that she, through a spiritual
realm, is showing us where we can find her. You can see why I have taken the time to describe my dreams, what they might mean, and what action Leo and I must take in response. In your initial letters you expressed a desire to discover more of the world and chose me in the belief that I have seen more then any other; I now declare that I have. There is more to the world than what we see, feel, hear, and perceive.

I am now ready to meet my fate in the further unknown parts of this world. I am left with a feeling of gratitude towards you and your interest in me. Yours sincerely,

Ludwig Horace Holly, adventurer

Life had streamlined into a single continuation with no perceptible digressions. A strict adherence to routine had become the former Emperor’s comfort, a pattern of constants that allowed for just enough rest for him to remain alert and just enough stimulation to remain active without over exertion. It was an existence, uneventful and uninteresting to the outside observer. For the once monarch, it was a brutal and agonising descent into the pain of a body breaking down. Only in recent weeks had the condition of his leg improved such that he could once again embark upon his favourite leisure activity, the humble walk. Receiving and composing letters was still his primary pleasure. However he needed letters to be read aloud to him by an assistant and had to dictate his responses due to his poor eyesight. This was a blow of indignity to his proud persona. He had accepted that he would never read another letter with his weak eyes again; until he had received Holly’s final letter. Though it had taken time and resulted in a painful headache, he had read it to himself. Due to Holly’s final sentiments, Pedro had been left feeling despondent and melancholy but not without hope. There still lay the possibility that a world beyond the perception and imagination of mortal man existed. In such a world as the one they lived in, the Emperor knew that his life was not limited to himself or his perspective. He simply possessed a deep desire to know if there was more and knew Holly could answer his questions based on his earlier work.

On a night, not long before his sixty-sixth birthday, the Emperor found himself immersed in the letters once again. With a slow steady pace he read every letter sent to him by Holly, taking in meaning and message, a lifetime of academic immersion in texts allowing him the skills to analyse hidden choices and omissions possibly made by Holly. Suspicions that there was more to be discovered in the letters meant the Emperor could not concentrate on anything else. He was convinced that he had failed to notice further information. Although plagued by this doubt and holding on to a series of questions he wanted to ask the writer and adventurer, for instance what the dreams had meant, and where he was going next, the Emperor did not believe he could compose a letter succinct enough to express his thoughts in time to send it before Holly left. Whatever hidden meaning he discovered would have to suffice in the way of answer. As it was the correspondence had been fruitful and accomplished everything the Emperor had desired from it and that was how he would settle the matter in his mind. He had wanted to know if there was more to the world then what a person might perceive with this mind and their senses. There was enough evidence from Holly to prove that there was. He did not need details just the permission to imagine.
Deciding that it was finally time for sleep he gathered the letters together, carefully placing them into a drawer, empty save for a small package and its accompanying note. In the warmth and comfort that only a soft bed can provide, the Emperor found his weary body relaxing and his wandering mind coming to an uneasy peace. However, sleep eluded him and he knew that soon he would return to his journal. For the moment he lay, eyes closed, motionless and deep in thought. Images of an ancient continent danced in his mind, memories of what he had seen, speculation on what might be. No matter what he imagined, the truth would no doubt be stranger and more beautiful, and probably hidden forever more from man.

Midnight came and went as the long case clock, hands moving slowly, peacefully, steadily, counted the ebbing flow of time.
They say at the height of Yi Sun-Shin’s last battle, dying, gasping, he demanded his nephew, his Lieutenant, to strip him of his armor and stand in front in his place. ‘Let no one know I’m dead.’ And that was it. His nephew took his place, and the battle was won. None of the soldiers knew of General’s death until after the battle. That’s what soldiers want to be. Brave. Glorious. A name.

Descendant of a hero, son of coward, and all of our names the same. That’s me. Don’t complain to me about expectation. My namesake was the greatest hero, ever. Printed on statues. Spoken with pride. Three hundred years ago he defeated armies and navies. He slaughtered Jurchens – the future conquerors of China. He was betrayed and tortured by his king and yet, he came back from that dank dark dungeon to defeat the largest Japanese fleet ever assembled, with thirteen turtle ships. Try that on the next time someone asks ‘What’s your name?’ Look for that split second of admiration, that twitch of disbelief. ‘Are you related to – ?’ Yeah. That’s me. Maybe it is envy, the kind that had my ancestor thrown into jail.

If that story is to be believed.

Not that I meet many people anymore, not since coming here – to the bunkers – tipping off the very edge of the DMZ. I’m an observer. My job is to look past the valley and the river to their side, the south side, into the mass of trees and hills and mark on maps where we can see the enemy and call in coordinates. That’s what I do. Watch and wait. Wait for the day when the skies go dark with lead and everything is battered and ruined and I stand in front of it all, holding back the wave, calling in coordinates and acting as a human breakwater, because here, they say, is where the war will be won or lost. Where the heroes will be made. For fifteen years that day has not come. When they ask me if I’d like a transfer, I always say the same thing, ‘I want to stay.’ Fifteen times I said that. When new soldiers do come, they look at me and say, ‘Yes, but fifteen years! What about rotations? What about seniority? Why here?’ Sometimes I tell them it’s for our country: for the part that hasn’t starved. Sometimes I tell them that it’s for our dear leader. Now there’s a man that knows what it is to bear a name. They nod. They respect me – at first. But then they see me day after day, they notice the lone stripe on my collar without promotion and it becomes clear; I am not that man. Not that hero. They lose their faith. A name is just a name right?

The guys are correct: I didn’t have to stay. I didn’t have to look out from this spine of crumbling trenches. There’s a phone, and I could easily ask the higher ups for a transfer. This ridge is like all the others on our side: ancient, ragged, stretching from one sea to the next; starved of green in the winter, everything living clinging to broken gray rocks. Yeah, it is ugly. The valley dips with green fields – mine fields – and breaks at the very bottom by a river. On the other side, beyond the pines – disguising the mountains, the barbed wire, the foxholes, the guns, the enemy – is the

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South. This is the furthest south anyone can go. I stare toward it a lot. Yeah, it’s my job, but I get lost in it. At night, way off in the distance, you can see the yellow haze of light coming off their cities. Like torches. Beacons. Locusts. You can only see the stars from our side. It’s beautiful when you take it all in, the light and the dark. It’s hard to leave. So, when they ask me, I say the same thing. Every year, the guys shake their heads and count their days, the higher ups pat my back and I feel rooted.

I wonder if my father saw the haze too – if he came to this river and looked back, even for a second. Back then, I imagine, this valley was beaten and ripped raw like the moon. Everything dark and cold, now buried beneath the trees.

‘Your father left to join the fight. He’s a man of Yi,’ my mother told me and to everyone in town. ‘He left in the night, so the enemy wouldn’t catch him.’ But I knew the truth. He fled: from his duty to the army, from his moment to liberate our people from the Americans, from us. If others in town knew, I couldn’t say. I was young. Maybe they believed it. Either way, people still broke into smiles when they looked at me and heard my name. ‘Wow! He looks just like him! The genes are strong.’ I had the gaze, or perhaps the glare, of the man casted in bronze. But that changed as I got older; my black hair peppered with white, my nose grew wider, my glare relaxed. I no longer looked like the monuments and no one said so. My face mirrored the age-stained photo in an envelope buried deep in the junk drawer. My father’s photo. The war took most of his things and what war didn’t take my mother fed to the fire, except that photo. During moments when my mother thought I wasn’t around, she held that envelope near the burning coals. Breathless, she stared into the ash and black, but she didn’t throw the envelope in. She didn’t speak about him, other than he had left to fight. I felt bad for her. She married the name of a hero, only to be left by a coward. We all make mistakes, and you could hear it in the way she said Father.

It was the same as traitor.

‘You’re going to do great things–my little avenger,’ she used to say. Avenger – the person who inflicts harm on behalf of others. The selfless hero who saves the rest. Yeah. That’s supposed to be me.

Yesterday, on our side of the valley we watched a deer, scratching the grass, digging for roots. It was thin, sickly. It scratched and scratched. It sniffed the weeds. Then, in a glint and flash, it was a plume of red mess. Land mine – probably. The boom echoed a second later. Everyone grabbed their guns. It was silent. Was this how it would start? The enemy firing first, the first casualty a deer? It was gone, only a smoky stained crater. The line waited for the laugh, for someone to say it was all right, ‘just a stupid deer.’ I think they all looked at me, but all I saw was what we would be – someday. A battered wet crater. Mute, I bit my tongue to keep from puking. Fifteen years, and that was the first time I had seen real blood. The first time this thing, this place seemed truly real and the startling truth gripped me.

Nobody said anything.

That one little crater, stayed with me for the rest of the day. Like when you were a kid and you stared at the sun and that purple green spot burned into your vision. I can see it even when I close my eyes. I always thought of the bombs darkening the skies the enemy charging up the hill at us in a wash of red, but tonight, as I look at the door, I can’t even pretend to imagine myself being anything other than

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what I am. How long did it take for my father to understand this? Was it when the war started and he did nothing? Was it when the war was coming to him and the army knocked on the door?

My mother could have been correct. Maybe my father really did go out there to fight the enemy. Maybe he did live up to the name, but died too quickly for anyone to talk about him. Many people died in those days, the war for the liberation of the fatherland was like that. Bodies and rubble, that was Korea. But when I look back and see my father that night, a rare night when the concussions in the distance were quiet, I just knew. Him, with his dirty bag slung over his shoulder, standing there at the threshold of the open door, looking, in all directions except back into the house, said it all. I wanted to call out to him – to scream, ‘coward.’ But I couldn’t. He slowly closed the door behind him and his quiet footsteps that, for a moment, sounded like he was sneaking up on the darkness to strangle the enemy hidden within it. I hoped–wished–that he would turn around and come back in the house with hands wet with blood. Instead, the sound of heavy, running footsteps broke the silence. I sat up. I wanted to run out there, with him. But I froze. Choked. I imagined him, running past burning farmlands, collapsing tin-roofed houses, fleeing among the people with their white linens dirtied black, running, so far and hard that when he finally made it to the ocean, he just kept running into the blackness like a man on fire. And I sat there, staring at the door.

Honestly though, it’s this – every morning, a suffocating weight piles on me as I face the doorway to the trenches. Two choices: path to the left, the maze of dirt and concrete walls that goes out to the phone, the road, the jeep, the countryside, the barren farmland, the empty homes. Path to the right, the lookout, my station, my binoculars, my grave. Those on the line are always the first to die. Every morning I hesitate behind the door – I don’t know how long, maybe it’s only seconds or minutes – fighting the urge to run left to the phone and scream into it ‘get me out of here!’ Then I think, is that what you are? Another apple not falling far from the tree? This is what bothers me most. This is what keeps me here. Every morning I have to go right. I have to. I don’t want to. I don’t want to become another mess soaked up by the trees.

At the beginning, I didn’t think about that phone. Back then I pretended it wasn’t there; I looked down whenever I was near it. At night, when soldiers asked each other ‘are you, brave?’ I always responded too quickly, ‘Yes.’ Brittle, hollow, my voice squeaked out ‘Yes, brave.’ And I believed it. I believed that I could forever walk out that door and go right, without thinking of the left. I told myself, ‘the genes are strong.’ Then I had half a thought, ‘Which genes?’ I couldn’t give an answer. Each year, it got worse – which genes? Which genes? And now – after that deer and the report of the mine – it just keeps echoing inside, which genes? So loud and hard I feel it burying me and I’m brought back to the door, that night, my slouching father tip-toeing out while I did nothing but watch, wait and listen.

Even if I went left, I think I would just keep going, forgetting the phone. I would run until my heart gave out or someone stopped it for me. They would come for me, burn me, relish in the knowledge that I was everything I was not supposed to be. It could all be in my head, maybe no one would care. I wouldn’t be the first to run. Maybe I would get away; I am the second fastest 1000 meter runner in the squad. But after the 1000 metres, if I got away, then what? I think I’d still have that feeling – like being two breaths from drowning. I tried so hard to imagine myself, different. Chest

out and proud, fighting like the avenger everyone wanted me to be. Leading. Running is really no different than staying. Gasping, staring, waiting for the wave to come with fire.

If my eyes could burn holes, that door would be smoke.

Sometimes I hear the whispers of those who bunk with me. They call me the door man. I can see them imitating me, in front of storage doors, bathroom doors – staring, breathing through their mouths like idiots. Catatonic. When they drink – everyone drinks here out on the line – they become blatant in their mocking. ‘Let no doors know I’m dead!’

I give them a look, trying to stare them down.

‘Hero? Slayer of armies?’ They laugh. ‘Sure your name isn’t Yi Sun Shit?’

Another will add, ‘Let no one know that Yi Chicken Shit is here defending the line!’

‘And who are you?’ I squeak. ‘Who of you have the balls to stay here past one petty year?’

‘You? Balls?’ They cackle with the delight of school children. ‘Hiding behind doors for fifteen years don’t mean you got balls.’

They want me to go through the door without pause, never looking back, moving heroically – but really, how does one go through a door heroically? They want me to be angry, looking for blood. They want me to be the man that makes them less afraid. They still have hope.

No one talks about why the king threw Sun Shin into the dungeon. We learn as children that the king framed him, out of fear of him. Witnesses said he ran from a battle, deserted his post. It’s impossible to imagine a hero and a coward being one. Yet, here I am, as my father before me, with the same blood and filled with fear. I wonder if we all could really be that different. Besides, the war that made this name, was lost. China came to save us as the country nearly bled to death and was left in ruin. Abandoned. The last war was the same. There was no victory. Only death. Only trenches.

I thought it was all about choosing one direction or another, and I can’t anymore. I’ve always thought it was my fear, another traitor to my name. Soggy barley instead of rice. Fifteen years, of waiting, of staring at a damn door, fighting to be the name. And all I can think now what am I really?

Those other voices in the background would say, ‘Yes – but – yes – but –’ No. I will not play this game. I can not play this game. I’ve made my own choice. Tonight, I will go another way. A third way. I can not watch and wait another day. My rifle is near, on the ground by the locker. It’s waiting for me; to grab it, to load it, to fire it, to kill with it. But it will wait. I’ve waited a long time, it can wait too.

It’s quiet, except for the sounds of sleep. I reach the locker and open it. I grab the only clean thing I have, a white T-shirt. I grab the rifle; it’s light. It’s ready. There will be a day when the concussions start and men scream. They are going to come. They are going to barrel out of the darkness and climb up the hill. Red will drape the hillside. But that will not be for me to see.

I tie the t-shirt onto the rifle, a good choking knot. The door looks smaller tonight. For once I know which way I really want to go. I think my father knew what was held in the darkness. The only hope men like us can have, blind hope. You can never know what’s in the dark without going into it. But I will not run. I will creep out that door. I will crawl out of the trench, away from terrified eyes – who wouldn’t say...
anything anyway – and make my way down into the valley. I will not turn around. I will zig-zag through the fields. I will wade through the river until I’m swimming in it. When I drag myself out to the other side, drenched, I will march forward, waving my flag as I surrender myself to the sheet of green and the darkness. After all, what good is a man with name if not charging forward?

Stalling, choking and out of breath – when I think I can see the shadows descending on me and I desperately want to run back – that is when I’ll tell myself, this is my choice. My choice. My genes. Only me and no one else. And I will move forward.

I am this Yi Sun Shin.
The Man Who Wanted to Write like Marquez
Sunil Sharma

He was in love – with Gabriel Garcia Marquez.
Who is not?

‘I want to write like Marquez, my master,’ he would say often. Now everybody wants to write like him and get a cult following and possibly, a Nobel.

‘We too,’ we would say, sipping brown concoction they called tea in a rundown hotel off the corner street. The taste of sugar would linger for an hour. The good thing was the lazy owner – one-eyed survivor of a communal riot between the Hindus and Muslims – would never ask us to leave. So we would sit, chat and drink tea, lots of it in chipped cups hardly washed by a frail Nepali teen who served as both the cook and the waiter. He, too, suffered a minor disability – a limp that would get pronounced when agitated. Although students, we were a motley group of down-nouts. It was a perfect place, the Taj Tea House as it was majestically called, although it consisted of a shack and a lean-to and few old chairs and wobbly tables. We called it Sanctuary. Ideal for drifters and there were plenty. Overall, it was a hospitable hideout for us and very cheap.

It was the kingdom of the dreamers!

So we sat, a bunch of college students and out-of-job young men, drinking sugary tea, eating thick-crusted biscuits and discussing everything: the contours of a female body; the shape of craters on the moon, bawdy Baudelaire; failed love relationships; the unemployment rate and suicide of writers. Every topic was welcome. Nothing was taboo. We talked of things sublime; we talked shit! Some of the regulars among us were students of English Lit and felt very superior and privileged. We were heavily influenced by theory, criticism and literature. We talked of words that the rickshaw-pullers sitting opposite us would never understand. We talked of the French and German thinkers, and treated non-thinkers, non-philosophers, non-literary with utter contempt.

They were all barbarians!

We regarded ourselves as a special species – young, restless, small-town dreamers out to change the World through the Word. We were sure that we were meant for higher things. Each one of us was gifted and born for greatness! In fact, none among us ever liked the ordinary. We hated the provincial town; the pettiness of the commercial pattern of existence that characterised it; the mediocrity of life into which we were born by a cruel accident or blind fate. The core group consisted of few beginning writers, actors and directors. Arts were our sacred province and the everyday was for the others – the 9-5 folks doomed to die ordinary on this planet and contribute to its overcrowding through mindless breeding. We dreamed big and in the Eastman

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colours. In our small heads, each one of us carried large empires where we presided as sole emperors.

As artists, we sought a 70mm cinematic version of reality that was light years away from our dull routine in a squalid town, long neglected and then, eventually forgotten by the state. We operated on the periphery. We wanted quick exits from this monochromatic landscape into a multi-hued realm neither here nor there. In a region between reality and fantasy. There would be quick stardom for everyone in the group.

Recognition.
Wealth.
Screaming fans.
Immortality.

Born lower middle-class, our chances of upward mobility were thin. Salaried class could never ensure that hip lifestyle. That kind of blessed state we could never achieve in a lifetime of doing menial jobs, stuck in a dying town. The only exit for dreamers like us was film, theatre or literature. They could bring us success, power, money and universal recognition. And free us from anonymity forever.

Naturally, in this grim setting, talking of our favorite writers was a pastime. The great Marquez had become hot news. It had been a closed world in the early 1980s. Globalisation was yet to occur. His voice was like fresh wind blowing in a damp place! He made us see old things in a new way. Marquez had hypnotised the entire world through word.

He had, the stout Colombian, this seller of magic realism, debuted in our dingy town as well. The only shop selling books and magazines in the main market had brought two copies of The Hundred Years of Solitude, not sure of its reception. A seminar had been organised on the subject of Marquez, by the few English teachers with a college degree. I had borrowed his books from my teacher and found him impressive. He had challenged dominant modes of seeing and the reading realities of the largely Western literary world. A new continent, shimmering a long distance away, was made visible for those of us who were raised on the old MA (English) syllabus of Dickens-Hardy-Galsworthy in a stifling Indian classroom.

What a perceptive writer! We were in thrall. A superstar, the real one. Could we be like him?

‘You are not listening…’ he protested, interrupting a random train of thought.
‘I am listening,’ I insisted.
‘What did I say?’ he asked.

I smiled. ‘That you want to write like Marquez. You, my friend Ramesh Kumar, a resident of Ghaziabad, wants to be another Marquez. An Indian Marquez.’

Ramesh smiled. His eyes held that dreamy look – gazing into space ahead, trying to figure out things dim on a distant horizon. Of all our friends, loosely held together by a literary bond, he was the most arrogant – or foolish. For some, he was both. For his frustrated parents, he was a fool of first order. Only his widowed sister believed in his genius. Rest of the family did what humans are best at doing – making fun behind his back and to his face, praising him to the skies.

‘Next Shakespeare!’ we would declare to him, while secretly winking at each other. ‘What you write, even Shakespeare will not understand!’ And he would go pink.
in the face. Then we would ask for a treat. He always obliged. We told him what he wanted to hear. He firmly believed that the next century belonged to him only. One day he would be as famous as the Colombian; he had promised this repeatedly. This trait sometimes irritated me.

‘Yes. I want to write like him. Yaar, Marquez is the best. What magic he creates! I want to write like him only.’

‘All the world wants to do that,’ I said, trying to hide my anger at his insolence. Suddenly, one day, his overbearing tone and narcissism repelled me. I felt annoyed with him and the world that stood static on that hot afternoon.

‘Let them. I am different. I am not the world. Your hoi polloi. I am special.’

And he dragged on his cigarette and then coughed. His tall body draped in a brown Kurta and blue jeans shook with the raking cough that dislodged the bifocals on his hooked nose and lent a pathetic look to his bearded face. The darting eyes got magnified from behind the specks dangling on the tip of a wide nose. He appeared ridiculous.

‘OK. Then DO write like Marquez,’ I snapped, lighting up my third cigarette. A warm wind was blowing from across the dusty plain, coating the tables and chairs with a fine layer of dust. The shack was deserted due to unbearable May-end heat. The one-eyed owner was sleeping on his barebacked chair, mouth open, a fat fly buzzing over his protruding teeth. The famished Nepali was swatting the mosquitoes with bare hands, an enterprise not suited to him. The flying mosquitoes always won and a few trophies were fast replaced by another angry army that bred and multiplied in a nearby choked open drain. The stench was awful to the first-time visitors. We had gotten immune to the stench, garbage and mosquitoes. It was hell.

‘Why you irritated?’ he demanded, eyes cold, a smirk on his hungry face. A master offended.

I said nothing. Sort of clammed up inside. I often do. Out of humour, I go deep inside. Withdraw incrementally from the immediate scene into a depthless void inside. A dark hole that we urban residents carry with us everywhere. I sat silent and smouldered. There were many things to be angry at. Everything was a mess.

Outside the shack, a humming sound could be heard on the bending highway in the distance. It was like a scorched serpent slowly uncoiling its black body. The ennui was overwhelming. We sat and stared, registering nothing. The sun poured lava on the burnt ground on which the hotel stood as an oasis under a slim Margo tree. Thatched and mud-walled. We two often sat here for hours as we had no place to go. Home was not very welcoming.

‘Why you irritated?’ he repeated.

I did not take the bait. Even the town was dead. He was also not expecting any answer. We sat and stared. Two lost souls. The street was dead.

He inhaled lustily on his fifth cigarette, swirled the smoke in his mouth, exhaling the grey cloud like an acrobat doing a slow act. ‘Have you read ‘One of These Days’?’

‘What is that?’

‘A classic short story by Marquez.’

‘No?’

‘You must. A gem…glittering gem. Vintage Marquez,’ he droned, like a bored
lecturer, repeating the same idea to a class of equally bored listeners.

‘I can re-write it. The same story.’
‘Who is stopping you? Go ahead.’
‘This story is as much about Columbia as it is about India.’ He gushed, indifferent to my tone. ‘It is a mini masterpiece. It needs to be written in the Indian context.’

‘So do it, instead of telling me.’ I retorted.
‘You are my close friend. That is why I am telling you,’ he said, serene.
‘How will you re-write a classic by a master?’ I asked.
‘I will change the names and re-write the whole story. It consists of only 994 words. Very small.’
‘That will be plagiarism!’
‘Naw. It is called re-writing.’
‘Then?’
‘I will get noticed through this reprise.’
‘You were to write like Marquez?’
He smiled, finished the tea and sighed, ‘You are impossible! Ordinary souls do not understand a genius like me.’

I wanted to scream.
‘One day, I will own the whole world.’
I did not contradict him. It was futile.
He was quiet for some time. Then he looked directly at me across the sun mica-topped table full of faded stains and smiled sweetly: ‘OK. I meant I will be re-writing Marquez.’

‘No. You said you wanted to write like him,’ I insisted. The old fan whirred above us unable to dispel the oppressive heat. A blinding glare outside hurt the eyes. It was a bleak day.

‘OK. I will write the story in an Indian context.’
‘How can it be possible?’
‘We share the same fate. Same deprivation. Same cruel inequities…’
‘Then write about them. Why reprise a story that deals with a Colombian situation of the 60s?’
He looked stumped.
‘Why? To mimic a great writer? Why not find your own voice, however small?’ I asked, persisting in my little advantage, pushing the knife deeper.
‘I am learning. From a master. We echo our fav writers,’ he said, not very sure.

‘Sure. Echo them. But don’t mimic them,’ I continued to harangue.
He grew grim, ‘Why do you talk like a teacher? Always pontificating?’
‘No. I am talking as an honest reader. Why ape somebody else when we are not that somebody?’ I explained.
He pondered. ‘Ok. Are we not influenced by role-models?’
I nodded. ‘Yes. But it is temporary. We cannot become what we are not.’
‘Then what do you mean? I am nobody?’ His voice rose, to almost screeching.
His darting eyes jumped out of the sockets in anger.

‘One thing is sure. You are NOT Marquez,’ I pronounced with the finality of a presiding judge.

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He laughed maniacally. ‘Wrong! Absolutely wrong! You are jealous. Insecure! I will prove my genius. I will show I can write like Marquez. Yes…I will prove it…’ His hands began shaking. I thought he had gone crazy. Or become delusional!

*And then brutal reality intervened in this piece of conversation with a sudden shock of 2000 watts.*

A huge commotion broke outside the shack that diverted our attention. We stopped sparring.

A man could be heard screaming, ‘Help me. Somebody save me. They will kill me. Please…save me.’

The dozing teashop owner, the Nepali helper and two of us sprang out of the shack as a single party and saw a horrible scene unfolding a few metres away in the open. A reed-thin man in a torn t-shirt and half-shorts was being hit repeatedly by two burly cops near a stationary rickshaw. Blood trickled out of his thin mouth. They were kicking him and abusing him, had gone berserk, on that baked ground. The screaming man was terrified, his eyes bulging out.

‘What is going on here,’ demanded the one-eyed owner in a commanding voice that surprised us. ‘STOP!’ The effect was dramatic. The cops stopped hitting the man who immediately collapsed on the ground, writhing in mortal pain, vomiting blood. ‘Why are you hitting a poor man? Are you cops or thugs?’ He demanded, his voice croaking with deep disgust and anger. In an instant, this non-entity had turned into a hero taking on the establishment, almost barehanded.

The abrupt intrusion of civilians disoriented the cops. They glowered, unable to decide their next course of action, taken aback by this puny challenger.

The victim sat up with effort on the burning ground, blood dripping on his dirty t-shirt, hands folded, ‘Sir, they hired my rickshaw. I drove them around in the strong heat for an hour and when I asked for money, they began slapping and punching me hard in the belly. I am a dirt poor man. Cannot I ask them for payment?’

‘Yes. You can. Then?’ he demanded, in control.

‘The cops told me they are the government. How can I ask money from the government?’ He was finding it difficult to speak. After some seconds, the rickshaw-puller continued slowly: ‘When I said that I have a large family to feed, they began hitting me, first with light blows and then they punched and slapped me. Please save me from these devils.’ And he started crying, a picture of abject surrender and helplessness.

My blood boiled at this blatant violence and abuse. I looked hard at the arrogant men in khaki. They remained unfazed. Rather they bristled with rage. It was brazen power on display!

One of the cops stood unsteady. He was heavily drunk. Sickening. The other cop recovered quickly and barked, ‘Go away, you s-s-scum. It is police work. Do not interfere. Go aw-y.’ He was more bulky, eyes red, voice slurring.

The one-eyed guy shouted, ‘I am not a scum. You are. I will report this to the inspector.’

The duo laughed. ‘You? One-eyed scum. You will report us to the inspector?’

The small saviour replied firmly, ‘Yes. I will. He sometimes drops in at my
place for tea. He knows me well.’

‘Ok. Then we break your both legs and bust your only good eye as well. Make you lame and blind. A permanent cripple! Ha! Stopping a policeman on duty? I will make you beg for mercy, you ugly monster. Bust your eye and legs, you know. Then you go and report to inspector, crawling on your belly,’ the bulky one said and he started marching towards us with his cane swishing in the air. The other one lit a cigarette and waited for the action to start. It was apparent that the two were sadists sans conscience. This episode, unscripted, was eerie and unsettling. Two drunken cops ready to kill witnesses in a few lingering minutes in that vast wasteland.

My stomach turned to jelly. I had never experienced such an overwhelming sense of dread. The rogue cops were thrilled like hounds by the scent of blood. The lip of the armed cop began twitching. His face had a look of madness. He was beyond sanity. The service revolver gave him a sense of untrammeled power over us. I could sense approaching death.

But the tea-house owner stood his ground, showing no fear. The man had turned into a statue, eyes un-blinking. ‘Hit me, if you dare.’ He said, almost taunting. His calmness infuriated the uniformed men further.

The cop laughed. Beyond reason. He expertly swished the polished cane in his thick hairy hand, while his colleague took out his revolver, eyes glinting hard. The situation could turn fatal. A murder could occur in few minutes.

‘Do not do it,’ I heard my loud voice urging an unlikely truce. The shrillness of this pleading tone surprised me. I never intended to speak out but somehow got dragged into a dangerous scene, first as an unintentional witness and then as an unwilling participant.

The glaring cops turned, re-focused and two pairs of ruthless eyes clamped me. Their icy coldness curdled my blood. The eyes of hardened killers! I was reminded of a striking cobra. The one with revolver aimed at my heart and coolly said, ‘who are you? Ordering us about like the superintendent of police. You, a scumbag! I will kill you first and write it up as an encounter with a known hoodlum. You...’ And a string of abuses followed in Hindi. The other with the cane started towards me, relishing each measured step that took him towards his intended prey; a serial killer in a classic stalking mode.

I stood rooted to the spot. Waiting for that fatal shot. For my own imminent death in that urban wilderness, near the derelict shack that had served as a day-home and a sanctuary for long.

Then something un-imagined happened. Breaking out of the general paralysis, the one-eyed owner swung a log towards the advancing cop that dislodged the cane from his hand and temporarily confused him. It was the practiced throw of a man who was once a knife-thrower in a travelling caravan. It opened up a tiny window of salvation. The brave teashop owner shouted at us: ‘Run. Run for your life, boys. They are cold-blooded killers. They will kill you both. RUN.’

Galvanised by this abrupt call from a brave well-wisher, coming out of a trance, immediately, raw fear surging as a tidal wave inside, without thinking, we ran for our precious lives. We synchronised as a team, and sprinted, galloped, leapt over garbage heaps, dirty puddles, open drains and prickly hedges, as if fleeing from a large enemy army, without catching breath or even looking back. As we hit the distant highway, panting, a shot boomed out, shattering the stillness of that scary summer
All this came back as a recollection on Thursday, April 17, 2014, the day the master died at the age of 87 in his home in Mexico City. That summer afternoon has been seared into my memory. That ill-fated encounter with feudal law in a small north Indian town in the early 1980s changed our lives forever. The shot that rang out still echoes in my ears on lonely nights. The scene plays out in nightmares for me.

We no longer remained the same and took separate ways. I returned home in the evening and told Ma about the whole thing. She asked me to leave for my maternal uncle’s place some five hundred km away. Ramesh, I later on learnt, also went to a relative’s house in a different city. We never knew who took that fatal shot that afternoon – it was not the age of 24x7 TV.

A few days later, two constables came searching for us. Somehow, the matter was resolved by a friend of my father, who worked in the office of the superintendent of police (SP). The constables had threatened to frame us in a murder case but dropped the idea after the SP intervened in the case. My father advised me to stay at my uncle’s place and finish my studies there. I did that, terrified of the police in my own city and fearful of running into those murderous cops in a public place. I did not want to take any chance with law. I finished my studies, stayed on and then took a job in a leading English-medium school in Bikaner, Rajasthan and moved home. Ramesh too lost contact with me and we forgot each other.

Then, one evening, some 30 years later, during a rare visit to my native place, necessitated by the fast-deteriorating condition of father, I ran into Ramesh. It was another encounter planned by destiny. I can still remember that scene. After buying groceries and medicines, I took a turn into a narrow lane in the old city and found a corpulent man approaching from the opposite direction. It was a summer evening. Hot and oppressive. The temple bells were chiming in the small Hanuman temple a few yards away. Darkness was thickening. Birds talked on a huge banyan tree that grew in a nook of the twisting cobbled lane. Doors stood ajar in ancient homes of two-three stories, almost leaning on top of each other. A lone cyclist pedalled furiously past me. And two elderly men sat outside their homes, chatting and listlessly watching the thin traffic. The scene evoked melancholy in me. The kind of intimacy you feel for your lane and neighbourhood. Its old world charm lost forever, like those of many others, in newly built localities on the edge of decaying towns. But still notorious for violence and a high crime rate, for crumbling infrastructure.

‘Eliot.’ A loud voice boomed in the stillness of the lane and repeated, ‘T.S.Eliot.’

I stopped dead in my track. Only one man called me Eliot in a derisive sense. Then it clicked as the obese man came up to me. A ghost from a long-buried past stood smiling before me. ‘Ramesh?’ I shouted with joy.

‘Yes. Ramesh,’ he said.

We hugged. Two lost brothers re-united.

‘How are you the great Eliot?’ he said. We both stood aside and exchanged memories.

‘You still writing? We had great hopes from you. Always quoting the great T.S. Eliot. Ha ha ha,’ he roared. ‘Always wrote like the great Eliot. Using difficult words, myths, memories and odd Sanskrit words. We thought Eliot had re-incarnated
in India...in you.

I, too, smiled, flattered by the comparison and then said, ‘that was a different phase. We all were imitating either the British or American writers. That is over. Realty has claimed us all. I am cured. What about you? Did you write like great Marquez?’

He grew serious. ‘No, yaar! I left writing decades ago. No regrets either. I too was cured.’

‘Like me. Good! Happy to be a 9-to-5 guy. A regular guy with family and steady job. A member of the bourgeoisie. The pretensions are gone. You cannot escape your grim reality.’ He was quiet for few seconds. Then: ‘The moment was profound...like Eliot. Life for me changed that summer afternoon...as it did for you. I too ran away, finished my studies. Shaken by the incident that almost took our lives, I decided to apply for a government job. I studied hard and passed an exam to be a sub-inspector. These days, I am posted here only as a senior inspector. Enjoying my work.’

My jaw dropped. Marquez as police inspector!

‘Surprised! Ha. That is life; full of surprises and neat twists! I wanted to become powerful, instead of writing about power. That day we survived. I understood in order to survive in this feudal country, you have to be powerful. Now, nobody can touch me ever. I am power personified.’

I was shocked. The man was indeed a ghost!

‘Do visit me in the police station and see my kingdom. I am a terror in the city.’ He laughed and hugged me again, the king of all he surveyed. ‘Lot of money and prestige. I am rolling in wealth. Stashed away and invested in properties. My sons are doing well.’

‘You have grown beyond recognition,’ I commented.

‘Yes. Lot of weight. You are same. Tall and thin,’ he said good-humouredly.

‘Booze, women and wealth, my dear Eliot. They can revive even a corpse. I am leading a life of pleasure only. Partying and all that. A different world!’

‘What about Marquez?’ I asked.

‘Who is Marquez?’ he asked, winked, pressed my hand in his fat he left me standing in that dark lane, pondering his question.

Was the early Ramesh real?

Or, this one?

Was that phase magical?

Or, this one?

Only Marquez could have shed light on this strange phenomenon but he was now talking with the greatest magician of the entire cosmos – his and our Maker up there in the clouds, about the merits and de-merits of a way of seeing called magic realism...
Their Countries of Origin
Ron Singer

An inveterate traveller and a retiree with disposable income, before Ngongo I had already visited Malta and Kosovo. These were the countries of origin of three of our building’s superintendents. But perhaps our most memorable hireling was Super #4, Michael, a slacker who once had the temerity to announce, ‘Me Plumerian, you Chew. We same, no, Meester Bob?’

‘Thanks a lot,’ I replied, but he was impervious to sarcasm, a super-duper.

Historically, it is true that Plumeria, a small island in the Black Sea, has been a football for the Greeks, Turks, Russians, and other bullies in the region. But the Plumerians have given as good as they get: their hands are stained with the blood of other weak nations and ethnicities.

A far more sympathetic super hailed from Ngongo. His name was/is Pierre Tshombe – like the Congolese dictator. Tall, thin, coal-black, agreeable and industrious, but with a modicum of skills, Pierre was only with us for six months, in 2010. He invariably addressed me as ‘Monsieur Shepard.’ When he disappeared one day, I assumed he had been picked up by the Citizenship and Immigration Services. At the job interview, he had produced a green card, but our Board is careless about things like forged documents.

‘I wonder what happened to that African guy,’ I mused one evening, looking up from the paper. My wife turned toward me from her desk.

‘Pierre?’

‘That’s right, I forgot his name,’ I lied.

‘I liked him, too. Everyone did.’

‘I was thinking of visiting his country.’

She shrugged, raised her eyebrows, and turned back to the report she was writing. I took her non-response to mean she would not try to talk me out of a quixotic trip to Africa.

While she was at work the next day, I googled La Republique Federale d’Ngongo. I discovered a landlocked place the size of Luxembourg, tucked between the DRC (Congo) and Zambia. News items emphasised economic development, many involving coltan, which is used in cell phones. The country’s deposits are grossly disproportionate to its size and population (5.2 million, according to a 1992 census).

Ngongo seemed exempt from the wholesale violence that dogs Central Africa, perhaps because it has been ruled for decades by an ancient dictator, who began life as a freedom fighter. Several times in recent years, this small nation has been flavor-of-the-month at Human Rights Watch. I speculated about the dictatorship’s longevity. The capital, Fort Chaltin, is named for a major from the Belgian Congo. Why has the dictator not renamed his capital something more palatable, like Lumumbaville? Perhaps the old name inspires fear, at least among his minions. More to the point, the city is perched on an escarpment, which must discourage coup-makers.

By early October, having obtained my shots, visa, and plane ticket, I was ready to...
go. Despite the distance and airfare, $1400, I planned to stay in Africa for only a week. I would fly via Paris to Fort Chaltin, then either spend the week there or make a side trip to Lake Tanganyika, which is just across the eastern border, 110 miles by road from the capital.

I pre-paid for a room for three nights at a pension I also found on the internet. Having learned from previous red-eye experiences, I left NY at 12:35 pm, had a two-hour stopover in Paris, and arrived at 12:15 pm the next day. Even so, I was so tired I was glad I had not booked a rental car. I found a Citroen diesel cab to haul me up the narrow hairpin road from the airport and through the dusty town. It was the dry season.

Hidden by trees and flowering bushes, the Pension Saint-Louis looked lovely. When I signed the guest book, ‘for security reasons’ my passport and most of my money were put into their safe. I was given keys to my room and to the high iron gates in front, which would be locked between 7 pm and 7 am.

My second-floor room was kitschy, but spacious, clean and comfortable, with tile flooring, big windows, and a ceiling fan. To skim off the jet lag, I took a two-hour nap, followed by a cool shower. After that, I wandered into Fort Chaltin.

My first impressions confirmed things I had read. The market kiosks were short of goods, prices were high –100 francs Gb., or about $3.50, for a small loaf of bread. The dirt streets were rutted and full of axle-shattering potholes, and clouds of dust and pollution from ancient vehicles made breathing difficult. It surprised me that I did not encounter any of the beggars I knew to be endemic, or the muggers and con men who brazenly accost tourists in places like Nairobi, a.k.a. ‘Nairobbery.’

As I roamed around, I began to understand this apparent absence of unfortunates and undesirables. Lurking in the shadows were men in dark, baggy suits, sunglasses and black Fedoras. These, I assumed, were members of the feared secret police, La Force NKN, said to number in the tens of thousands.

More blatant was the stark contrast between ubiquitous poverty and the few pockets of wealth, presumably created by the coltan economy, presumably controlled by the octogenarian kleptocrat & Co. Clustered in the District Centrale, a five square-block area, were skyscrapers, luxury hotels, and upscale restaurants. Pension Saint-Louis was situated on a quiet street just south of this oasis. On the way back, I stopped at a kiosk for a meal of bread, goat meat and beer.

At the front desk of the pension, the patron stood reading a newspaper. ‘Alors, Monsieur …’ he began, his eyes twinkling through his bifocals. ‘Ca va?’

‘Bien, merci. So far, I like Fort Chaltin.’ My schoolboy French came back easily, so we continued in that language.

‘Thank you. Are you here, Monsieur, on business, or for tourism, if I may ask?’

‘Neither. I’m here to re-connect with someone who used to work for me.’

‘How interesting!’ He sounded wary. ‘And is this …reconnection your sole motive for visiting our poor, out-of-the-way land?’

‘Well, mostly,’ I replied. We smiled and nodded at each other. ‘But tell me, mon patron, how might I go about locating this man?’

Again, he eyed me suspiciously. ‘What is the name, please?’

‘Name? Robert Shepard. But… ‘
‘No, no. His name, please?’
‘Oh. Patrice – I mean, Pierre-Tshombe.’
‘Well, Monsieur,’ he said carefully, ‘“Tshombe” is a common name here. If I were you, I would check for an address at the Post Office.’ He pushed his bifocals up on his nose. ‘This will be easier than trying to obtain a phone number, which would entail a big palaver at the Ministrie Telephonique.’
He stood up and stretched theatrically. ‘And now, Monsieur Shepard, if you will excuse me, I must see that the children are asleep, then go to my own bed. At what time would you like to take breakfast, please?’
‘Seven-thirty okay? I’ll probably wake up early from jet lag.’
‘Of course, Monsieur, I am at your service. Good night, then. Please turn the lights off when you leave this room. There is a night light in the stairwell which you may leave on.’
‘Good night, mon patron.’
We shook hands, and he went upstairs. I sat in the parlor a few minutes, my mind a welter of impressions. Then, I went upstairs. Probably because of my nap, it took me hours to read myself to sleep.
Luckily, I had remembered to set my phone alarm for seven, because it woke me from a deep, apparently dreamless sleep. I was the only guest in the small dining room. After the patron had served my continental breakfast, I wandered back into the empty parlor, where I found a paper to read while I digested the meal. Then, I went up to my room and used the toilet. Putting the things I would need for the day (cap, cell phone, etc.) into a backpack with a small lock, and slathering myself with sunblock, I went back downstairs, ready to walk to the Post Office.
In the vestibule, the patron lay in wait, polishing his glasses with a white handkerchief. After we had exchanged pleasantries about the forecast – hot and dry, chance of afternoon thundershowers – he snapped his fingers. A thin, light-skinned young man materialised from the parlor. Perhaps seventeen, he wore neat, but worn clothing, and bore a marked resemblance to the patronne.
‘Monsieur Shepard, allow me to present my wife’s nephew, Joseph.’
I offered the young man my hand, and, with a small bow, he softly shook it. We said how glad we were to meet each other.
‘I have brought Joseph here,’ the patron explained, ‘because he can be of assistance in the search for your former employee.’ Before I could protest, he continued. ‘Please. Joseph will be most useful, Monsieur. The Post Office is difficult to find, and Joseph will be of assistance in communicating with the employees, who speak only Ngongienne, with perhaps some Swahili, but little or no French. Assuming you succeed in acquiring an address, he can then help you to find the place. If your friend is absent, Joseph will be able to communicate with the other residents. Fortunately, he is free to serve you all day. You see, Monsieur, the lack of school fees has forced Joseph temporarily to abandon his studies. If you like, when you have completed the day’s business, you will give him a small pourboire, to assist him in returning to the lycée – just a few francs, you understand.’ The patron looked embarrassed, as did Joseph.
Before I could reply, Joseph chimed in. ‘You see, Monsieur, as my uncle has explained, not only will the location of the Post Office be difficult to find, but the employees will speak mostly our own tongue, Ngongienne.’ The patron solemnly
nodded his agreement.

Fuelled by two cups of espresso, my mind raced dizzily. In a dictatorship like Ngongo, citizens and visitors alike must live under a cloud of uncertainty. To evade my host’s ministrations might stoke his paranoia, or that of the authorities. While I ran through these thoughts, Joseph and the patron gazed at the ceiling.

‘Very well,’ I said. ‘I accept. Monsieur Joseph.’ Another round of handshakes. ‘Shall we?’ After a moment of ‘after you’ farce, I preceded Joseph out the front door, which the patron closed behind us. We went through the gated entrance to find a big, old, black American car waiting at the curb. I was glad to get away from the officious patron.

‘I have taken the liberty, Monsieur,’ Joseph said, gesturing to the car. ‘The Post Office is far.’ I got into the back, and Joseph took the passenger seat. The fact that he did not tell the driver our destination reinforced my growing sense of being managed.

After the preliminaries, the Post Office proved anticlimactic. Since there were few customers, there was almost no wait, but all that I – we – learned from the polite clerk was that they had no current address for a ‘Pierre Tshombe.’ As we exited the colonial-era white stucco building, I began to wonder whether someone might not want me to find him.

Our car was waiting. The driver had turned the motor off and sat dozing behind the wheel. By now, it was ten-thirty. Suddenly, I bridled at all the control.

‘You know, Joseph,’ I said, ‘I think I’d rather walk back to the pension. I mean, all I’ve accomplished this morning is to eat breakfast, take a car ride, and spend ten fruitless minutes at the Post Office. Why don’t I pay the driver and have him drop you somewhere? If I get tired, I’ll find my own taxi.’

Joseph became agitated. ‘But, Monsieur, this is impossible. It will be a too long walk, and my uncle will be very angry with me if I allow you, our guest, to lose yourself in this, our city.’

‘No problem.’ I opened my backpack and extracted the guidebook. ‘Look.’ I showed him a map that included the Post Office and the pension. ‘You see,’ I added cheerfully, ‘I’ll be fine. Go on, please.’ Reaching for my wallet, I gestured to the car.

But Joseph would not be shaken so easily, and after some more back and forth, we reached an understanding: I would get my walk, but he would accompany me. After he had exchanged a hurried word with the driver in Ngongienne, I handed over what seemed a fair price, 150 francs GB, or about $5.25. The cab made a cautious U-turn and headed back toward the District Centrale.

‘This way, Monsieur Shepard.’ Joseph smiled, setting out along the edge of the road. ‘You will get to enjoy your constitutional, and I will preserve my uncle’s good will. We can – how do you say it? – use one stone to kill two birds.’ I forced a smile of my own and, careful not to fall into the drainage ditch, followed him in the direction my map said would lead us back to the Pension Saint-Louis.

The day had grown very hot. Glad I had worn my lightest pants and shirt, I put on my cap and sunglasses. The blocks around the Post Office were a sort of suburb, quiet, with little traffic. Although the small one-story bungalows, made of stucco or whitewashed cement, were modest by American standards, they all had high iron fences with razor wire, and intimidating signs announcing that security companies...
patrolled the neighborhood.

Joseph saw me looking at the signs. ‘I think those are only for … how do you say it... dis …?’

‘Dissuasion,’ I said. Deterrence.

‘Ah, yes, of course.’

‘Are there burglaries?’

‘Not many. But the property owners fear them.’

‘What of La Force NKN?’

He flinched. ‘Well, of course, there are those people.’

I did not pursue the point.

After several blocks, the street on which we had been walking, the Rue de la Liberation, brought us to a long row of small market kiosks like the ones I had seen the previous day. Between them wound unpaved paths leading back to mud huts roofed with thatch or rusty corrugated metal. Inside the open-fronted kiosks, men and women dozed on stools or chairs. In one or two, people appeared to be haggling. A few feet up one of the paths, lounging in the shade of a kiosk was a man in a dark suit with a Fedora hiding his eyes. If Joseph saw him, he did not comment. Unconsciously, I moved my hands toward my pants pockets, and realising I had neglected to do so, zipped them both shut.

‘Don’t worry, Monsieur, there are no thieves – very few, anyway.’

‘Good.’

But, as if to contradict Joseph’s assurances, a few minutes later a tall, thin, ragged, dust-covered figure suddenly sprang at us from a path between the kiosks. Before I could jump back, the man, who was somehow vaguely familiar, brushed against me. I felt a hand at my right pants pocket.

‘Shaa!’ shouted Joseph, adding what sounded like a furious imprecation in Ngongienne. Several proprietors materialised, waving their arms and shouting similar imprecations.

‘Sorry, sir!’ the ragged man cried in French. ‘Please forgive me!’ He spun around and sped back up the path, eluding the mob.

‘I, too, am sorry,’ said Joseph. The merchants, some still muttering, wandered back to their kiosks. ‘I am afraid you have encountered one of our madmen. Very, very sorry.’

‘That’s okay, Joseph.’ My heart was beating fast. ‘Not your fault.' With trembling hands, I patted my pants pockets. In the left one, I could feel my wallet. But, in the right one, which had held only a few coins and a roll of mints, the zipper was half open, and I felt something like a crumpled piece of paper.

In such situations, people do not often notice much, but, for some reason, I had observed my accoster closely. His hair was filthy and matted. He wore ragged khaki shorts and a torn, once-white t-shirt. He was barefoot, and his face, arms and legs were covered with bruises, cuts and abrasions. I realised, then, why the madman had seemed familiar: it was Pierre. The image of our polite, meticulously clean super flashed across my mind. Instinctively, I patted the piece of paper in my pocket.

‘Nothing missing,’ I said.

‘Such people are not usually thieves. Would you like to sit down for a moment, Monsieur, perhaps to take a cold drink at a kiosk?’

‘No, thanks,’ I said. ‘I have water.’ Unlocking the backpack, I took out the...
bottle. ‘Would you like some?’ He shrugged and smiled. Taking a few long swallows, I put the bottle back and re-locked the backpack. ‘Shall we?’

We walked on, until, half an hour later, the tall buildings of the District Centrale loomed ahead. By then, I was exhausted. The intrepid traveler had never before attempted a long trek beneath the midday African sun.

‘I give up, Joseph,’ I said, at last. ‘You were right.’ With a polite smile, he hailed one of the ubiquitous rattletraps. In ten minutes, we were back at the gates of the pension. I paid the driver and gave Joseph his pourboire, to which he responded with effusive thanks.

As soon as I was in my room, I locked the door and splashed tepid water on my face. I unzipped my pocket and took out the piece of paper. It was a dirty, wrinkled, lined sheet torn from a notebook. In spidery handwriting, it read (in French):

Please, Monsieur Shepard, I am so sorry to impose on you, but this is a matter of life and death. Could you be so kind as to meet me tonight at the statue of Major Chaltin, which is on the road inside Parc de L’indépendence, near the northeast border of the city? If you will call 23-004-91 at exactly 11 pm, you will be picked up and driven there. The driver will be one of us. Your presence will indicate your willingness to help with an urgent matter. I will meet you with a packet containing literature documenting the struggles and sufferings of our group. I will ask you to carry these documents home with you in your luggage, then take them to the address indicated. When we meet tonight, I will explain more completely. In case I am not there, you may assume I have been apprehended. The driver will drop you someplace where you can have a drink, and you will return by taxi to your pension. This should provide you with an adequate cover.

The letter was signed:

Your former employee and (still, I hope) friend, Pierre Auguste Modupe Tshombe, Secrétaire Générale, Cadre Pour La Libération d’Ngongo (CPLN).
P.S. Please memorise the contents of this note and destroy it immediately.

Relying on memory for the other details, I memorised the phone number, then tore the note to bits, flushed it down the toilet, and flopped onto the bed. I imagined being stopped at the airport by NKN thugs, who would discover the packet. I would be thrown into a foetid cell, where demands to speak to my consul would be met with derisive laughter.

I filled the rest of the afternoon napping and trying to read. For lunch and supper, I made do with some fruit and crackers I had brought along from New York, in case the airline food was inedible. In the evening, I e-mailed my wife. Trying to be circumstantial, I provided some local color and reassuring noises about my safety. Since I knew she would expect me to mention Pierre, I said that I had unsuccessfully tried the Post Office. After that, I stared at the same page in my book for over an hour.

At 10:30, in their apartment down the hall, the patron and his family turned out the lights. The pension seemed to have no other guests, at least none that I had seen. At exactly eleven, I called the number from Pierre’s note, tiptoed downstairs and, as quietly as possible, un-locked the gates. Re-locking them behind me, I waited in the shadows. A quarter of an hour later, Pierre’s man appeared, driving a battered old sedan. He carried me through the city to the statue in the park. No Pierre.

‘Their Countries of Origin.’ Ron Singer.
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With growing anxiety, we waited forty minutes, until the driver suggested we leave. He dropped me at a bar in the District Centrale, where I had my drink, then took a cab back to the pension. As quietly as possible, I once again unlocked and re-locked the gates. Creeping up to my room, I re-read the Lake Tanganyika chapter in my guidebook.

After a restless night, at seven the next morning, I ate breakfast, paid the bill, and booked a room for the night before I was scheduled to fly home. When I asked whether I might leave some of my things at the pension, the patron, polite, but wary, agreed. He had already ordered the same car as the day before, which now carried me to the bus station on the eastern edge of the city.

Purchasing a round-trip ticket, I squeezed onto a crowded bus that carried me to a resort town on Lake Tanganyika, just across the Zambian border. There, I spent four nights at an upscale lodge in Sumbu National Park. It was a lovely lodge in a lovely location, but I was so distracted I could hardly enjoy the spectacular shoreline scenery, or even the blue duiker, a small, rare antelope I was fortunate enough to glimpse from the lodge’s Land Rover during a game-spotting ride.

On the fifth day, I returned to Fort Chaltin, arriving in the early afternoon. The car met me. Back at the pension, I still saw no other guests. When I asked conversationally after Joseph, the patron’s reply was monosyllabic. When I said I wanted to stretch my legs after the bus ride, he shrugged.

Deciding to keep on playing the tourist, I spent a couple of hours at the small Musé’d’Ethnographie at the south end of the District, six blocks from the pension. On my walk to and from the Musé’, I could tell I was being watched: the men in black were obvious. After returning to my room for a nap and a shower, I went down to the lobby, where I asked the patron to arrange for the car again, and to reserve a table at the Gril Lapin, an upscale place I had found in my guidebook. I waited while he impassively made the calls.

The car soon arrived, but with a new driver, short, silent, and scowling. Without a word, he drove me to the Gril. Not responding to my overgenerous tip, he said he would return in one hour and sped away. Not fifty feet from the restaurant, two NKN agents stood side by side on the pavement beneath a streetlight.

It was now seven-thirty, and the place was about a quarter full. As far as restaurants go, the Lapin looked like a good choice: immaculate and chic, with white tablecloths and black bentwood chairs. The waiter, a nervous older man, seated me at a table for two in front of the window. As soon as I was seated, he took my order. I hardly noticed what I chose. A glass of red wine appeared immediately, along with a basket containing two huge rolls.

Five minutes later, as I was crumbling the second roll into pills, a massive black stretch SUV pulled up in front of the restaurant. Trotting around the rear of the car, the liveried driver opened the back right door, and out came... Michael Milevski, my Plumerian super! Or someone very like him. Illuminated by the restaurant’s red sign, this Michael wore a shiny, tailored safari suit with a dark fisherman’s cap. Like his suit, Michael was shiny, smirking radiantly and glowing with health and confidence.

As he strode into the restaurant, his driver disappeared back into the SUV, which had tinted windows. I have never seen a bulletproof vehicle up close, but there was something tank-like about the side panels of this one. Scanning the room,
Michael spotted me. After a theatrical double take, he approached my table with a shark-like grin and outstretched hand.

‘Well, well,’ he said, ‘of all people! Long time no see.’

I stood up and returned his firm handshake. He exuded an expensive smell.

The safari suit was light green and, I guessed, silk.

‘Michael?’

With a perfunctory nod, he sat down at my table. His backside had barely touched the chair when the waiter appeared, now wearing an anxious smile.

‘The usual,’ Michael pronounced, in heavily accented French. ‘But no food tonight, Alain.’ The waiter ran back to the kitchen.

‘Well, Mr. Shep – Bob?’

I nodded.

‘You look well. A little older, of course, but who isn’t?’

I kept kneading the bread pills. A few seconds later, the waiter returned, holding aloft a silver tray with two glasses and an open bottle of what looked like champagne. Filling one of the glasses, he set it down in front of Michael and waited.

‘Join me?’ Michael asked.

‘No, thanks.’ I lifted my own glass.

‘Well, here’s to … success.’

I sipped my wine, and he drank some champagne.

‘Ah, delicious. You sure…?’

‘No, thanks,’ I repeated. The waiter withdrew with the bottle. I hoped my coolness would prompt Michael to leave before the food arrived.

‘Still travelling, I see.’ His remark had a sneering undertone.

‘Sort of.’

‘Some day I hope you’ll come to Plumeria, my country. Much nicer than this place, which, if I may say so, is the arsehole of the world.’

I jumped at the opening. ‘Well, these days the world is full of arseholes.’

Rather than taking the sarcasm personally, he laughed so hard that several heads turned. ‘Very true. I’ve been to – and met – many of them.’ He drank more champagne.

‘Not to be rude, Michael, but what are you doing here?’

He laughed mirthlessly. ‘Certainly not mopping floors or delivering packages!’

‘I can see that. But what are you doing?’

His expression became a caricature of thought. ‘How to put it... let's just say I've been spending a lot of time in Africa lately. I'm a … businessman.’ He seemed pleasantly surprised by his cleverness in coming up with the word.

‘A very successful one, at least from the look of you. But what kind of business, Michael?’

‘Well … Bob, let's just say I deal with several African leaders whose names you could recognise from the news.’

That gave me a good enough idea: probably guns for diamonds, or here in Ngongo, guns for coltan. I dropped the subject, and for a few moments we sat in silence. The waiter re-appeared, carrying a steaming plate of food and Michael's bottle. Consulting his smart phone, Michael waved him off.

‘Sorry, Bob, I’m due at the Defense Ministry an hour ago. I'll leave you to … Their Countries of Origin.’ Ron Singer.

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your dinner.’ He made no move to get up. ‘But before I go – Bob – I have a little message for you. Actually, it comes from the President of this country.’ He looked me in the eye, enjoying my fear. ‘Unless you want to sample his special brand of hospitality, you should make no attempt to re-establish contact with that guy who accosted you the other day.’ He laughed harshly. ‘Who, even as we speak, is enjoying the President’s hospitality!’

With a look of false concern, Michael switched from heavily accented French to heavily accented English (which I won’t try to reproduce): ‘Bob, as someone who wishes you well, I really hope, Bob, you won’t be stupid enough to meddle in things that are none of your fucking business!’ To punctuate this rude peroration, he jabbed a finger at me. This time, no heads turned. He stood up and, without shaking hands or even saying goodbye, strode through the door, slamming it behind him. A moment later, the SUV sped off.

Only then did I notice my food, a French stew served central-African style, still hot enough to exude a delicious aroma. I ate what I could, washing it down with a second glass of wine, and paid the bill, which arrived just as my car pulled up to the curb. As I exited the restaurant, I looked to my left. One of the NKN men saluted.

Back in my room, it took me a while to calm down. I imagined a second conversation with Michael. ‘Hey, if I didn’t do this, someone else would.’

Had Pierre really been arrested, or had he failed to keep the rendezvous for a different reason? What would I do if he, or someone from his group, tried to contact me again before I left the next morning?

At about ten, to escape these unpleasant thoughts, I booted up and checked my e-mail. There were only two messages. My wife’s was short and sweet. She missed me, hoped I was still okay. She would see me soon. Love, xxx.

The second one was a follow-up threat from Michael, this one texted from his phone. ‘BBQ at rsdnce of Jstce Mnstr Sndy pm. Wld lve hve yu for dnnr (ha ha). Pstpne flt, see the real Ngng!!! Wll snd car. Chrs, M.’

I e-mailed my wife that I would take a taxi from the airport and see her the day after tomorrow. I also promised to shop and cook dinner before she returned from work. To Michael, I wrote: ‘Sorry, urgent NY business, maybe next time.’ With a forced laugh, I signed it, ‘B.S.’

In the morning, I breakfasted, paid the new bill, and exchanged cool farewells with the patron, who was busy checking in some Chinese business types. I was driven to the airport in a random taxi. During the forty-minute ride down the escarpment, I worried obsessively that I would be detained.

Arriving just in time to check in, I entered the small terminal. Wearing the best smile I could muster, I wheeled my suitcase across the air-conditioned lobby to the check-in counter. The moment the perfumed, immaculately uniformed clerk, who was as beautiful as a model, began to process my ticket, her cell phone rang. For perhaps thirty seconds, she listened in silence, her perfect forehead beading with sweat.

‘Oui, Monsieur Le Capitaine, entendu,’ she finally said, and closed her phone. Then, to me, also in French, ‘I am so sorry, Sir, but certain formalities require me to direct you kindly to proceed with your luggage to the grey door over there, the one marked “SECURITY”.’ She pointed a long manicured finger.
‘But ...’
‘Please, Monsieur, it is necessary. I am sure you will not miss your flight.’

With a sense of doom, I wheeled my suitcase to the door she had indicated, and knocked.

‘Come in, Bob, it’s open,’ Michael called through the door, in English.

Dressed in another shiny safari suit, this one sky blue, he sat staring at a computer screen on a metal desk in a tiny, windowless office with fluorescent lighting. The only ornament was a huge, framed portrait on the wall behind the desk. It was the dictator as he might have looked fifty or sixty years before, wearing black framed glasses and a camouflage uniform. There was no chair for visitors, so I walked up to the desk and stood there. Without a word, Michael gestured for me to come around to his side. Complying, I saw on the screen several thumbnail photographs of a man under what I assumed was extreme torture. In one, he was dangling by his ankles from a meat hook with his hands tied behind him, his entire body covered with blood. In another, a close-up of a silently screaming face left no doubt who the victim was.

Barely able to keep myself from swooning, I leaned both hands on the edge of the desk. Michael’s face displayed a look of false concern with an undercurrent of delight. He play-acted jumping from his seat and clasped me very hard by the shoulder.

‘Please, Bob. Sit down! Sorry there’s no audio. Can I get you a glass of water?’ He gestured to the desk chair. I shrugged him off, and he smiled. ‘No? You’re okay? If you don’t mind, then, I’ll just have a quick look through your bag.’

Not trusting myself to speak, I gestured to the suitcase. He popped the snaps and cursorily rifled through the contents, then snapped the suitcase shut again.

‘Good to go, mon ami. Bon voyage. Please give my very best to your lovely wife and to all the kind neighbours.’

Hardly aware of what I was doing, I staggered from the office and wheeled back to the counter. With an apology, the clerk escorted me through a door that led out onto the broiling tarmac. In Paris, there was a three-hour layover, during which, still dazed, I sat by a window as the planes landed and took off.

During my first weeks back in New York, I told the story of Pierre and Michael to anyone who would listen: my wife (several times), friends, neighbors, complete strangers. When I began to feel like the ancient mariner and she suggested I ‘give it a rest,’ I subsided.

Two months after my return, a torn, smudged Manila envelope arrived, covered with cancelled stamps and containing incendiary materials. There was a slip of paper with the address of a Human Rights group, but no note. I brought the packet to the address, where an earnest young woman took it, earnestly shook my hand, and uttered an earnest speech of thanks. Since then, six or seven more months have floated past, as time does for the elderly. Hardly a day goes by, however, when my liberal heart does not bleed for Pierre Tshombe.
The Z Hotel hadn’t changed. Still the coolest place to stay. The holy city of Puri had lots of hotels but a maharajah’s ex-palace is still a maharajah’s ex-palace.

Maryanne registered the scatter of tourist footwear and the impressive staircase with cast-iron banisters leading to reception. She slipped out of her sandals and nudged them aside to help the taxi driver follow with her suitcase. She let her fingertips drift up the smooth wooden tops of the bannisters as she ascended the stairs. *We slid down here once. Thirty-five years ago.*

To the left, a doorway. European tourists sitting around a huge table on a veranda. ‘The Rajah’s Table’, Trevor had dubbed it. ‘I’m going to check if we’ve got mail,’ she remembered him saying in his flat, farm-boy way. ‘Meet you back here at the Rajah’s Table.’ And she saw a much younger Maryanne with long straight brown hair lift her head from journal-writing and blow him a kiss across her half-finished cup of chai. *They called us The Aussie Lovebirds.*

They’d taken the cheapest rooms available then: Trev in the men’s dorm; Maryanne in the women’s. *Up that flight of stairs if I’m not mistaken.* Yes, she swivelled her head – up there. More than once she’d swung into the men’s dorm and Trev had cajoled the Brits, ‘Hey hippie bums, give us some privacy. Go blow some joints at the Rajah’s Table.’

‘Madam?’ It was the taxi driver beside her, puzzled by her hesitation. ‘Reception is available.’

He parked her suitcase to one side of a majestic wooden desk behind which the manager was rising to his feet, smiling welcome.

‘Thank you, driver.’ She tipped him – he’d driven her all the way from the new airport in Bhubaneshwar to the holy city. ‘It’s our – my – second visit here,’ she told the manager as she took a seat. ‘The last time was 1977.’

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‘Ho-ho. Long time. Many of our guests return to us,’ he said with a waggle of his head while extending one hand for her passport. ‘But – verry long time for you, isn’t it? You are verry welcome, Madam. Thank you for remembering us. Many changes coming. We have wi-fi now.’

‘Can you still go up to the roof?’ Maryanne asked after completing the formalities. A mental picture of the flat Indian roof where she and Trevor would begin their day – their place – flashed into her mind.

‘Certainly Madam. The rooftop is available.’

‘Is the … ah … the Pink House still down by the beach?’

‘Yes, Madam.’ He wagged his head sideways to impress his answer upon her.

‘You can see,’ and he pointed upwards. ‘Fourth floor.’

‘And Konarak, the Sun Temple? Can you still get a bus there?’

‘Certainly Madam. Buses are always available. But a taxi for you is better. More com-fort-able. No-one pushing every which-way.’ He then spoke rapidly in Oriya to one of his staff and flicked his right hand towards the room she’d booked on the internet: a big airy room facing the Bay of Bengal.

‘The boy will take.’

The ‘boy’ taking her suitcase was a thin barefoot man of at least thirty. She followed him to a set of doors, thick with layers of paint and secured with an ancient padlock. He opened up and wheeled her suitcase inside. There were two single beds, side-by-side, made up with white sheets. He padded to the one closest to the window facing the sea and began to undo the ties of a mosquito net piled on top of its wooden frame. Mauve netting fell around it like the sides of a teenage girl’s hide-out. He showed her that the shower worked. Indicated drinking water in plastic bottles.

She tipped him a ten rupee note. *Trev and I hardly ever tipped. Gave to the beggars instead.* But the Ten Rupee Tip was the recommendation of friends in Peacherester who’d recently returned from their first Asian holiday, a package tour to Delhi, Rajasthan, Taj Mahal and Varanasi. ‘Keeps everyone happy and everything flowing,’ the couple had said. They’d initially tried to persuade Maryanne not to go to India so soon after Trevor’s death. ‘Fair enough,’ they’d said, ‘Go with the kids but four weeks on your own before they join you?’ It dismayed Maryanne just how advice-prone everyone had become; how her every move was monitored, discussed. The worst was that the whole of Peacherester had expected burial in the Nelson family plot not cremation. But she knew that Trevor wanted his ashes to be released in the Ganges River. He’d always said this. When death was a joke.

She was standing, blank-eyed and lost in thought, in front of the mauve mosquito net. Happened often, this paralysis. She roused herself, closed the doors and unpacked her things onto the spare bed and into shelves. When her fingers found the square box, tears welled. She put it next to her pillow. Then on the broad windowsill facing the Bay of Bengal. *No, not east facing Australia. North. Facing Old Puri town. And the mighty Jagannath Temple. And the Ganges.*

She lifted the mauve haze of mosquito net, taking with her the bananas and packet of roasted peanuts she’d bought in Bhubaneswar. She sat cross-legged on her bed and picked at the food. Then she stretched out; let her jet-lagged head spin. That way, she put off facing anyone, or anything, until the next day.

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The sound of her smart phone registering texts woke her.

Mum are ya there yet? Wilson playing for laughs.

Mum did the flight from Kolkata to Bhub connect as promised? How are you handling it? Karla the Human Resources manager.

Nothing from Dylan. Busy on the farm? Or too stoned to bother?

She checked if her phone company had activated its ‘roving’ signal before tapping in a response. Of course it has, Mum, she imagined Wilson and Karla, the city-slickers, chorusing: how else could you be getting our messages?

All ok. Meet Varanasi as planned. xx

Sending … Wilson.

Sending … Karla.

Sending … Dylan.

But she felt racked with doubt. Is this really what you want Trev? Sweetheart, it’s hard. So hard.

At breakfast at the Rajah’s Table, Maryanne let a talkative Londoner, also a new arrival, take the lead. Yes, Maryanne agreed, happy to share a taxi into Old Puri. Yes, take in the views of Odisha state’s pilgrimage city from the library opposite the Jagannath Temple. Yes, Marina Beach after that. And dinner at the Peace Café.

While Jackie chatted on, Maryanne toyed with a pancake. Who could be bothered eating?

‘I come out every year. Six months at a time. Catch taxis for a coupla days to acclimatise then go everywhere on the cheap. What about you?’

‘Haven’t been here since I was, uh, twenty-one.’ Tears prickled Maryanne’s throat. Grief began its dark and heavy tug.

‘My first year at the Zed was 1984,’ Jackie continued. ‘Gol-ly-gosh it was wild back then, but you’d know that. I start all my Indian trips here. One year didn’t go anywhere else, stayed put, got my strength back. Up there,’ and she pointed to the ceiling. ‘The dorm. Saves a packet. That way, I can buy loads of presents. They love their Indian party dresses back home, all them sequins and little mirrors. This year will be a bit different. I’m meeting a friend down in Pondicherry. Going to live it up for once, stay in one of the colonial hotels and eat French every night. Cheaper in Pondi than Paris! In my line of work, you need to treat yourself.’

Maryanne decided not to ask what line of work. She felt certain Jackie was a social worker: last thing I need.

‘Have I got time to go up to the roof before that taxi?’

‘Absolutely. Like to take me first day nice ‘n’ easy. See you here at the Rajah’s Table at ten. No,’ corrected Jackie, ‘make that eleven.’

‘You call it the Rajah’s Table too?’ Maryanne asked in surprise.

‘Bin called that for ever,’ Jackie stated. ‘Mornin’,’ she greeted a new guest. ‘Just in are you?’

Maryanne took the four flights of stairs slowly. Not that she was puffed – living on a farm, albeit one corner of a farm – kept you fit, but she felt tired. So very tired. Like she’d fallen into molasses. Black and sticky like the tonic they doused the cows with when they had the farm to themselves, when Trev’s older brother and his wife took off for their annual winter holiday. A treat for the mothers run down after calving.

Even now at nine in the morning, the concrete roof of the Zed was hot underfoot – she could feel it through her thongs. Pack a pair of thongs, she’d told the kids, you’ll need them in the showers. Worms might burrow into the soles of your feet, up into
your intestine. They’d laughed and said, ‘It’s not like back in the day when you and Dad travelled around on two dollars a day! We’re going to be in a five star hotel, Mum.’

She skirted the hotel washing that was spread out flat. It was a clear day and the Bay of Bengal was a light grey, dotted with boats from the fishing fleet. She leant against the low wall. Down by the dunes – how about that! – the Pink House. They’d eaten grilled fish at the Pink House. Sat under a coconut palm and talked about the swami from Tiruvannamalai as they drank Cokes. Not Coke – India had banned Coke – substitutes, fizzy drinks said to settle the stomach, kill off the diarrhoea-inducing bugs. Strains of devotional music and Bollywood from Puri itself now drew her over to the opposite side of the roof. The Jagannath Temple wasn’t visible from here, she remembered. Does it still have the signs? NON-HINDUS NOT ALLOWED.

Her smart phone buzzed with Karla’s reply: Don’t overdo it. Be careful Mum.

She turned it off to save the battery.

Nowhere near eleven. Back in her room, she crawled under the mauve mosquito net with the inflight magazine, a pencil case of bits and pieces and a new notebook. Sitting cross-legged she glued in a map and, starting from Brisbane, drew arrows across the brown empty space of Australia to Bangkok; Bangkok to Kolkata. Underneath Kolkata she printed the more familiar but now outdated CALCUTTA. To christen her first travel diary since 1977 she wrote: There are some things you must do alone and only you know what they are. Trevor Nelson.

On the following day, Maryanne dressed in a white top and long white pants and nibbled on a bit of toast and marmalade. She wanted to leave early before any guest could engage her in conversation.

‘Marina Beach,’ Maryanne told the rickshaw rider. Pointed down Chakra Tirtha Road like an old hand. As he jolted over potholes and dodged wandering cows and competing traffic, Maryanne rummaged in her daypack for her sunglasses. She slipped them on; they’d prevent locals making eye contact with her yet would allow her freedom of vision. A favourite traveller’s trick. Funny what I remember.

At the Marina Beach esplanade, she handed the rickshaw rider the twenty rupee fare and The Ten-Rupee Tip. He brought his hand up to his heart in gratitude. Maa, he called her. The beach was teeming with Indian holiday-makers. Some waded tentatively into the small waves of the Bay of Bengal; most sat eating snacks bought from hot food vendors whose small coloured carts plied the sand. A group of Hare Krishna supporters brushed past her, their chests and shoulders bare, their dhotis incense-scented. European men speaking Russian.

She turned and crossed to the less crowded footpath opposite. There – the acre of bare dirt that she’d spotted yesterday with Jackie. Actually, Jackie had pointed it out: the Burning Ghats.

Back in the day, as the kids say, I wouldn’t look.

‘I’ll be on the beach, Trev,’ she heard her young self call; saw young Maryanne stride off with a flick of her long hair. Headstrong, somewhat rude. Ignoring the swami’s advice to speak kindly. When Trevor eventually joined her there, she’d blocked her ears like a rebellious schoolgirl. ‘I don’t want to know what a burning corpse looks like.’ Now she whispered, ‘Trev, you were always wiser than I was.’

On reaching the entrance, she pressed her small frame – in respectful white – up
against a wall, as unobtrusive as a Westerner can be at such a place. When she was ready, she gazed at the Ghats. The low-caste men who burned the corpses were already at work on the hillside.

Behind her, an ambulance pulled in. A couple of men, probably family, opened the ambulance doors and slid out a bamboo litter on which lay a corpse covered by a white cloth. They carried it past her and placed it next to the first woodpile they came to, about fifty metres in, and removed the shroud. An elderly male in a loin cloth lay on the litter. They folded the cloth and took it with them, leaving the carcass, as stiff as a stick, behind. No ceremony or emotion. The grieving stage must be done with – now it’s simply a matter of disposing of the material that has housed the soul in life. One old brown wrist wore a hospital name tag bracelet; the other thin wrist sported a plastic tube dug into a vein. An attendant arrived and lifted the bamboo litter matter-of-factly onto the pyre and lit the wood.

No-one paid her any attention. At length, Maryanne took a cotton handkerchief from her daypack and covered her mouth and nose with it. The smell of the burning wasn’t offensive but it was sharp and smoky. She gasped at one point when the old man’s blacked bones jerked upright in its orange flame. Just as suddenly, the torso bones fell. There were two attendants, each with several burning bundles to mind. When one returned to check on progress, he poked anything protruding back into the blaze. The limbs took the longest to burn.

When the fire burnt down to ash, Maryanne started to cry into her handkerchief as secretly as she could. She was remembering the coffin hewn by Trevor’s only brother from planks of wood from the tree that killed him. This is exactly what happened to you Trev, except all we saw was blue velvet crematorium curtains.

In the middle of this rush of intense emotion, a cow walked in from the street and past her. Puri had many holy cows and also many stray dogs and they roamed where they wanted. But here? It introduced a sense of the ridiculous. All over the Ghats, she saw, cattle and dogs were wandering about or dozing here and there in warm hollows. No-one found the presence of the animals perturbing. Trev would love it.

Another ambulance pulled up with its cargo. Another old man, even more emaciated than the first. He was carried down to the burning grounds. A bony Brahmin cow swayed over and snatched up its garland of marigolds.

Enough.

Maryanne returned to the esplanade.

Camel rides were in full swing across the sandy expanse. A few young women swam in saris, not swimsuits. A new wave of grief caught her in its knuckles: couples everywhere. She hailed a rickshaw by holding up a twenty-rupee note. Made it clear she wouldn’t negotiate further.

Back at the Zed, she saw Jackie on the veranda displaying party dresses that she’d bought for her grandchildren. Instead of joining them all, she caught the manager’s eye. ‘Can you send dhal and rice to my room? And tea in the morning at seven? I’ll go to Konarak tomorrow,’ she advised. Declined his offer to book her a taxi.

Maryanne tipped ‘the boy’ when he came. He too called her Maa. She missed her pet name, M.A. which people in Peachester used. Em-Ay. She picked at the food although it was tasty and placed the tray outside the door. Crawled under the mauve net and into the sheets.

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There was one consolation – she missed repeating this observation to all and sundry – she’d told Trevor she loved him the night before he died. They didn’t declare their love so often anymore – it was, after nearly forty years together, something both took for granted – but on what had proved to be their last night, she had. They were talking over their days – hers at the prison for men and his at the hospital. She lolléd in the bathtub and he sat on the toilet seat, cross-legged because, with all the meditation he did, he found that position comfortable. She pushed up against the back of the tub and said, ‘I love you.’ A film of bathwater shone on her small breasts. Her toenails were happy dots of cherry red against the porcelain. His weathered face was serene as he shrugged philosophically. ‘Without the swami, we wouldn’t have this.’ His last words because, by the time she’d joined him in bed, he happened to be asleep and in the morning he left early (as usual) because he had further to drive, his love-you and have-a-good-day pot of tea on the bedside table. And when she came home at dusk, it was his silence that sent her running down the paddock. Saw the chainsaw first. It had cut itself a crazy path through the kikuyu, gouging at the loam in somersaults until it had run out of fuel. The evening: cool, and so quiet. Fresh dark leaves of the avocado tree at her feet. Knowing then. Turning. Feeling her arms and her voice rising up before her eyes found him. Under a heavy skirt of dense green leaves. Pinned. Crushed by the old avocado tree limb that he’d climbed to trim. One consolation.

A party of them were about to troupe down to the bus station, all heading to the Sun Temple at Konarak, when Trevor decided to nip down to the poste restante first. She was still at the Rajah’s Table, flirting mildly with the Brits, when Trevor passed her a blue airmail envelope from home. Stop sabotaging career prospects, show some consideration; come home. Qantas ticket from Calcutta to Brisbane enclosed.

They ran up to the Zed roof. Held hands under the glary morning sun and blinked at the east. We have lost track of time, they realised. We are pretty much out of money. The year we planned is up. But two days to make it to Calcutta, almost Mission Impossible.

‘I’ll fly back with you, Maryanne,’ Trevor decided.
‘You don’t have to.’
‘But we’ve met the swami now.’ And he braided his suntanned arms yogi-style and made them sway like a fakir’s cobra. ‘In it together. We’ll come back, Little Sad Face.’

‘Let’s go then!’ she screamed with sudden joy and ran across the scorching concrete. Threw her body onto the bannisters and slid down. When they announced their decision to the Rajah’s Table the other backpackers exclaimed, ‘But you’ll miss Konarak!’

That’s how Konarak became the joke between them, year after year, after the deliciousness of sex when Maryanne – it was always Maryanne – said, ‘What if we’d gone to Konarak?’ Meaning: how could we want for more? Because the Sun Temple wasn’t only amazing for its religious significance but for its sculptured reliefs of lovemaking on each of its four massive sides. The kama sutra in stone. Architectural erotica. On the occasions she said was she too tired for sex, Trevor pretended to spank her and mock-ordered, ‘Off to Konarak with you and don’t come back until you’ve perfected Position Number 42.’ They had no idea what Position 42 was, it was just a number to play with, to laugh about. And Konarak was their symbol of other things.

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too, like the different lives they might have lived had they’d not returned to Australia at that point in their lives and ‘settled down’ on a corner of Trevor’s parents’ dairy farm at Peachester, built a house of their own and raised three children.

She passed the train station as she walked to the bus station. Queued up and booked a second class seat north to Gaya, only 700 rupees; she knew she could take a taxi from Gaya to Bodhgaya. As for getting to Varanasi – she’d figure that out when the time came.

Today’s bus to Konarak cost only twenty rupees for the forty kay trip, less than a dollar return. The ease to which she returned to ‘roughing it’, as they had when travelling around India after finishing their uni degrees, made her pleased. Still got it, Baby.

In the crowded bus, she said excuse me to the two schoolgirls next to her, hugged her daypack to her lap, and closed her eyes. Blocked the visuals to the melting pot of noise: the horn blasting; the conductor’s shouts of Konarak-Konarak-Konarak to prospective customers on the road; the passengers gossiping; mobile phones tinny with Bollywood. Mother India. I feel safe here.

They are down south in Tamil Nadu, ten months into the trip they’d started in Delhi. They’d meandered up to Srinagar, down to Rajasthan, south to Goa … further south to Kerala. They’re making their way north now. Gradually. Heading to Bodhgaya, the place where the Buddha became enlightened. Varanasi is next. They’re in the holy temple city of Tiruvannamalai, staying in an ashram – he’s in the men’s dorm, she’s in the women’s – and they’re breaking up. Trevor’s meditating for hours every day and Maryanne feels locked out. ‘We’re supposed to be travelling,’ she protests. But Trevor – he’s calling himself Krishna now on the advice of a Brahmin priest – responds with, ‘There’s only one journey. To know: who am I? who is thinking?’

They’re climbing the mountain behind the Sri Ramana Ashram to say goodbye at the summit. Her idea. She’s carrying her heavy canvas backpack, ready to check into a hotel that she’ll reach via another path. An unnecessary martyrdom. Trevor will return to the ashram. She imagines she’ll never see him again; that’s what she wants. Tomorrow from the hotel she’ll catch a bus northeast.

Halfway up, after passing the cave where Sri Ramana meditated for nine years, they stop to talk to a swami who’s sitting on a boulder on the side of the path. As pilgrims pass him, he sweetly offers them cards printed with Sri Ramana sayings. They introduce themselves as Maryanne and Trevor from Australia. ‘Dear young people,’ he invites and gestures to boulders opposite.

He tells them he’s a man of fifty, a prosperous accountant who is leaving family life behind ‘to live the holy life’ for a few years. He says happily, ‘I dwell here every day.’ They reveal that, although they’ve been together since first year Social Work, within the hour they’ll separate, never to see the other again.

The swami sinks into silence. It lasts and lasts.

‘You cannot take a virgin,’ he says to Trevor gently, ‘and give her love then abandon her. There is the right time for the holy life and the wrong time.’

‘And you, Miss,’ he says to Maryanne, ‘How can you think of abandoning this love of yours when he needs you the most? You must speak to him kindly – not harshly as you do – and give him support in his journey. It is not easy to understand

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the non-material world. Encourage him, with your every breath. The time will come for you to take up the holy life. Then you will know what he knows now.’

Maryanne shrugs off her backpack and begins to cry.

‘Dear young people,’ he instructs them, ‘live like ordinary human beings, even though you know you are not ordinary. Make every day a holy day. Be happy with your lives.’

‘Baba,’ asks Krishna-Trevor, ‘don’t you believe I am ready to stay here?’

‘I do not believe, my boy. Babu, you have been smoking too much charis and your life is in danger. Be careful or, like a stone tumbling down this mountain, you will tumble down too.’

The two schoolgirls moved past her and conductor called, ‘Konarak Maa!’

‘I’m here.

There was no particular reason to choose Mister Vikku over any of the other Indian government guides who rushed her. But he stuck like glue and, when she introduced herself as a widow on a holiday, he sent her such a gaze of empathy, she agreed to an hour of commentary about the famous thirteenth century construction that UNESCO awarded a World Heritage listing.

‘Where from?’ he asked.

‘Australia,’ she replied.


She smiled patiently.

‘And your good name?’

‘Maryanne.’

‘Follow me Madam Maryanne.’


After lawn and rose gardens they arrived at the southern side of the immense structure in the form of a chariot. Mister Vikku started his spiel here: praise for the precision of a sun dial which doubled as a chariot wheel.

‘Let’s keep moving,’ she suggested.

‘Ah, Madam is interested in the sculptures.’

‘Yes,’ she said, bluffing an assertiveness she did not actually feel. ‘I’ve read about the history here,’ and she held up her phone. ‘I want to see as many of the sixty positions as possible.’ I think, Mister Vikku, I’ve earned my right to celebrate the eroticism of the body. I want, for the hell of it, to find Position 42.

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‘First one,’ Mister Vikku pointed. ‘She is putting hands together to invite: come here. Next one, looking in a mirror, checking, “Am I beautiful?” ’

The shapely court girl had perfect round breasts and a tiny waist.

‘Next one, she is touching one breast and telling, “With all my beauty I will dance for the king. Please the king and the gods.” Above her, musicians, see Madam Maryanne?’

‘Hmmn.’

‘Drum. Flute. All playing. And the beautiful court lady lifts up her arms and places her leg in front, and she is dancing.’

_How did the sculptors do it? Make the stone alive?_

‘From here, so much sex. The king is telling the people: make the children. So many wars happening. Killings. And the Buddhist monks of these days, they are telling the people, _don’t_ marry, _don’t_ enjoy. But the king _wants_ the people to make the kingdom great. Enjoy! Make the children!’

‘So the sculptures were the king’s idea?’

‘Verry much so. Verry much so. Madam is a married lady so I am not telling Madam anything. You see, so many tourist here. India, America, German, oh yes, everywhere coming.’

There were thousands of people at the complex. Her fellow-tourists included scholarly types she imagined to be academics; gay couples; intense men with cameras and long photo lenses. A global babel encouraged by Indian government guides showing off specific sculptures on the massive sides of the towering chariot. Why feel self-conscious? Even groups of uniformed schoolchildren were walking around, admittedly without really looking.

‘Look Madam – two men, one woman. There: two women, one man.’
She clicked with her phone.


As they reached what Mister Vikku called ‘The Backside’ of the huge temple complex, he leaned closer and said, ‘Some American women are telling me – black men are verry popular. Black men have, ah, equipment. Very long, very strong equipment. They are telling me, Mister Vikku, big is best. So look, Madam, over there – very big, isn’t it? Verry big.’

‘Just _point_ to the different sculptures, the different positions, if you don’t mind.’
‘Yes Madam.’ Mister Vikku retreated from his exuberance. ‘There. There.’

‘I see.’

‘So much dancing, so much music. So much every which-way.’

They stood now at the shady western end of the complex. ‘Are there always so many people?’ Maryanne asked.

Mister Vikku shook his head sideways. ‘This is _noth_-ing. Everyone in India is coming here: villagers, schoolchildren, everyone! Today is _noth_-ing.’

‘And the top part is in ruins?’

_Thirteenth_ century Madam,’ he chastised. ‘We must expect. That was the most holy holy place. Only the priests who worshipped the Sun God allowed there. You know The Frontside, where I met you. Bus side? Once it faced the sea. Very very close in those days, not far away like now. Verry beautiful setting. And the

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‘Vasco da Gama? From Portugal? He never made it this far east. To Kerala, yes …’

‘Oh he came. Would Madam care for another hour? There are many interesting things to tell. I am highly trained Indian government guide. Forty years I am coming here.’

‘Thank you but I must have time alone,’ Maryanne declined.

Mister Vikku persisted. ‘Vasco da Gama removed the magnet and the Sun Temple collapsed. Very interesting story.’

‘I am thinking of my husband,’ she said quietly.

Mister Vikku hushed. ‘Very good, Maa. Then I say, may the gods keep you well.’

‘Thank you.’

Under a bottle tree, its base painted in broad red and white stripes, she paused to eat an orange. Peered at the inner sanctum above, now bricked up to keep the structure intact. Here I am at The Backside, Trev. God knows where Position Number 42 is.


She dabbed underneath her sunglasses with her handkerchief.

When ready, she climbed up a set of stairs. Scaffolding everywhere. Orange safety tape barriers. On every corner were signs: BEWARE OTHERWISE YOU MAY FALL DOWN.

Don’t worry Trevor, wherever you are.
Journey on. I am not falling down.
I am not.
Cigarette
Rob Walker.

Watanabe stares at his fingers curled round the steering wheel. Other teachers see him in the car park as they arrive. Perhaps he’s planning the day’s lessons or waiting for the end of the news. But when he isn’t in the staff room 30 minutes later they go back and there he is, staring through the windscreen. Seeing nothing. When they knock on his window he says he’s fine, grabs his collapsed briefcase and heads for the office.

Perhaps the hacking cough will be eased by a cigarette. Morning Staff Meeting has finished early. He can get down to the ground floor, slip on his Outside Shoes and hide behind the gate pillar for a quick draw – maybe three quarters of a Hope – and back to Lesson 1 in four minutes. He’s done it before. He gives a nod or a ‘-masu’.

There’s a small knot of them there. All middle-aged men with grey hair and skin to match. The students are safely locked in. Only late-arrivals will see their teachers drinking in the furtive smoke. Nomimasu. Drinking. The chrome gate is a massive structure on track and wheels. It could keep out a tank.

All the men dye their hair. Some try to take off twenty years and go for black, but most go for a shade somewhere between. Like that gaijin book, he thinks grimly, fifty shades of grey. At least he doesn’t have one of those cheap jobs with their tinge of purple or blue…

The public address plays the Chimes of Dunkirk and they draw in deep, final inhalations and the glowing orange tips race towards their lips. They squint from smoke and concentration or pleasure and stamp out unfinished butts and the nicotine is already in the bloodstream for the three hour haul until lunchtime.

Watanabe’s hands shake. He was called out by the police this morning at 2 am. Some kids in his class were causing trouble at the 24 hour McDonalds. The police always call the sensei first. There were no charges pressed. A brow-beating for the boys from him, gomenasais all round to Manager and Police, then drive the boys home to their parents. All this in less than two hours, but at home he couldn’t get back to sleep. If his wife were still there he could talk to her. Perhaps she would massage his shoulders. She’d been good at that. Now she was back with her parents. The chances of reconciliation were about as likely as snow in July and neither wanted the shame of divorce.

At four he takes the last temazepam he begged from the doctor. It doesn’t work, his mind a roulette wheel. The little silver ball of thoughts spins against the wheel, rolls down into a groove and whips into a circle. Then it jumps out Pachinko! Bounces off the rim like a pinball and flies off at a new tangent.

Will she ever come back? I must submit my schedule tomorrow morning… I forget return-gift for Sakata-sensei… three more math tests to correct before Thursday… should I get my hair cut before parent interviews?

He turns the light back on. Perhaps one more cigarette.

‘Cigarette.’ Rob Walker.
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And so it goes, one thought bouncing off another like a *pachinko* ball, each tangent a catalyst for a new chain reaction. Yes. He is the *pachinko* ball. Contained. Out of control. Contained. Out of control.'