Stepping in the River

Julie Kearney

Just as Frank promised, Vittala Temple turns out to be everything Lil has ever dreamed of. When it comes time to leave, the others have to drag her away from the honey-coloured columns to get in an auto-rickshaw with Prue. ‘See you at the Mango Tree,’ Richard calls, as he and Frank wave them off. The men have decided to walk back to Hampi and take a look at Lotus Mahal on the way.

On orange plastic seats under the striped awning of their chosen vehicle, the two women rattle along at a pace, up hills, down hills, past crumbling fortresses, past a giant statue of Hanuman the Monkey God and other remnants of the Vijayanagar empire. Dust billows behind the rickshaw, enveloping slender women bearing pots on their heads, lungi-clad men herding goats, children bowling bicycle wheel hoops, chai sellers and the odd buffalo or two.

‘We could be in a scene from A Passage to India,’ Prue says, grinning at Lil and clutching the driver’s seat to stop herself sliding about. She’s laughing, and Lil is laughing because she has to agree. After all, here they are – two middle-aged women in sun hats and lace-up shoes, being conveyed like memsahibs past quote unquote picturesque natives they know nothing about.

‘Adela and Mrs Moore without the corsets,’ Lil says, and they laugh again, hanging onto whatever will stop them from falling onto the road or each other. For some reason they are both extraordinarily happy, which just possibly is because – in a way that can never be satisfactorily explained since it concerns the spirit rather than the flesh – Sharma, or someone, or something, India perhaps, is with them.

Can this really be so?

Twenty-four hours earlier.

When the boulders appear on the horizon, glowing pinkly above a fringe of coconut trees, Lil sees they’re the same as ever, still heaped into fantastic mountains as if thrown down to earth by some playful giant. She can’t take her eyes off them. Somewhere on the other side of those improbable stones is Hampi and with any luck, Sharma. The boulders shimmer like a mirage and like a mirage they get no closer, because Thiru, their driver, is lost.

The boulders are drifting sideways now. This is too much! Wedged in the back seat between Frank and Prue, Lil tries to catch Thiru’s eye in the rear-vision mirror. ‘Thiru! Hampi’s back there, I know it is.’ Her peremptory words hang in the air-conditioned air of the Toyota.

No one says anything, not even Richard in the front seat whose mediating skills have been needed once or twice on this trip. Thiru ignores Lil, but a few kilometres on he pulls over to talk to a man herding goats. They listen to the rapid-fire exchange, Thiru’s in Tamil, the goat-herder’s in some rural Kannada dialect, supplemented by gestures and one word which is repeated: Hampi. As with previous exchanges they’ve witnessed this one is successful, and an hour later the car is crunching up a boulder-lined driveway towards their hotel. The manager comes out all smiles to greet them. He is film-star handsome and says his name is Narasinga.

‘What does Narasinga mean?’ Prue asks and he tells her Lord of Lions.

He leads them to a pavilion for drinks on the house, and they’re so glad to be out of the car and so charmed by Narasinga’s smiles that no-one remembers to thank Thiru. He’s probably being fed in the kitchen, Lil thinks later, as they sip mango and lime juice under a slowly-

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revolving fan. But it’s only a passing thought because she’s just registered a sound she hasn’t heard in a long time – twenty-five years in fact – and it’s coming from behind the palm trees on the far side of the pavilion. A gurgling, roaring noise that can only be made by quantities of fast-moving water.

The Tungabhadra. The holy river.

‘Thank God we’re here,’ Prue says, putting down her glass. ‘I couldn’t take any more of those potholes.’

‘How’s your back?’ Richard asks, without his usual show of solicitude. It’s been a long morning and he seems more interested in the waiters padding about, setting out dish after fragrant dish on a circular buffet table.

‘I’ll feel better if I can get a massage,’ Prue says, yawning. ‘Excuse me, Narasinga, but what’s this?’

Narasinga has just placed four small bowls on their table. He waggles his head in a minuscule figure of eight. ‘Ma’am, we are giving you refreshment before lunch. Wild honey from forest, gathered only at new moon.’

‘Is that right?’ Frank asks. ‘That’s the best time is it?’

‘Yes sir, very good honey. You will like.’

And they do like. Never before have they tasted such delicious honey and Richard asks Narasinga if guests are allowed to join the honey-hunts. Lord of Lions laughs handsomely, not bothering or unable to hide his amusement. ‘Full moon is tomorrow so not possible,’ he says. ‘But we are giving our guests moonrise-viewing party instead.’

The Australians beam at him. ‘Sounds great,’ Richard says. ‘Better than hunting for honey in a dark forest, eh?’

‘Don’t be silly,’ Prue tells him. ‘They wouldn’t collect it at night.’

Frank and Lil nod wisely because Prue is always right when it comes to practical matters.

‘We had some honey in Toulouse that was very good,’ Prue says. ‘Remember, Richard? How nice it was.’

This is the only downside to travelling with friends. You have to listen to them talk about other countries at the drop of a hat, and Lil doesn’t like it. She believes it dilutes their experience of India. She hasn’t been to the countries Prue talks about because she prefers India. This is her sixth trip to the sub-continent and Prue’s first, and she wants her friend to find it as wonderful as she does. Hampi particularly, because Hampi is special. Though they aren’t actually there yet. The hotel they’ve chosen (high end, of course, because Richard and Prue don’t fancy staying in dives and nor, for that matter, do Frank and Lil anymore) is several miles from Hampi, tucked away among elephantine boulders on the banks of the Tungabhadra. A far cry from the fleapit she and Frank stayed in when they met Sharma.

Dear Sharma, she thinks, hoping he’s still alive, which possibly he isn’t given that terrible cough he had. On the other hand he was fit enough to lead her and Frank a merry dance on his ‘little nature walk’. They walked all day and half the night and nearly got drowned in the Tungabhadra and it was so dark, not full moon like now . . .

‘Aren’t you eating?’ Frank says, and she sees he is standing up and the others are over at the buffet table. She gets up stiffly, hearing her joints creak.

Next morning, after breakfast, the couples sit out on the veranda of their secluded bungalow to enjoy the view of the Tungabhadra. It flows below the stone balustrade, coiling into the distance through a surreal landscape of boulders which change colour as they watch. Slatey blues become ethereal mauves and eventually glowing pinks. Everyone exclaims about the eerie but wholly calm light that morphs the boulders into a bestiary of hybrid animals. At dawn they
were suffused in hallucinatory bluish light; now monkeys with dignified black faces scamper across their flanks and fishermen in reed-woven coracles glide past on silken, pastel-coloured water.

‘Better get on to Thiru,’ Richard says, pulling out his mobile and keying it. ‘Oh? Did he? Uh-huh ... see you later.’ He raises his eyebrows at the others and clicks off the phone. ‘Narasinga’s sent Thiru across the river to stay in Hampi, and he’s not happy. Says he’s staying in a car-park full of badmash men.’

The others look at one another. They know Thiru sleeps in the car; they’ve got used to this disquieting fact, but so far he’s been allowed to park it in the compound of whatever hotel they happen to be staying at. Lil suspects that to their super-conservative driver badmash means anyone different from himself. But she can’t be sure and he will be there three days.

‘Good, I could do with a break from him,’ she says and catches a quick exchange between Prue and Richard. She knows they disapprove of her inability to get on with Thiru but she can’t help it. Everything he does seems to rub her the wrong way.

‘If Thiru’s on the other side of the river, how do we get to Hampi?’ Prue asks, practical as ever.

‘The hotel people will drive us to the ferry apparently. I’ll ring them now.’

An hour later they’re sitting crammed between back-packers in a tiny boat, put-putting across the eddying channels of the Tungabhadra. The river swells out at this point and becomes almost a harbour – an impressive, even magnificent sight, but it doesn’t stop Lil feeling confused. Nothing is as she remembers. Last time she and Frank were here they crossed the river from Hampi, now they’re heading towards it. Last time they were in a coracle with Sharma, now they’re in a motorised dinghy whose carefree young passengers are the age she was then. She doesn’t recognise the approaching steps at all. Sharma brought them back to Hampi on foot, wading in the dark through flooding waters, and if the ghat was there she certainly didn’t see it. Listening to the happy chatter around her she’s keyed up, half-expecting, half-hoping Sharma will magically materialise when they reach the other side.

Plenty of people come up to them after they climb the stone steps but none is Sharma. They escape the clutches of the postcard and ganja sellers, then fall prey to the hypnotic eyes of three magnificently-robed magicians who treat them, and a small crowd of amused locals, to a not very convincing display of stone-swallowing, followed by a more convincing attempt to relieve Frank and Richard of the contents of their wallets. After that they’re left alone by the laid-back locals, free to wander as they please. Prue and Lil enjoy an hour of pleasurable plunder in the bazaar, and when they’re laden with minuscule soapstone elephants and sandalwood fans they go in search of the men.

There they are, waiting outside Virupaksha Temple. How drab they look among the women in their brilliant saris.

There’s plenty to see and do once they step through the gateway into the temple compound. Prue and Lil get blessed by Laxmi, the temple elephant – a curiously uplifting experience – then drift off separately to explore. Lil bends her head to enter a small dark room set like a cave in the outer wall of the complex. Darkly ancient, its walls encrusted in centuries of incense and candle smoke and what look like gobs of blackened wax, the room is dedicated to Pamppa, the lake goddess, and has a resident priest who puts out his hand for Lil’s coin and decorates her forehead in workmanlike fashion with a dab of tikka paste.

She wanders outside and is immediately drawn to the ancient columns of a pavilion. What is it about these worn old pillars of India? They always tug at her heart as if they’re friends she has

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somehow forgotten. She’d like to throw her arms around them and hug them, but doesn’t of course. Passers-by might think it a bit odd.

Her feet are starting to hurt so she sits on the pavilion steps to enjoy the passing scene. A beggar approaches, moving slowly on all fours across the hot flagstones. He’s horribly deformed, his head nearly touching the ground as he drags himself toward her on stick-like limbs. He reaches the step where she sits and raises his head. The face of a beautiful young man regards her with sombre, knowing eyes. Lil is too startled to speak and he doesn’t choose to. He has no words to spare, it seems, either to trade on her pity or rail against his fate. His dark eyes hold memories she can’t and doesn’t want to imagine. They bore into hers, reading her. Reading her puny soul it feels like. What do I know? she thinks, jittery and confused, and gives him more rupees than she’d intended. What does she know about anything in this country?

When he moves off, reduced once more to a faceless collection of misshapen limbs, she watches the monkeys forage among the banana-skins at the base of a shrine and manages to forget the trapped young man.

‘Ah, there you are,’ Richard says, appearing with the others from behind a pillar as if he’s a character in a play. ‘We’re off to find Thiru.’

_Do we have to?_ thinks Lil.

Richard grins. ‘He’ll be waiting to see if we need him today.’

They leave Virupaksha and walk through the bazaar to the car-park cum bus-station, where they immediately spot Thiru among the throng of people, cars, cows and food-stalls. Immaculately dressed as always, he is standing beside their hire car, looking sulky and displeased. But he brightens up when they arrive and starts pointing at Lil’s face and giggling.

‘Ma’am, so funny. Tikka is running down your nose.’

She’s annoyed by this remark but tries not to let Thiru see it. He knows though, she can tell. She peels in the Toyota’s side-mirror and discovers he wasn’t joking. Red dye trickles down her nose from what looks like a wound in her forehead, and for a split second, against all reason, she believes she’s been stabbed. _Why can’t I take to Thiru?_ she worries, searching in her pocket for a tissue while he talks with the others. He’s a small, self-contained man with a ready laugh – usually at other people’s expense – but that’s not what irritates her. It hasn’t helped that she’s been reading _The White Tiger_ in the car, and noticing certain similarities between its murderous protagonist and Thiru. Both are hire-car drivers, for instance. Both are Tamil, and both, as Lil knows from comments Thiru has made, envy their rich passengers. Each day as she reads, further new disclosures in the plot remind her of details confided by Thiru about his family, his ambitions and his opinions of the Indian economy. But as she peels in the side-mirror and scrubs at the stubborn _tikka_, she knows it’s not this. The comparison with Adiga’s sinister anti-hero is gratuitous, absurd. It’s because Thiru is so materialistic, the exact opposite of Sharma.

They say goodbye to Thiru and wander off to enjoy themselves. Lil can’t help glancing back. Their driver stands out, the only clean-shaven man in trousers among the moustachioed locals in their colourful _lungis_; a lonely man condemned to spend his day guarding their hire car, which also contains his possessions – the toiletry bag and change of clothes he resuscitates daily from where they lie squashed under the back seat. It’s a sight to induce guilt and it does.

But not for long, because Frank has the good idea of enquiring about Sharma in the bazaar bookshop. Prue and Richard disappear to do more shopping while Frank and Lil mount a stoop and enter the cooler air of an ancient stone-vaulted shop. The owner, Mr Angudi, when fetched by his wife from the bazaar where he is chatting with friends, turns out to be a middle-aged man with the same scholarly sort of face you see in photos of R.K. Narayan on the covers of his books. Given that Narayan’s novel, _The Guide_, was Sharma’s great inspiration in life, this seems
to Lil a very good omen. And so it proves. Mr Angudi says he knows Sharma and knows where
he is.

‘Oh Frank, he’s still alive!’

But Lil and Frank are disappointed by the next news, because Mr Angudi says Sharma has
moved to Bangalore. A quick calculation of the hours involved in a return trip to Bangalore
reveals what they fear: it’s too big a change in their itinerary to ask Prue and Richard to make.

‘And you say he was your friend?’ Mr Angudi says.

‘Yes, a special friend,’ Lil tells him.

‘A strange man, Mr Sharma. Did you know him well?’

‘Only two days,’ says Frank.

‘He was, I mean he is, an unorthodox Brahmin,’ adds Lil. ‘Is that what you mean?’

‘No, no. Nothing at all. His wife, of course, has left him.’

They nod. They know all about that business. She ran off with an Irishman.

‘But his son is still here. If you come back later I will have his telephone number for you.’

There doesn’t seem much point trying to track down Sharma’s son, given the vagaries of
India’s telephone system, but they thank Mr Angudi anyway, and notice Richard and Prue
waiting outside.

‘Namaste,’ they murmur, nodding respectfully over prayerful hands.

Now that Thiru’s services have been dispensed with for the day, the plan is to see Vittala
Temple and then have lunch at the Mango Tree, a café recommended by a friend of Prue’s. They
stroll out of the bazaar and continue up the broad walkway that was once the thoroughfare of the
Vijayanagar kings. Their ruined emporia still line its sides, but are squatter homes now, patched
with old bricks and red cloth. At the end of these recycled buildings, on the edge of a lunar
landscape, the four discover a pitilessly high phalanx of steps chiselled out of equally pitiless
granite. Away at the top of these stairs tiny stick figures of backpackers and would-be guides
lounge against pillars or move about as if on a stage.

‘Good heavens,’ Prue says. ‘We’re not going up there are we?’

Neither Frank nor Lil can remember these formidable steps and no-one wants to climb them
so they follow a path leading down to the river. But this proves hard going as well because it’s
made out of tilting slabs of the same granite interspersed with house-high boulders. They have
reached a place that is empty of people – nothing but looming hot boulders with occasional
glimpses of river – and Lil’s feet are giving her serious trouble. Richard and Prue have gone on
ahead, owing to her slowness.

‘I’ll sit here,’ she says, collapsing under the first available tree. ‘I can’t go any further. Sorry, love.’ With difficulty she holds back tears. First Sharma being in Bangalore and now this.

‘Drink some water,’ Frank says. ‘You look like a beetroot.’

‘Oh Frank, to think this is the same walk we went on with Sharma. And only just begun. Oh God, if only Thiru was here he could drive me back.’

The irony of this wish doesn’t escape her – she is nothing but a rich tourist who bitches about
her underpaid driver. Remembering that it’s the travel company that underpays him in no way
lessens her guilt.

‘Thiru wouldn’t be able to get the car down here,’ Frank reminds her.

Frank is a master of the obvious. Lil doesn’t reply, lost in a vision of Thiru descending
through the air in a golden chariot, like god Krishna does in Hindu comic-books, to carry her
back to the hotel. She can’t see how else she’ll get there.

‘You’ll be alright, just rest up a while. You don’t mind if I go on, do you?’

She shakes her head.

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‘Are you sure? Okay, I won’t be long. I’ll have a look at Lotus Mahal while I’m at it.’
And he’s gone in a flash, a last wave of the guidebook before he disappears behind an enormous boulder.

It’s nice here under the trees, she realises when Frank has gone. Nice looking down at the river that she hadn’t even noticed was there. She can see the old river pavilion where she and Frank and Sharma once stopped, at the beginning of their long-ago walk. After a time she stands up and finds she can hobble down the embankment.

It’s cool inside the pavilion, and pleasant among the water-lit columns – singing columns Sharma called them, carved in some special way with a special chisel to make musical notes when struck with the palm of a hand. They tried that, of course, but twenty-five years later Lil finds the sound of rushing water is music enough. She props herself against a pillar and dangles her feet in the river. Heaven! No longer does she care about Sharma, or anything else for that matter, just the chill of the clear green water flowing over her swollen feet and the rippling reflections of the river chasing one another across the low stone ceiling. Beautiful Tungabhadra, let her stay here forever, she wants nothing more. And she means it, so much so that when Frank appears among the dappled columns and watery light she’s not at all grateful.

‘What’re you doing here?’ Frank advances between the columns. ‘I came back,’ he announces. ‘When I saw Vittala Temple I knew you’d love it, so I got a rickshaw and came back.’

_Her knight in shining armour._

‘Let’s stay here,’ she says. ‘It’s lovely here. Do you remember this place?’
‘I’m not sure. Maybe.’
‘It was lovely then, too.’
‘Why don’t you come? Vittala’s great, a bit like that Jain temple we saw in Rajasthan, only not white, all honey-coloured.’
She watches the coiling green water spawn silver bubbles from her toes. ‘I don’t think I can,’ she says. ‘Not even with a rickshaw.’
‘Come on. There’s a road from the temple so you can catch another one back to Hampi. Or Thiru can fetch you from there. Anyhow, you have to come. Prue’s starting to agitate about the Mango Tree.’
‘Is she?’ Lil looks away to hide her smile.
‘I don’t know why she wants to eat all the time.’
‘It is lunchtime,’ she reminds him.
‘I can go all day without food.’
Frank is tapping the guidebook against his thigh and she thinks how lucky she is to be travelling with Prue, because this way she gets to have lunch and get blessed by temple elephants and go shopping. That sort of thing never happened before. Frank doesn’t approve of frivolous activities, but with Prue as an ally she can do more of the things she likes.
‘And we haven’t seen Lotus Mahal yet.’ The guidebook taps faster.
She moves her feet in the green torrent and sees they have become two glimmering white fishes trying to swim upstream. ‘I don’t care about seeing it again,’ she says. And she doesn’t. She’s tired of change, tired of finding everything different – everything except this old river pavilion, that is – like a dream changing shape before her eyes.

Up on the bank, under the feathery trees, the waiting driver is enjoying an ice-cream from a Kwality Icecream cart. Nearer, on the same water that surges over Lil’s fish-feet, a coracle goes by, moving fast in the current, carrying a boatman and two backpackers. It’s a vision from another time, a time when she and Frank climbed into a reed-woven bowl and sailed away with a
guide called Sharma, a small man they can’t forget. But in a way he’s still here in the persistence of memory, an after-image in the light that streams off the water and makes the coracle dance.

The coracle bobs weightlessly on the light-struck water, its reclining passengers gesturing and pointing their cameras. The boatman kneels, plying his paddle to avoid the undertow that surges around the boulders.

‘Must be hard for him coming back,’ Frank says.

They watch the coracle until it disappears round a bend, then Frank stretches out a hand and Lil lets him pull her up.

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