

THE LAST LONELY PLANET

Christopher James

There is a moment, in the midst of a long-distance flight, when I feel like I've been buried alive. This allegorical, final act in a Verdi opera, is especially faithful in the cabin's darkness, long after the complimentary pretzels and movies, when cramped and punished bodies have escaped in pressurized sleep. The flight attendants, like zombies, huddle together in the plane's galley... sullen and silent. A baby cries... out of boredom, hunger, or the pain in her ears. A young man and an older woman touch under their blankets. Later the woman cries; later she kisses him; later still, she hits him with her complimentary pillow, but he will not look at her now... not since she cried.

Across the aisle an elderly Hindu man, also on his way to Delhi, sits, inanimate and alone. His wife curls into him... her head on his lap. Throughout the night, he stares ahead, at nothing, stroking her hair softly while she sleeps.

A few rows back two Irish girls quietly sing Christmas carols; one laughs, the other takes staccato breaths to keep emotions at bay. Directly ahead of them, a skinhead in an exit row, a Union Jack tattoo on his neck, who boarded our plane in a wheelchair, has jacked up the volume on his Walkman. His companion, dressed in beach resort attire, having requested a "special meal" of bananas, lip-syncs the words to a private song. We are all bound together at 37,000 feet, minus 87 degrees F., 587 mph, full of our secrets and on our way to India.

"I used to recover so quickly after these flights to Asia," he said.

"You're getting older," she replied.

Delhi, again... after nine years. I had forgotten the invasion of the senses. I remembered the energy of its noise, the sacred cow shit, the colors, indented mattresses in the guest houses, the street side feasts for pennies, the smoke, the smell of incense and biddis, but

I did not remember the feeling of imminent mayhem; the Paleozoic brain itch one senses when the harmony in the maze can not tolerate that one extra rat.

There is so much activity. All of it moving, farting, honking, belching... in a hyper-kinetic performance piece with animal extras. Vendors sell paper painter's masks in the middle of traffic as a placebo remedy to air so thick it can be sliced, wrapped in burlap and twine at the post office, and sent home in the mail. This pink air has a taste, metallic... I can brush it aside with my hands. It fuels the itch of panic like an addiction. If I were to be discovered in a closed garage with air like this, I'd be institutionalized for trying to kill myself. The sun is barely discernible; it looks like a Ridley Scott inspired planet at dawn.

I came back to India to find some balance, to pull away from myself for an unobstructed view. An Englishman I was having a beer with in Jaipur said that traveling, for most he had met, was going from ground to ground; always holding on to the familiar with one hand, and securely being able to look back and see one's home. Traveling in India, on the other hand, was like going from ground to water with your hands tied. In order to experience the truth of the place it was necessary to let go of the ground and lose oneself in the water.

As I bargained for a rickshaw ride to the lodging she and I had booked, this is what I saw. A lost Buddhist monk in the street running his hands over the stubble on his head, contemplating his scalp and predicament... making soft sounds. On the side of the street people are tending fires, cooking, chatting, hustling, laughing, selling, shitting. A leper picks at his sores next to a water buffalo chewing a faded colored square of kite paper. A little further up the road, a corpse, wrapped in white, is tethered to a bicycle. The corpse's family sleeps, scattered in a field, waiting to resume their journey to the cremation grounds. Beyond the corpse, there is a wall of hastily constructed tin, protecting an overloaded Ferris wheel. I stop and take a picture of this scene with my plastic toy Diana camera and am immediately surrounded by children. The equivalent irony of reincarnation is not lost on me. I take another picture, give the kids a smile,

light up a bidhi, and consider the idea that traveling here is like taking a slow tour through an unresolved, and beautiful, corpse.

The road to Agra is littered with sacred cows.

A man and his wife of many years travel upon it to the Taj Mahal; their marriage is not well. In truth, it is beyond fixing. The man wonders; had the union between Arjuman and the Emperor Shah Jahan really been amazing enough to merit this tribute?

The road to Agra is made up of near misses.

Driving there is one near death experience after another. He laughs to himself.

"What's so funny?" she asks.

"I just made a dumb pun," he replied, "how the road to Agra is made up of near Mrs."

"Why do you think that's funny?" she asked.

He recalls the elderly Hindu man stroking his wife's hair and tells her his thoughts; how that act was one of endurance. "Perhaps it is resignation instead," he says.

"Sooner or later, she replies, everyone resigns."

They stay in separate beds in a guest-house in Delhi, and she comes to his in the early hours of the morning and curls into his sleeping. Outside, in the city, the air is yellow and thick. In the morning it is pink again.

She has had a dream and this is it: We go to a restaurant for a pizza. In order to find a seat we must crawl on our hands and knees to an empty table. The ceilings are that low... so low that when you sit you have to bend your head forward as if in pizza prayer.

In the dream she waits, she gets impatient, and claustrophobic, and goes to order at the counter. She crawls to the kitchen, places the order and she waits. Finally, the order is prepared and given to her. She drags the meal back to us, across the floor, beneath the low ceilings, and stops at our table.

The pizza in the dream, she tells me, is lying on the naked belly of a beautiful dark haired woman who just so happens to be encased in the body of a transparent crocodile. It is necessary to slit the crocodile open to expose and eat the pizza. I don't know what this dream means.

"What do you love?" she asks. "Who do you love?"

"It's not as simple as what or whom," he replies.

"Do you think I've been a good wife?" she asks.

He hears his neutral voice reply, "have you had doubts?"

"Not many," she says, "but sometimes I think that you do. It's hard being here with you. You aren't into this adventure like all the other times."

"I've been by your side," he says.

"Barely," she replies. "I think we should just go to Jaipur and then go back to the states."

He notices that she didn't say the word home as something to return to.

She continues to consider his face, his eyes, as she has since the beginning of their conversation, but he just isn't looking back.

We find Rakeesh, a one armed, chain smoking, beetle nut addict, atheist, rickshaw peddler, of Hindu parents, at the Red Fort and hire him to take us to the railroad station. On the way we peddle down an alley dedicated to the sale of matrimonial hardware and supplies.

"I think I don't ever have wife" says Rakeesh. "Too expensive."

"Is it the dowry?" I ask. "Do you have a girl in mind?"

"She is too much money, he says, unless I buy the artificial wedding sari or get big tip."

"What is her name?" I ask.

"No name yet, he replies, just thinking."

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New Delhi Railroad Station: Imagine being inside a gigantic arcade pinball game. Then imagine that one must find the place to purchase a special coupon in order to leave.

Inside the game one will compete with several thousand men trying to do the same thing. The only difference is that they have all done this before; I haven't. Hours later I end up on one level of the arcade game that no one told me about. I sit in musical chairs and live in numbered rows waiting to see if I am in the correct place. At the head of the line, with a handful of filled out forms, I am finally able to ask the question... "But sorry, wrong line, wrong floor, wrong form, wrong station, no problem, start again."

Another day in the corpse.

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Tickets for Jaipur in hand, they walk through the streets of Delhi looking for an Arab restaurant they remember from a decade ago. On the way she pulls him off the street into a cloth shop. She buys tablecloths, pillow-cases, napkins...

"I'll keep these when we split," she says.

He is writing and she reads his writing upside down. "God," she says laughing, "is everything I say going to show up in this story? I've got to find a shop and get a book of faces for my collages. This city is so crazy. Is that my pen?"

He smiles and wonders if this scene is funny.

"My tongue is black," she says.

"Must be the air," he replies.

"I think I need a dot on my forehead."

"Why, he asks, so that you can look like the Indian "wanna-be" in the guest house?"

"Will I really end up looking like her? She doesn't even have a dot."

"Do you want a dot?" he asks.

"Who knows?" she replies.

"Want some chai? Is my tongue still black?" she asks.

It's 4:00 am, the polluted air is freezing and we are riding in a rickshaw on our way to the Pink City Express out of Old Delhi Station. We find the pink train to Jaipur and locate our names, age, and sex, posted on the outside of the car. It was said that the reason for the personal information is to facilitate giving hard data to the local press in case of catastrophe. It's hard to tell the bundles who are sleeping from the bundles that are being shipped; both groups are wrapped and bound identically.

On the dark platform, in a sea of sudden activity, I sip a small flower pot of chai and smoke a bididi. The train is full and the only other, non-Indian, passengers are a group of Australians who are on a pilgrimage. It is not clear if they are seeking to save or be saved. One of them turns to his girl friend and says, "Why do you want to have a dot on your forehead... it looks like a garage door opener."

Later, in the dark, out in the desert, the train pulls to an unexpected stop. A crooked old man boards and orders are placed for chai.

She wakes and says, "Are we being attacked?"

"Indians," he says, and she returns to her sleeping.

Later, after waking to pee, she returns to the seat with a colorful description of straddling a hole in the floor and watching the tracks speed between her thighs while she urinated. "Why are we traveling backwards?" she asks.

He considers the meaning of her question and gets up to walk the length of the train one more time.

When he returns she is reading aloud. Something about going for a walk in the woods surrounded by guys wearing Rambo suits and looking for deer. The character in the Francine Prose story, *Primitive People*, decides to empathize with the deer and return to the city. "I might get killed by a crack-head there, she reads, but at least I won't be tied to the hood of their car afterwards."

Sooner or later, he thinks, we're going to have to discuss where this relationship has gone. The train's progress slows, sun cuts through the cotton air in small increments, children run up, and down, the aisles. A couple (she clearly ill) shivers together next to a window that will not close. There are small conversations going on throughout our car. An Australian woman reads aloud to her friends... a line from a worn copy of Rushdie's, *Midnight's Children*, something like... all that is significant in your life taking place in your absence. This makes sense to him and he goes off for another patrol of the train.

Breakfast is delivered, wrapped in pages from a medical school anatomy textbook. Scrambled eggs with chilies, a wedge of boiled potato perched in ketchup, and two slices of bread with the crusts cut off.

"Very English, don't you think?" he says.

"Well," she says, "do you love me?"

"Listen," he replies, "you're my oldest friend, an amazing person to travel with, and I do care for you."

"But you still don't feel anything," she says. "I'm going to have to do some voodoo on you. Have you tried the ketchup yet?"

He didn't answer and so she went on... "It's funny," she said, "my father was so social, he loved to talk with strangers... I don't"

"I know," he said. "I do."

"I only want to talk with you," she said.

"I know," he replied.

"What do you want to talk about this morning?" she asked. "The detective and the hand cuffed prisoner in the next seat eating garlic and nan, post-modernism, the politics of a Guggenheim rejection, sea life?"

He stares out the window of the moving train at dawn and sees land life in the silhouette shapes of distant trees. "I have seen an ostrich, a bull, a nuclear explosion, a broken heart rendered in two halves, a flying fish," he says.

"If you're not careful," she says, "I'm going to go diving with you."

"Why can't you hear what I'm saying?" he asks.

"This looks more tended out here," she laughed. "The grass is cut."

"It's the desert," he replied.

Jaipur is a maze; painted pink walls within walls. Outside of the walls there is the usual India; a chaotic maelstrom of rickshaws, decorated trucks, bicycles, motorcycles, carts, wagons, beggars, touts and everyday “normals.” The city reminds me a little of Varanasi ten years ago except the streets are wider; more room for more chaos. There is a difference however in the animal life that co-habits the confusion.

There are elephants, peacocks, camels, goats, dogs, pigs, the usual sacred cows and a very large monkey population. The animals are literally everywhere; moving with slow contemplative grace or frenetic speed as they negotiate the obstacles of man and the internal combustion engine. It is a zoo without keepers.

We hiked into the hills surrounding the walled city to an abandoned palace that was populated by thousands of emotionally unstable ring tailed monkeys and an occasional holy man. The religious guys stay here because of a water source from a cliff that no one can figure out. This makes it a mystery, and in the spirit of all organized religions, the unexplained automatically becomes holy.

We ate dinner on the street. Sat down on some plastic chairs next to the traffic and had aloo gobi, sag paneer, biryani and nan. I sipped a glass of chai and then watched as our plates, along with those of other brave diners, were licked clean by cows and rinsed in the street in a bucket of textured green water. It was the first time I had felt immersed since we had arrived.

We walked back through the streets in the dark. Turned left at the cinema that was hosting huge crowds and an erotic film festival, (the male star on the billboard looks a little like me), and immediately, as if we were one half of an irresistible magnet pair, became attached to another twelve year old street girl with a baby in her arms. She would not let go until I gave her rupees. There are no other women in the streets except those few who are attending the erotic film festival. Erotic meaning that somewhere, within the context of the film’s dancing, music and dagger fights, the guy who looks like

me will actually place his lips to the lips a woman who looks like someone I've never seen before.

As they walked into the guest-house, filled with people like themselves, from all parts of the world, he noticed some of them in the small garden, Lonely Planet Guides in hand, having a conversation. A couple from New Zealand smoked some Indian hash and played Monopoly. The thing he enjoyed the most about "third world" travel were these gatherings; they shared a common experience, like being part of a tribe. She did not share his pleasure, in fact disliked the tribe, and so they continued on to their room. "Well," he said as he turned the key, "is that it for the night?"

For her it was, but his question was not a subtle one. She sensed immediately that he was going into passive aggressive mode, a state of behavior he had taken to with enthusiasm as he just didn't have it in him to be physically violent... too intimate. She lay down on her bed, put the pillow over her head and said sarcastically, "I need my space." They exchanged old argument history, and blame, for ten minutes, and he left the room to sit alone on the small terrace in front of the guest-house and write in his journal and listen to the traffic, a determined mosquito, and an angry monkey.

"You change too quickly for me these days," she said when he returned to the room hours later. "One minute we're just like we always were, the next, you are off someplace in your thoughts. I'm not sure what you want anymore."

"Do you want to sit on the terrace with me and listen to the city?" he asked.

"No, my needs aren't the same as yours. I'm content in this room."

"Do you mind if I'm not here with you?" he asked.

"Do as you please." she replied. "Go outside, go be with your new friends, meet someone, go for a walk with them, if you want; I don't care."

"I just want to sit quietly and write," he said.

"Lock the door when you leave," she said. "I can always go through the window if there is a fire."

He noticed that she had earlier pushed the single cots in the room together but left for the terrace without mentioning it.

I had a dream during my first sleep in the city of Jaipur. I was standing in a field on the outskirts of the city at night. There is a woman next to me but I haven't looked at her and so am unaware of her identity. In the field there is another woman. At night, with the glow from her fire, and the headlights of her truck, she is a shadow. She comes to me. "I am dying." she says. "What I have can not be repaired by surgery, healer or miracle. Take my hand... you are the same... I'm sorry."

We walked away from the female stranger I was standing with and entered the gullies and dark side alleys of the city. She held my hand with a gentle grip and every few minutes would whisper the name of a creature in my ear. "Raven, she said, listen closely. Grouse, bear, elephant, dog...they have come to tell you a story."

We stopped at a small hut with a stone brazier before it. "Chai," she said, or would you prefer sea water?"

"No thanks, I replied, just had a cup of new age?"

As we sat in the dirt drinking our chai, she said, "What is happening can not be turned from its destination."

"What will you talk about with someone new?" she asked. "What will you remember with her? Will all of our experiences just get locked away inside of you?"

"I'll make new experiences," he replied.

They sat in red plastic chairs on a congested street, the backs of the chairs up against the crush of people and traffic. It was a small restaurant, he thinks its name is Khundylal, across from the Love Kush Hotel. It is night. In front of them is the outdoor tandoori kitchen, the staff of boys, slamming water glasses upon tables and food onto plates, cooking, in a running theater of service.

The boy who makes the nan and parathas suspends himself over the oven, sunken in stone, wielding two long pieces of metal like chopsticks as he pastes the raw dough to the sides of the tandoori and rescues them as they fall to the coals. He works like a dancer in a sleeveless white undershirt. His bread is magnificent.

There are two others cooking with him. One places the raw ingredients in a wok like pan while the other ladles in the sauces and spices and flips the food in a sliding, rolling series of movements until he glides it onto a plastic plate for the order. There is a chai maker to his left, straining the tea, boiled milk, cardamom and sugar into glasses. Beneath him, in the gutter of the street, a boy washes the glasses in another pot filled with that opaque green water.

She says, "I love the view."

"I'm charmed by the ambiance as well." he says. "I believe this establishment should be awarded a fourth star."

"Why not five?" she inquires.

"The fifth star is only awarded for the scenic views that surround the restaurant," he says. "This fifth star is out of the question as it is essentially impossible to see the view through the traffic."

Behind them are two beggar girls with the requisite babies in their arms. "I believe they are on to our tourist identity," he says as the girl's hands play upon his back like a lover. They leave them behind in a scary dance through the traffic and make their way to the guest-house on the small side street off the main road.

"Well, she says, are you going to say it?"

"Sure, he replies, well, is that it for the night?"

"I'll be in the room," she says.

"I'll be in the garden," he says.

"Goodnight," they say in unison.

He sits in the garden alone, thinking about the snow he's missing on the New England coast when a man settles into the adjacent chair and says, "je suis Francais."

"Je ne parle pas francais," he replies. Seconds later, he looks over at the man and he is sound asleep. Inside the guest house he hears a woman guest shrilly calling.... "Henri... Henri... "

"I think I have a temperature," he said as he climbed into his bed. She greets this announcement with a sigh of exasperation. "Why is it, he asks, when I get run over by a

car, crash the motorcycle, cut up my leg with the chain saw or tell you I'm sick, it's always a big sigh like I'm disturbing your precarious equilibrium?"

"What do you care?" she asks. "We're getting a divorce so it really doesn't matter how I respond."

"Just thought I'd point it out so you were more aware of it next time around," he replied.

"Next time I get the opportunity I'll push you in front of a fucking car." she said. "What happened to all of the cars outside? Why is it so quiet."

"I've wired them all with explosives, he replied, and left notes to that effect on the windows."

"Very thoughtful, she said, you coming to bed now?"

Later in the night he goes on room safari for a cricket that will not shut up. He has a cold, can't breath, needs some rest and the cricket will not stop until it finds a mate. Bad luck to kill a cricket under one's roof so the hunt must be a careful one. In the morning he touches her hair. She mumbles, "Oh, time to worship?"

"I had a dream last night," he says to her over tea the next morning.

"Do you know this is our anniversary?" she said.

"In this dream, he says, I kept walking into a jam packed room that was functioning as a public toilet. The only gender visible is male and all of them are going to great efforts, peeing and shitting wherever you turn. Who are you writing the postcard to?"

"Mum," she replies.

"Anyway, he continues, on two separate occasions I enter this place and it is a large open courtyard lined with holes in the ground."

"You know, she says, for only \$200. you can attend the New Years Gala at the Rambaugh Palace Hotel."

"Too bad, he says, I forgot to pick up my tux at the dry cleaners in Calcutta and simply have nothing to wear. Eggs are such miracles, don't you think?"

"I think I'll always put ginger in my eggs from now on," she says.

"You have blood on your fingers," he says.

"Wounds don't heal here," she responds.

"Is that a forecast?" he asks. She does not reply so he continues.... "So I walk into this courtyard toilet and there you are sitting on, no, not sitting, suspended above, a seat-less toilet in the middle of the courtyard taking a dump. No one pays any attention to you of course and it doesn't seem to matter that... "

"Do you think those two Frenchmen are interesting? she asks. What do you suppose they do?"

"Two lovers from the musical theater between plays," he replies.

"I think they are just friends, she says, like you and me."

"Anyway, he says, it doesn't seem to matter that you are missing the toilet."

"Only in India would you have this dream," she says.

We hired a car and drove to the Amber Fort where the Maharaja of Jaipur would visit to see to the needs of his twelve queens. I am running a fever.

The Fort, inside and out, has the usual cast of characters that gather wherever tourists might appear. It is a relic, as is the custom of collecting twelve queens, and as I sit, nursing myself in the sun, I overhear a guide describing where I am. It seems that in this particular part of the Fort the twelve queens slept in individual chambers on a level below where the Maharaja had his space. There were secret staircases to each of the queen's rooms and the Maharaja would use them discreetly in the night. In this way, he would attend to the chosen queens in secret. This practice avoided jealousy and rancor the following morning and created harmony within the court.

In a restaurant, recommended by Lonely Planet, they had a mediocre meal. "It's nice to be out of the traffic dinner," she said.

His sentiments didn't match her own as he had grown attached to the street restaurants. Besides, he thought, this was too civilized; almost like eating in Cambridge.

"Wouldn't it be strange if we got up after the meal, and when we went outside, we found ourselves in Manhattan?" she asked.

"That would pretty much kill this story." he replied. "It would dishonor the reader's trust in the conflict that both the first and second person characters were evolving through."

"But, she said, there is only one story."

"I am writing this as two stories in one." he said. "Where you and I and the "he and she" couple in the dialogue were on the same path."

"I don't think so," she said. "There is only one story. How will the story end?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," he said. "Perhaps they fly home and take separate cabs from the airport; she to their old home, he to his hotel room."

"That has already been done," she said flatly. "Besides, what were they doing on this trip together if they had already split up?"

"One last adventure for old times sake," he suggested.

"No, she said, she wouldn't have gone."

"Look, he said after they had returned to their room at the guest house, there's a hole in the middle of my sheet."

"It's the wedding sheet," she said.

"I have a fever," he replied.

The road to Pushkar is littered with smoldering dinosaurs. It is a road for the dead... and the soon to be dead. Along the shoulders are the remains of recent accident and carnage, men beating their heads over the loss of friends, family, or beloved trucks... the skeletons of the losers in a continuous game of road chicken.

In our first hour of travel we have had no less than sixteen near death experiences. There is always a truck heading straight at us in a passing attempt, getting back into safety with two or three inches to spare. After a few hours we stop getting excited over such things and begin to believe in karma. This is a truck convoy route through the desert and it has, we later discover, a legend.

Several days after this adventure, we were chatting with an Indian who looked exactly like Little Richard. He told us that the Jaipur to Pushkar trunk road is renowned for the ferocity and frequency of its accidents. It seems that drivers on this road will suddenly be overcome with a vision. This hallucination will totally fill their sight, and according to the survivors of such things, the vision is that of a dead ancestor, friend or animal.

"They always seem to have this vision as they attempt an impossible pass," he said.

In the Indian courts of law, the judges universally accept these visions as a plausible excuse for the accidents and that seems to settle the matter to everyone's satisfaction.

"I'm glad they have nerves of steel," she says calmly as they vie for space with three other vehicles and a water buffalo.

"I don't think it is nerves of steel as much as it is acceptance of karma," he replied. "If you were good in your last life; you live on."

"Did you enjoy Pushkar?" he asked later on their return trip to Jaipur. "Think you might ever live there?"

"Kind of a 60's time warp," she replied. "Like Mexico used to be. I'm not sure I would enjoy living there."

"Where do you think you will live? Somewhere quiet and Christian?"

"I'm not going to let you know where I'm going," she replied. "I like the smell of the incense the driver burns on his dashboard."

"Nice time of day isn't it?" he said, watching the sky go orange.

Tonight, on this desert road from Pushkar to Jaipur, somewhere, perhaps hundreds of miles from where we sit in the traffic, someone had a vision and there was an accident... two or more dinosaurs crashing together. The custom here is to save the bulbs in your headlights and only turn them on after you've swung into the other lane to pass. Invariably, this technique surprises the drivers of the trucks in the passing lane and as the drivers swerved to avoid colliding with a departed ancestor, or favorite goat, there is a collision. On this two-lane road, in the darkness of the desert, six lanes of trucks, buses, and cars are trying to find a way not to be here.

Out of nowhere, the chai vendors show up. Vehicles park at all angles on the road and everyone turns on their tape decks. We have, at this point in the night, a total road-lock between somewhere and Jaipur.

In the funky, Indian made, Ambassador Nova we wiggle our way down a side ditch to a roadside tea stall. Fires are burning and taped Indian music fills the night; not a romantic Ravi Shankar variety but the more locally popular Indian version of Madonna

on helium. The people, men only, mill about in an ever growing crowd, moving quickly, dodging the police who carry brutal canes. Dust and exhaust fumes saturate the air and the ever present "zoo in the wild" wander about, searching the refuse for anything to eat. A black goat stands defeated, pulled into its own rib cage, head down, drooling.

The accident scene is too far from here to estimate how long we will stay in this place. I buy another glass of chai, smoke a bididi, walk out in the sand to see what's happening, and find that the road has disappeared and a small village has taken over the space where it used to be. No one seems particularly upset or surprised. Suddenly, there is a collective madness and we escape the "village" with four other cars and three "Express" buses. In a state of blind faith we head off down a single strip of tar and shale into the darkness of the desert... a caravan to Jaipur, and no one, we will discover later, knows the way.

The tar turns to sand, a camel track, and perhaps an hour into our trek, the soft desert begins to take hostages. There is a small car filled with very large women in saris. Every time their car gets stuck they all unload and stand in a tight circle until the bus passengers, tired of trying to free a bus, take on the lighter task of the woman's Nova. As soon as they are successful, the women all pile back in the bus, race off for a short distance and immediately get stuck again. Then the whole scene is repeated and everyone laughs... karma.

I have noticed that the stars in Orion, and adjacent metaphors, appear to be inverted. The air is also different here and the shadows of the scurrying bus passengers, trying to free their buses from the sand, play across the desert in the headlights of the other imprisoned vehicles. It is a beautiful and surreal vision.

Suddenly, there is a manic honking sound of a car racing across the desert well off our track. Everyone stops what they are doing and watches the headlights. Faster and faster the little car goes. The high beams, bouncing through the night, horn blaring, the crowd

from the busses and cars cheering on its progress, when all of sudden the lights launch towards an oddly shaped moon, and just as quickly, drop vertically into an abyss.

There are a few flickering last gasps and then the desert is black again; like watching your sinking ship from a life raft. The crowd utters a collective "hmmm" and "tsk-tsk" sound and returns to their tasks. No one goes to see what happened to the car. Karma.

After a few more hours of pushing and digging, we stop to look around at the clueless landscape, and an old man in a turban, and a young boy, appear out of nowhere and climb into our car. They speak rapidly to our driver and point in the direction of the soft boiled yolk moon. Hours later, weaving in and out of gullies, dunes and scrub, and heading towards the moon, we, three buses and two of the cars, land on something that feels like a road. The old man and boy jump out without a word and walk back into the desert. At dawn, that morning in Jaipur, the moon and the sun shared separate edges of the sky.

In India, kite fighting is a national passion, experienced with great emotion by those devoted to its similarities to life. Like life there are strategies as well, and some of these, like playing dead in the air, only to kill your opponent later while he's celebrating, are ruthless; warriors made of paper.

I was watching one of these matches today. A boy on our rooftop accepted the challenge of a red kite already victorious in several previous encounters. The kid on the roof, flying turquoise, couldn't see his adversary but he was clearly talented and his tactical skills seemed superior to his red opponent. In short and powerful bursts of lift, both red and turquoise came together, perhaps a quarter of a mile away. The red kite was waiting for an opening when the turquoise kite from our roof top went through an incredible series of circling movements, strangling the line of the red kite, and following it with an apparently decisive yank and cut.

The red champion went inanimate and began to gently float back and forth, a death drift to the ground. The boy on our roof commenced celebrating with some air acrobatics. I watched him on his perch, yelling defiantly in victory, and noticed that as he turned

away, looking for another war, the defeated red champion suddenly lurched to life, attacking the soft exposed line of the turquoise kite, which floated quietly to the street where it was promptly eaten by a cow.

"At least we haven't been fighting," she said.

"We'll get back to it soon enough," he replied.

"Why... she asked, why should we have to."

"It's the distractions," he said. "They keep us involved in all of those things outside of ourselves."

"Why can't we just keep being distracted?" she asked.

"Distractions are too expensive," he replied.

He was sitting on the stoop of an alley tea stall, moving his feet for a cow, when a hole in the wall begins to gush shit and water. It flows between his feet onto a small sleeping dog, who gets up casually, shakes as dogs do when they're wet, and then lays back down.

"I think I've had one drop of stagnant water too many," she said.

"Why are you so concerned about the cost of distractions when you have so much to lose?"

"Want to visit a zoo?" he asked.

Zoos are the saddest places in the world. When a zoo exists within a zoo and a third zoo exists within the second then the sadness is multiplied.

The first zoo is the one you visit. It houses a meager assortment of the world's creatures in various enclosures of cement and iron; all of it filthy. The African lion is not alone. He shares his cage with rats that tug and rip at the rotting carcass he is supposed to eat. The crocodiles have no water and lie like corpses in the dust. The gazelles have tumors and the monkeys live one to a cage; a very un-monkey like thing to do. Who will groom them? The otter never emerges. The bears look at their unused exercise yard from behind wooden bars. The Bengal tigers groan loudly and paces endlessly back and forth without rest; a sign of a tiger who has lost his mind.

The second zoo, the zoo outside the zoo, is the city itself. It is curious that the vast assortment of wild, and urbanized, animal population in the second zoo appear to be faring far better than the animals in the first zoo. The second zoo animals seem to be involved in the process of living, thinking and surviving; traits that have all but vanished from the first zoo's population. The prime examples of this are the monkeys who literally thrive in the urban chaos.

The third zoo is the zoo within the zoo we are visiting. This one contains several species of beggars with severe deformities. One beggar is around ten and he pushes another older, severely misshapen one around on a foot square platform with wheels. The two of them are amazing in their tenacity, and just when I think I may have eluded them by going up stairs or over a chained fence, the deformed one slides off his wheeled pallet and drags himself along the ground after me... hand out stretched, pleading, grabbing at my legs and screaming for baksheesh. I recall a scene from a Monty Python movie.

She says, as they walk from the zoo, that she wants to leave Jaipur and move on. He reacts predictably at hearing the news. It reveals a distinct difference in the way they experience travel. She wants to see everything, saturating herself in the trek. He prefers to stay in a place long enough to know the short cuts, to be on a first name basis with the chai seller, the peanut wagon girl, and beggars... to stop being the transient tourist. In all the years they have traveled the third world together this has always been a bone of contention. He decides it probably doesn't matter what they do but neglects to mention that sentiment to her.

There is comfort in familiarity. They are in a nice guest house with hot, if irregular, water. They have a rickshaw driver named Uday who takes them where they want to go without hassle or hustle, and a street restaurant where they have become regulars. He is beginning to know the short cuts; she wants to follow a new map. In five hours they will take a ten-hour bus ride to Udaipur. She will unfold her new map and look for the roads and he will look for the short cuts.

"You're not the traveler you used to be," she says.

"Do you want some nan and biryani before we leave?" he asks.

"Sure," she says, "to your restaurant?"

"You mean the one where everything is washed in the street? Where beggars grab you during your meal? Where the ambiance is pure?"

"Yeah," she says, "that one."

As usual, it was usual, with of exception of several new, and nameless, large rats running beneath their feet. She swallows a scream and launches her feet onto his bench.

"Nice selection of restaurant," she says with a hint of sarcasm.

"You're not the traveler you used to be," he says.

They finished their meal and once more entered the whirlpool. They passed the beggar girls who by this time had become so used to them that they were left alone. He bought some peanuts from the usual girl on the peanut wagon and then went to the stall across the street from the erotic film festival where spiced sweets were sold to cinema patrons and travelers. They passed "their" pig and the gauntlet of hustlers and kite warriors....

"I've never felt so invisible," she said.

They sat in a garden surrounded by mosquitoes, quiet conversations, and the blaring horns of traffic. Two hours before they leave for Udaipur; she reads from Michael Ondaatje's book *The English Patient*.

"I have spent days in the desert forgetting to look at the moon," he said. "As like a married man may spend days never looking into the face of his wife."

"I've never felt so invisible," she said again. And she rose to leave; he stayed behind with the mosquitoes, quiet voices and blaring horns.

On the bus to Udaipur she is cold and irritated.

"Is that guy going to lean his head out the window all night?" she asked.

"He was a dog in another life," he replied.

"If he isn't careful," she said, "something's going to hit him in the face."

"Probably a dead ancestor," he said. "This is the road for it."

"If he doesn't shut the window," she said, "I'll hit him in the face."

In Udaipur they woke up to a spectacular view of Lake Pichola and the infamous Lake Palace Hotel. The Lake Palace looks at them, they look at it. Both views are different, but both views are the same. One view receives morning light, one sees the setting sun. Their view costs \$12.00 a night while The Lake Palace view starts at \$350.00. The essential difference is that The Lake Palace people are protected by water from every possible contact with India. They might as well be in London. "Jesus!" he said, "you can't even visit without a special permit."

"Someday, when I have a lot of money," she said, "I think I'll spend two weeks a year here at The Lake Palace Hotel."

"Send me a postcard," he replied.

"I'm not going to send you anything," she said, "especially a post card from The Lake Palace Hotel."

"Why?" he asked.

"You can't have everything," she said.

At night on the balcony: off in the distance there is a palace on the top of a mountain. Illuminated in the darkness it seems to float in the sky. For the first time, since being lost, in the desert, the stars are not obscured by pollution or smoke. The sounds are also quite different. Instead of traffic and warning shouts of horns there are the repetitive patterns of ashram bells, a lonely puppy, a motor launch to the hotel in the lake, a soft and haunting sitar. The sounds here are private; they have their own set of colors.

We met an Iranian named Reg who used to take photographs in a museum. He met a Swedish woman, had two children, left home and now travels the world collecting fabric patterns. We had two beers with an Indian from London, in a guest house filled with French tourists. He had had a big run in with the manager of the hotel because he was tired of being treated like an Indian and said that he wanted to be treated like a white person. In the lobby a young Lolita like French girl, stoned, flirted with two Indian boys from the kitchen. When she turned to speak to one, the other leaned forward to smell her hair. The girl giggled and the boys got erections that they did not attempt to hide from her. Across the lake a Hindu chanter sang a prayer.

"This is the most romantic place I've ever been," she gushed. "Your whole life, you grow up reading fairy tales about castles in the clouds and here they are right in front of you... And," she added smugly, "I brought you here."

"It's amazing," he said. "Did you like dinner?"

"This is so perfect," she said. "I would love to stay here and explore the secrets. Yes, I did," she said. "Especially not having to deal with the rats under the table."

"I miss them," he said. "This all seems a bit too sanitary and romantic. Not at all like the India we traveled through to get here."

"Why are you so resistant?" she insisted. "Why can't you just loosen up and admit that I'm important? I've given you so much. I've made you a nice person... some of the time... someday you'll thank me."

"Thank you," he replied facetiously.

"You know what I mean," she said defensively. "You needed me to have all of those adventures. You needed me to take the life risks with."

"Thank you," he said.

"Why don't you love me anymore," she asked.

"I do care for you," he answered.

"Will you come back here with me again next year?"

"Sure," he replied. "Send me a postcard from wherever you are and let me know when you'll be arriving. I'll meet you here and we'll have a reunion."

"Your such a shit!" she said calmly. "I'm serious, don't you love this place?" "Can't you love me in this place?"

"Truthfully," he answered, "I resent all of this perfection for confusing the issues that are important to me now. The rats under the tables helped to clarify my thoughts. This place just isn't gritty enough for me to wallow around in."

He remained silent for a long time, looking out over the rooftops and the water, to the castle floating in the sky. "It is beautiful though," he said softly. "Thank you." He didn't realize that she had left and that he was alone.

When they awoke the next morning she looked over at him in his bed and said, "Last night I had a nightmare about you...you were being nice to me."

We sat on the ghats across the lake and spoke with the men for several hours while they washed and bathed. Twenty years ago the whole area was verdant with forest and field and there were tigers roaming the hills. Someone, Shiva told us, got the idea to sell the wood from the forest on the local constable's day off. In a short time the forest was gone, the constable had retired with his "look-away" money; the land, unable to hold water, turned brown and the tigers went away. We took all of this in from the castle in the clouds; it must have been very beautiful.

That evening, returning from a meal near the bus terminal, they found themselves lost and walking down a lot of dead ends, to locked gates, past stables, garbage dumps and rats of all sizes. "Well, she said, this should help clarify your thoughts."

"Quite nicely, thank you," he replied.

"I was killed by lightning in a former life," he said.

"I was a lightning bolt in a former life," she said.

"It would be nice to live here for a while," she said.

He laughed to himself, thinking about their expensive hotel room in Delhi. They had left the room, their clothing, and money, weeks ago and had been amused at how simple it was to live without anything.

Monkeys, monkeys, everywhere. At dawn I went to the roof of the guest house and made short breath exhalations (something like tuk..tuk from deep in the throat) to call them from their trees near the lake shore. This is the first morning I've tried this as their normal visiting hours take place during sunset. Bananas, red carrots, peanuts, sweet Parle-G biscuits and sesame candies are their favorite foods. The other night, S.K., the owner of this balcony I'm "tuk-tuk-ing" from, tried to give the largest male, "Big Boy", a gin and tonic but he ignored the offer.

This morning, Big Boy was the first to arrive and we sat together on the low wall, eating Parle-G's, watching the city wake up. It was all quite peaceful and connecting in a primal kind of way; then the rest of the clan arrived. Girl monkeys, mother monkeys with baby monkeys clinging to their sagging chests, adolescent monkeys learning the routes from

trees to rooftops and a gang of “teenage” male gang monkeys who would have to wait their turn at leadership. While Big Boy is occupied, the younger males pretend to groom the females. They keep a single watchful eye on Big Boy and the instant Big Boy turns his attention away, the young male leaps on the back of the female he’s grooming and they fuck rapidly for about five seconds before resuming their innocent grooming positions once again.

Of all the monkeys, only one exhibits any hostility. She is an adult female without a baby; she is perfectly pleasant until I have nothing left to give to her ... then she gets real scary. She screams and shows her teeth, and finally leaps off the roof. Big Boy never lets her out of his sight, but he never lets her know that he's watching.

"It was really important for us to get away from ourselves for a while," she said.

"I'm quite sad to be leaving," he replied.

"That's nice." she said. "It's the first time you've expressed anything emotional the entire time we've been away."

"I've loved it here," he said. "It's not really fair to say that I haven't had any emotional reactions to anything."

"You've worked really hard to be alone," she said.

"I've only been trying to find out where I've been," he replied. "Where are you going now?" she asked.

"Home," he answered.

"Home," he said.

Back in Delhi my mood had changed. The air was so freaking polluted I couldn't see a sunset if it happened in front of me.

I went through a fantasy today trying to figure out how I could alter everything at home and move to Udaipur. Fantasy is gummed up by reality. There are too many obligations waiting for me, and The International Herald Tribune reports that there have been three

major snowstorms on the east coast in the last week. Why do I have to think about snow in the driveway?

"There's no need to be so upset," she said, "look at all you have." "You've got plenty of time for what you want to do."

"Don't you see?" he replied, "I feel like that just isn't the case. I feel I have to pack all of this stuff into my life now before it is too late."

"What?" she exclaimed. "The fame, your precious few minutes of it?"

"My life," he said. "I want to experience the parts that are missing."

"So what are you going to do?" she asked.

"I figure that I can dump the properties, all of the possessions, the jobs, the clients, you and this marriage... everything but one element prevents it."

"O.K. asshole, she said, what is the one thing more important than all of those other things?"

"My dog," he replied with a straight face, "I just can't figure out what to do with Amelia."

It is 3:15, in the Frankfurt airport, when she finishes reading his story.

"I'm not sure I like the ending," she says.

"What ending?" he replied. "I haven't written it yet."

"I'm still trying to figure out how to pack all of this fabric," she said. "Did you notice the soldiers outside the window with the machine guns?"

"Yes, he answered, they're the same ones who were here when we left a few weeks ago."

"What's going to happen to us?" she asked.

"If we have enough money to pay the bill I don't think they'll shoot," he replied.

"That's not what I meant," she said.

"I know," he said, "I just don't have an answer for you now."

"I'll take care of your dog if you need to go away for a while," she offered.

"Thanks," he said.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you also," he replied.

"I'll need some help getting this stuff into the overhead," she said.

"I'll be there for you," he replied.

"Just thought I would check," she said sarcastically. "It may be the last time I have you until next Christmas." She moved about the room taking a last look to see if they had packed everything. "Do you want to brush your teeth before we go?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered.

"You can always tell the travelers from the tourists," she said.

"You're right." he said. "There's a look of weariness to them. I think the traveler goes off not knowing destination, the cost, or when the adventure will end. The tourist has an itinerary and a budget; they always have a hand holding the ground and know when they will be home."

"Maybe it's the same in relationships," she said. "Some are travelers; others are tourists. What's going to happen to us?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter, he said, it's only a story."