

## The Mental Traveller

### CHAPTER ONE

When the man in the end bed died, I knew it was time to leave.

It wasn't just the shock of seeing my first dead body: I'd had enough of the heat; of the sullen nurses and pre-dawn injections; of the breakfast curries and the cloying stench from the toilets.

A corpse at the end of the ward was the sign to go.

None of this had been in the plan. I had returned to India to awaken the genes of my ancestors. A series of crystallised images described my idyllic future. My Hindi, unspoken since the age of three, would return like the taste of a forgotten spice. Dressed in a white silk kurta, in the shade of the Taj Mahal, I was ready to burn my British passport - in slow motion - and become a full Indian citizen again, at one with my family.

Instead, I was stuck in a Bengal hospital, my relations no more than names on postcards.

"Dear Uncle George," said the one that I wrote yesterday. "At the moment I am staying in very cheap accommodation in West Bengal. I look forward to meeting you all soon. Lots of love. Stuart."

Three days earlier, a pair of orderlies had brought me

from New Jalpaiguri railway station on a stretcher. I was like a visiting dignitary who happened to be delirious and retching up bright yellow bile. They dropped me in reception in front of a senior doctor. He beamed with pride at the sight of a premium foreign patient and insisted on inspecting my passport.

"You have been drinking our water," the doctor said. He spoke carefully, but rushed his words as if he were embarrassed to speak English.

I nodded. "Yes."

"Ah, Bengal water is the worst," he said, shaking his head a great deal. "You must drink boiled water or chai. Do you know what dhab is?"

"No."

"It is the water from the coconut. You may drink that also." He frowned as he handed back my passport. "You look Indian."

"My father is Indian."

He nodded, then scribbled on a pad. I grimaced as I overheard some mumbled words: "Dehydration. . . acute gastroenteritis. . . saline drip."

"Am I going to die?"

"You have a bug only, do not fret. You are worried for being in a foreign hospital, certainly. Indian hospital! Well, let me tell you: your English doctors may cure you. But I will cure you - whether you like it or not."

Two nurses took me to the ward. They laid me on an iron bed and played Pin the Tail on the Donkey, using my arm and a hypodermic needle. Every time they jabbed at a vein I howled in agony. They finally connected me to a saline drip and went away, leaving a dark pool of my blood on the blue plastic mattress.

When you lie bleeding in hospital, wired to a drip, hungry and exhausted, three days is an eternity. I longed for rain and cool weather; I pined for my Mother: I craved nothing simpler than a Marmite sandwich. I was also itching to break another of my golden rules.

3) Don't speak to other tourists  
just because you meet them. You  
wouldn't cross the street to speak  
with them back home, so they deserve  
no special attention now.

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The creature trapped in my intestine lurches, tries to escape into my bloodstream.

It feeds off microbes and undigested food particles, but it wants to be free. It is sightless. Clogged fur and gnarled extremities. A trapped, primordial mole.

The pain is like a hot, rusty knife twisting in my guts. A scorpion sewn under the skin would hurt less. The walls of

my intestine stretch under the pressure of broken claws.

I wake in agony, hands clutching my stomach. The creature - can it really exist only in India? - relaxes slightly, sheathing its claws back into stubby fists. Its arms retract; the pain subsides.

I see the pleasant nurse with the shiny round face. She says a few soothing words: Hindi or Bengali? She swabs something cold against my skin. Before I can object, she has plunged a needle into the hard muscle of my shoulder. It goes in like a nail. She smiles, shuffles away. I smile back. She will make me better.

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The dead man arrived a few hours later. Even before I saw him, I could hear his wife wailing along the corridor. Her sobs, raw and throaty, caused the rest of the ward to look up. The boy who spent most of his time asleep lifted his head from his stained pillow for a moment. The noise of the woman's crying grew louder, until it burst through the doorway. She was at the head of a large procession. She babbled and gestured to a blank-faced young medical orderly. The family took up positions around the empty bed. Finally, the sick man stumbled into the ward. His wife ushered him to the hard bed, clawing and pawing at his forehead. His eyes had the faraway look of somebody drugged or delirious.

With his brown, emaciated limbs he resembled a curious tree. And, like a tree, he kept himself upright at all times:

for most of his short stay, he perched atop his metal bedpan, bony knees drawn up against his chin and a blanket flung around himself for modesty.

Nobody offered him sympathy. Not the tough guy who unhooked his drip when he padded to the toilet; nor the sleepy boy in his few waking moments; and certainly not the nurses. More than anybody, they knew he was a lost cause.

As I sat watching two of them trying to insert a needle into the dead man's arm, I saw somebody at my shoulder. A young man smiled at me. He spoke confident, though halting English.

"Hello, my name is Dewas. I am from Nepal. Which country you are from?"

I smiled, pleased of the company. "England."

"I need to improve my English," he said. "Some phrases I find difficult."

He drew a folded scrap of paper from his pocket. It looked like a typed shopping list.

"These are my key words," he said. "Glow-sester - is that right?"

I smiled. "Gloucester. Gloster."

"Yes. Glowster. This one?"

"Lester."

He lost interest suddenly, folding the paper back into his pocket. "My friend is upstairs. Tetanus. Cut himself on a rusty weapon. He is close to death. You are tourist?"

"More of a traveller," I said, pushing my metal thali plate beyond smelling distance. "I'm visiting relatives in Meghalaya. I need to send postcards."

I instantly regretted being so candid: I'd been scammed so many times on this trip that it was hard to know who to trust.

"I will buy postcards," said Dewas. "You will give me money and I will buy things. Postcards, stamps, and suchlike."

I began to smell a rat, remembering stories I had swapped in the last month: sick relatives in need of money, a contribution to a train ticket to Madras, a worthy charity. The list was endless - all, in hindsight, obviously false.

But I was sick. The pain in my stomach was increasing. I felt weak and resigned. I had no resistance.

"That's very kind," I heard myself say, handing him a 100-Rupee note. "I'll jot down a list."

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The creature bares its fangs, tries to gnaw its way through my stomach. Only one way to relieve the pain. I swing my legs off the iron bed and hobble to the stinking toilet. Past the man with the gashed leg; the boy who sleeps all the time; and the dead man, who sits screaming on his bedpan. He hosts a colony of the creatures, I am sure.

The latrine - to use the nurses' quaint phrase - has an ancient shower head and a few filthy toilet cubicles. The floor tiles are brown and chipped. I'm glad there are no

mirrors. If I'm in the mood, I crouch against the wall of the shower and let my bowels empty. Most of the ward residents are confined to bed or unconscious, so will not disturb me.

Expelling a creature from the body brings relief from the agony. It is a fusion of pain and pleasure. Even as boiling lava vents through my anus, the spasms begin to ease and I feel the creature disintegrating. Of course, any broken remnants - like stray tendrils or claw chips - will eventually fuse together to form a smaller creature. But for now the pain is gone.

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A pilgrim: that's what I was. I was twenty years out of India, with barely a trace of my original DNA still at the surface. Twenty years had lightened my skin, re-wired my brain, altered my digestive system. But things were changing. I had ripened in the hot sun. Hindi phrases were seeping from their dried springs. If only I could shake off illness, I would become stronger.

I pictured my family as a tribe living on the far side of a deep ravine. Visible, but unreachable. Dad had sketched me a family tree. I had studied photographs of uncles, aunts, cousins. I felt I could recognise any one of them from those twenty-year-old frozen images. Now I needed to hear them talk, taste their food. I needed to belong.

But the relatives weren't enough. I had to discover where I came from. The land was as important as the people. The

high, dank kingdom of Darjeeling. Goa's coast. The Himalayas and Kashmir. The white heat of Delhi; Agra and the Taj Mahal; Bombay's teeming streets. And finally the heights of Meghalaya the 'mountain kingdom', The Scotland of the East.

But it had to be done properly. I wasn't on the hippy trail, or filling a blank on my CV. I was a traveller, a pilgrim. Shorts and sandals were out. So were luminous backpacks: instead, I dragged a suitcase around. There would be no visiting the Wimpey bar in Delhi - which ingeniously sold lamb burgers instead of beef burgers. I resolved to buy Indian shirts. I might even start smoking bidis.

In time I broke every rule that I'd set for myself, apart from the one about the backpack.

\*

I have dredged my memory for everything I know of microbiology, and cast a cool scientist's eye over my symptoms. My conclusions have confirmed my worst fears. The creature got into my system during the long train journey from Delhi to Calcutta. The most likely source was the chicken curry. I forced mouthfuls down; I hadn't eaten in nearly twenty-four hours. I remember small pieces of bone scraping at my throat.

The creature must live in the marrow. Porous chicken bones, I realise, are a sure indicator of infection. It lives in the pores and later recombines in the stomach. Then it starts to grow.

When I voiced this to the doctor, he sniffed loudly.

"You have only acute gastro-enteritis," he said. "Will be right as rain in almost no time."

"I'm sure there's an animal in my gut," I told him. He smiled indulgently. I was still an honoured guest.

"It is painful, but is perfectly normal. The cramps will continue until the drugs take control. Nothing to worry about. You are strong."

"It can't be just a stomach bug. This is much worse." He pointed at the man on his bedpan, who chose that moment to let out a scream of agony.

"He has bug, so do you."

"I have the same as him?"

"The very same."

\*

Dewas came back later that afternoon as I was reading. With no fuss, he put down all the stuff that he'd bought for me - bananas, bread, postcards, stamps and a Thums-Up - and placed the change in my hand.

"What are you reading?" He looked at its cover. "Robert M. Pirsig. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance." He nodded a few times. "I have bought a book."

He took it out of a paper bag and handed it to me. A pink cover; a woman in a long, flowing dress kneeling in front of a bare chested man. She looked at some faraway point off the page; the man looked at a different one.

I flicked through, feeling his eyes on me. Words from the page leapt up and punched me: acheing; yearning; rippling; quivering; tremulous.

Then a thought hit me: what if he'd bought it for me?

Pulsing, groaning, chaste, tragic.

I looked up and met his smile. Maybe he'd bought the book with the money I'd given him, convinced that I needed cheering up. Even so. . .

Monumental, crashing, marble-white flesh, secret place.

"It looks really good," I said, handing it back to him.

"This will definitely help you to improve."

He took the book and studied the first page, then he looked at me and smiled.

"I must see my friend," he said. "Later, I return."

After he had gone, I opened my hand and counted my change.

\*

The nurses were a hard lot. Only a few of them spoke English, and they were never around at critical times.

Example: not long after Dr. Like-it-or-not had insisted that I drink only boiled water, I watched one of them fill my glass from the tap. Then she brandished it under my nose, motioning that I should add a packet of rehydration salts.

"I can't. I need boiled water. Boiled."

She carried rabbiting away in Bengali. I knew exactly what she was saying: "You're dehydrated. Drink this and you'll

be cured. The doctor says that you have to."

So why couldn't she understand me?

I searched my brain for Hindi phrases. Water was...what? The few Hindi phrases my Dad could ever remember were all foods: milk, cheese, pork, bread. Then I remembered a story that he had told me about a big lake near where he lived. The Big Water. Bara Pani.

"Pani!" I yelped.

"Pani!" she nodded, tapping the glass of tap water. Billions of bugs lurked inside, itching to multiply in the soft lining of my gut.

"I need boiling water," I said. "Hot water."

I touched the glass, then snatched my finger away as if I'd been burnt. "Owww!" I cried. "Hot."

She watched me neutrally, horror creeping slowly onto her face. She felt the glass herself: it was cold. Then she crossed to the phone. I ran the conversation in my head.

"Hello, Doctor Lakitornot, the UK patient has snapped. He thinks that cold is hot."

"Looks like we'll need to section him. Is Doolali still operational?"

"It closed years ago. But this is serious. If you can't tell hot from cold, what chance do you have?"

"Do we have any restraints?"

"I can fashion one from bandages."

"How is the patient otherwise?"

"Eating only bananas. Afraid of water."

"Could be rabies. Has he been in contact with dogs?"

"He has a lot of nasty puncture marks on one arm that might be from teeth."

"Well that settles it. He'll need an injection into his stomach with an enormous needle, followed by a spell in New Doolali."

"Yes, doctor. I mean, Doctor."

"And clear out the remains of Mr Endbed."

"Endbed is still in the end bed."

"Hasn't that bugger died yet?"

When she came back from the phone she had a fixed look on her face. She stood in front of me and said nothing. Then she pushed the glass at me.

"I can't," I said. "I need dhab. Or chai?"

"Nain chai!" she scolded. No tea. "Pani."

It wasn't like this on the train. The food vendors who wander along train carriages have several specialities. Tea, omelettes, vegetable cutlets, tomato soup. All of them are served hot. You can hear the vendors chanting the menu from the next carriage. "Om, leddom, leddom, let. Garam cutlet. Garam tomato soup."

"Garam pani!" I yelled. "I want garam pani!"

"Aaah, garam pani," said the nurse, her face alight with understanding. I watched her shuffle away and fill my glass from a kettle. When she brought the glass back, she held it in

a white cloth. I touched the glass.

"Oww!" I said, pulling my hand away.

She nodded and walked away, pausing only to sneer at Mr Endbed. I let the water cool, then emptied two packets of rehydration salts into it. As I sipped it, I mouthed the words.

"Garam pani," I said, practising my accent.

\*

The dead man groans and begins to expel a creature: it is a horrible sound.

It's past midnight and we're the only two awake. I'm on my back, drowing in a fever sweat. I see him in silhouette, a lumpy pyramid topped with a head and an occasional white flash of eyes or teeth. There's faint light from the far end of the ward. The nurses are there, but they're staying put.

He's delirious. I don't feel good either: my brain is on fire, my body slippery with sweat. The man wheezes quietly. Then he looks right at me. He starts to talk in short gasps. I meet his gaze: to look away would be callous.

So I let him babble. I don't understand anything except for his pain. As I'm nodding sympathetically, it suddenly occurs to me that he might speak some English.

"I'm English," I say. He is silent. "I have the creature too."

He responds with a tangle of Bengali. I start to recognise the odd word: did he say 'pani'? Perhaps I should

call a nurse. If he called, she would ignore him.

Words wash over me, a torrent of impenetrable language. He starts to talk more fluently, as if propelled by the ultimate impending deadline. I watch his mouth move. His white eyes are fixed on me; his teeth glint in the faint light. Then, like a radio dial hitting the right frequency, I can suddenly understand him.

It's as if an interpreter has begun to whisper in my ear. It might be empathy, or telepathy. Perhaps I retain a genetic memory of Sanskrit, the root of all Indian languages. Maybe he is speaking English. But his words make sudden sense.

"I have the creature," he says in an old, dry voice. "It lives inside. It will multiply. I am dying."

"I have the creature too! It comes from diseased chickens. It hides in the bones."

"It lives in other places too. In vegetables, on strangers' hands. And in water. Beware of the water. Bengal water is the worst."

"Mine has claws. Broken nails, matted hair."

He reaches towards me. He no longer seems to be at the far end of the ward. "Amashi krimi!"

I sit up. "Is that its name?"

He winces as a spasm grips him and his voice rises to a controlled shriek. "Amasha Krimi!"

I see a nurse's head poke around the lighted doorway, then instantly disappear.

The silhouette changes shape. The man releases his blanket and slides off his bedpan. The smell is grotesque. I turn away to bury my nose in my bag/pillow. Now I can only hear his laboured breathing. After a few minutes, I can hear that he has fallen asleep.

\*

I was composing a quick note to the chef ('Dear Sir, do you really think that curry and brown rice is the ideal breakfast for a man with acute gastro-enteritis?') when Dewas rushed in.

"Someone in here has died," he said excitedly.

I looked straight at the end bed, where the man lay stiff and abandoned. My first dead body. I stopped chewing on my banana.

"What did he die of?"

Dewas digested the question before answering: "He had the same as you."

\*

I picked up my suitcase from left luggage. I was in no hurry to reach my hotel, so I had a shower at the station, changed into fresh clothes and bought some lunch at the snack bar. As I leant against the counter, holding a glass of milky tea between thumb and forefinger, a tall, pasty man ambled towards me.

"Which platform for Delhi?" Australian. Or maybe a Kiwi.

"Do you speak English?"

I went through scenarios in my mind: jabber away in mock-

Bengali until he went away; or adopt a hideous accent and watch the look of growing horror on his face. My feelings about rule number 3 had returned.

"I am English," I said. "You want platform six."

ENDS