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The Old Man at Chennai
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We have come to Chennai for one day—a brief interruption in what will otherwise be a holiday together. Michael, who is an engineer, has business in Chennai—meetings with colleagues in the India office of his firm, with local government officials. While he does this, I will go out and see something of this city I am unlikely to ever see again, this megalopolis of ten or perhaps twelve million people—so my *Lonely Planet* Guide, eight ounces heavy in my suitcase, tells me. Every day, more and more people abandon their ancestral villages for the brave new world of Jumbotrons, call centers, modern medicine, and unrelentingly omnipresent ads. Even in the airport, faded signs in English and other languages—Hindi? Bengali? Tamil? Urdu?—hawk a myriad of Internet providers.

After Chennai, we will fly back to Delhi, where Michael will hire a car and driver and take me to the *Taj*, as he has wanted to do ever since he saw it alone more than twenty years ago. Paying more than we have ever paid before for a single night, we will stay at the Oberoi Amarvilas Hotel, the most expensive hotel in Agra, from which, if we are very lucky and the air not too filled with the invisible fine particulates that people in India refer to discreetly as “the weather,” we will see the *Taj* rise up out of the mist as the sun from the clouds. Ghostlike, it will rise up unreal in the far distance, a mammoth marble image the color of almond milk. As the sun travels westward, the *Taj* will turn a pale, delicate yellow, then slowly infuse with red until it is the same color as the thornless tea rose Michael has planted in the

back garden of our house in Bethesda. Finally, slowly, the *Taj* will turn white again, signaling that now it is time for our visit, and the cycle begins again.

Several thousand workers, *Lonely Planet* tells me, are believed to have died in the making of the *Taj*: the world's most impressive monument to eternal love, the world's most exquisite mausoleum.

I am able come to India with Michael for a month only because that I am no longer, as the doctors always called me when they came white-gowned and solemn faced out of the room, "The Daughter." Now I am "The-Daughter-In-Mourning." Once I told a friend made desolate by grief that she would feel better when a year had passed. I spoke casually, saying the first thing that came into my mind. I felt uncomfortable with the falseness of my words, guilty at my own good fortune.

"Really?" my friend answered with some bitterness. "How do you know?"

On the way in from the airport, we take—at my insistence—a government-approved taxi, which *Lonely Planet* says is the safest way to travel in India. This turns out to be a 1960s black Chevy with one working windshield wiper, luckily on the driver's side, and a large hole in the floor through which I can see rivulets coursing madly over the potholed roads. After taking three hours to go forty-two kilometers, we arrive at the center of Chennai. At once our taxi is becalmed in a gridlock of chaotic traffic. Toyota-sized cars, their colors dulled by dust. Bicycles, bicycle rickshaws. Small and grotesquely overloaded trucks, which I find myself thinking of, in British, as *lorries*. Motorcycle taxis—known in India as *tuk-tuks*,

according to *Lonely Planet*—with little shaded seats behind them that I might think were for two people but that here are occupied by four, six, entire families.

Horns blare on all sides. I look up to see a rickety, blackened train on an elevated track making its way slowly and precariously around a curved incline. Door after blackened door is flung wide open or perhaps long since ripped off. Young men clutch at handholds as the train's motion leans them out over the tracks. Their hard, malnourished bodies sway slightly, half inside the train and half out. I want to look away but instead stare fixedly at these faces blank of all expression, these eyes dulled with strong, suppressed feeling.

Hours later, I wake in the hotel to darkness and a man's voice, half-singing, half-chanting. On the lumpy, anonymous traveler's mattress, I raise myself up on both elbows. The voice wanders insistently—unpredictably to me—through unknown modes. I reach for Michael, who has taken a sleeping pill so he can be alert at his meetings tomorrow. My hand falls on his shoulder, and he lets out a small, sweet snore.

It is the call to prayer, the *Adhan*. What do they mean, these words that have so great a power over millions—no, billions—of people? Although not in this city, where on almost every face we have seen the Hindu mark of caste: a small circle, cinnabar. I am surprised and puzzled how this ancient ritual calls up a sense of awe.

I imagine the invisible sound stretching out over the tin roofs of the shanties, canvas tents, small shops, the skyscrapers, this well-worn *faux*-colonial Victorian hotel; reaching backwards and forwards in time over uncountable human throngs.

Later I will read in *Lonely Planet* that the voice of the *Adhan* is no longer a living voice. Today, the *Adhan* is a recording piped out from every minaret. Nonetheless, even after I know this, the *Adhan* continues to have the power to stop all my thoughts for the moments when I hear it.

The voice falls silent. Words float into my head. *The Cloud of Unknowing*. A name from some lecture long ago, at the university. I think it is the title of some medieval mystical tract I heard of but never read. *Unknowing*: the *via negativa* of San Juan de la Cruz, Sor Juana, George Herbert, the founder of the Quakers George Fox, T.S. Eliot. Direct apprehension, the mystic's way to truth.

The spring I turned sixteen, I prevailed on my father to accompany me to our Methodist church each Sunday. It was only fair, I said. I went only because he insisted I go, religion being, he said, "good for women."

Every Sunday at 11, we would climb the stairs together to the last pew of the balcony. A bald old man with funny smells always sat next to us. I envied how he would reach up and turn off his hearing aid when the lights dimmed, signaling the start of the sermon, which I liked far less than the thumping Methodist hymns.

Afterwards, I would walk with my father through the vestibule where women in picture hats and low-cut sheath dresses would stop him, putting a white-gloved hand on his arm.

He would always wear the same uniform he wore every day to his office downtown, where he worked as a commodities broker: starched white shirt, Countess Mara silk tie, impeccably pressed dark blue pinstriped suit. His eyes were still pale blue then, not yet rheumy; his hair—like mine—ash blond.

As they held the folded program for the church service, a brooch or a handkerchief pinned near a breast, the women laughed softly. My father would answer, embarrassed—perhaps simply that I was there. Sometimes I would pull at his arm when he kept talking, . I was uncomfortable with myself then. Already I had decided to leave. I was just biding my time.

Years later, when I would go up to the little suburban house and cook for him, he would say in his new timorous old man's voice, "No one will ever understand you as I do."

He said this with pride and with affection.

Was this true? Sometimes I've been afraid it could be true.

It's ten months and five days now since my father died.

At noon in the hotel at Chennai, I take the elevator down to the neo-Victorian lobby. The dim bulbs of an old-fashioned glass chandelier illuminate a curving, worn marble staircase; I imagine the ghosts of perfumed women in hoop skirts, carrying fans and dance cards.

At the reception desk, a friendly young man with dark slicked-down hair greets me by name. With a warm smile, he steadfastly maintains that Chennai has no bus tours suitable for "Madam." A car and driver, however, could easily be arranged.

"But *Lonely Planet* says there's a tour called 'Unknown Neighborhoods of Chennai,'" I say, fighting down a mild sense of desperation.

Hotel tours were not what Michael or I usually did. Once we had walked with backpacks along the north coast of Haiti, we had gone diving with whales in islands of Tonga. Of these and similar places my father would say, his lips pursed thin in practiced disapproval, "Why do you have to do those things, honey? Can't you do something that's not so dangerous, so offbeat?"

Now the young man at reception shakes his head again.

"That tour goes only on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Madam. Today is Wednesday."

He pushes a brochure across the scratched mahogany counter and waits, patient.

I object. Surely there must be a bus tour somewhere in this city of ten million people. It's absurd to have a car and driver for just one person. Besides, the expense. . .

I think of how comfortable Michael is hailing *tuk-tuks* on any street in Asia. I think of the blackened elevated train off which the young men hung suspended. Fuming, I nod at the desk clerk and give in. I am angry as always when I have let someone else make the decision for me.

The young man slaps his hand down on a little silver bell. On the other side of the lobby, a man rises eagerly from behind a desk and bounds across the lobby. I try to repress the feeling that I am in a bad Hollywood, or perhaps Bollywood, movie.

And then the driver, in a perfectly pressed light gray uniform and white gloves, is standing before me at attention while giving me a smile bright as it is unctuous.

I smile back, uncertain how I—or rather “Madam”—should behave.

None of this allays my doubts, my discomfort about the whole venture.

And then we are off, me in the back and him in the front of the overly air-conditioned, freshly washed white SUV. Expertly he guides the car down the ramp of the once-white, colonial style building and past a line of men in white turbans and paste jewels—the hotel staff who help with suitcases—and past a luggage scanner that no one mans.

“Shopping, Madam? Pashmina shawls? Silver earrings? My friend can give you good price.”

I shake my head, forgetting my cultural obligation not to be rude.

Clearly and understandably irritated by my indifference—after all, I have just done him out of his commission—the driver begins a monologue as we drive through a leafy neighborhood of large, Victorian-era townhouses much like those I have seen in Bayswater. Only here, every bit of grime, every chipped and missing stone, is laid bare by the sun.

In an effort to make conversation, to avoid further rudeness and take me at least momentarily out of myself, I ask the driver about his family.

He and his wife have two children, he answers. A boy and a girl, ages three and one. Am I satisfied with his driving? If so, can I please tell the manager on my return?

“Yes,” I say.

Emboldened by the success of my first question, I ask if he can tell me what his red caste mark—called *tikka*, according to *Lonely Planet*—means. Why does he wear it?

He sits up straighter in his seat.

“I wear it to honor the god,” he says, tightening his hands on the wheel.

His voice has gone suddenly formal, cold.

Once, I lit a candle for my father. This was at the beginning of his dying, in a place called San Pedro Sula—the most crime-ridden city in Honduras, according to the *South America Handbook*. Our plane from Houston had been unable to land at Tegucigalpa, so we had missed our connection and ended up here for the night. We had gotten a taxi to the only hotel *South America Handbook* recommended. This was a 1930s flimsy wooden structure on a little main square. In front of the hotel, on its wraparound porch, an older man lackadaisically ported an ancient rifle.

“Any self-respecting gang from East LA could take him out in a heartbeat,” I said to Michael, hoping the joke could fill up space that would otherwise fill up with fear.

“Stop worrying,” said Michael. “This is nothing compared to India.”

Dusk was falling.

In the square, the fluorescent electric lights were coming on, making intersecting triangles of darkness and light. Down a side street, a long market of small stalls crowded up against each other. Leafy green vegetables under bare electric bulbs wilted in the heat; plantains, pineapples, bunches of small bananas

decayed next to tiny bright plastic toys for children. We had seen places much like this in Mexico, but this one had an air of habitual poverty, of long-accustomed deprivation that was new to me then.

When we went back into the square, I think I was the one who suggested going into the church, but perhaps it was Michael. I don't remember.

Inside, a few—very few—people were walking about or praying. The church was mostly empty – bare stuccoed walls, a modest altar, a few crosses here and there. Old women with wrinkled faces wreathed in black shawls prayed and knelt and crossed themselves in the aisles. I went over and watched the candles flickering in small bowls of cheap colored glass.

I threw some coins down the wooden slot and lifted one of the wooden tapers from a box of sand. As I lit the candle, I asked myself why I was doing this. I didn't think it would make any difference. It certainly wouldn't please my father. He would be irritated if I told him, perhaps sleeping now or wandering about the rooms of his proud little suburban house wrapped in the gray velour robe I had given him, soft from its repeated washings.

Years later, the nurse who now came twice a week called me.

"You should make plans to come up," she said. "It's almost time."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"They have a sweet smell at the end," she said crisply. "It makes you want to hold them."

My father is dead now, I whisper to myself.

My father is dead.

I am not.

The driver takes me first to the museum at Fort St. George, built by the British built in the 1650s. This was the first permanent settlement of the British East India Company, he tells me. At that time, the British, the French, and the Portuguese were still fighting over who would reap the whole of the spoils. With a manner I read as carefully suppressed boredom, he leads me through room after room of oil portraits of the upper class Brits who once ruled this part of India.

As briefly as is consistent with politeness, I look at badly painted images of men in tight, starched uniforms and women in stiff, heavy taffeta. Just thinking about being out under the Indian sun, or for that matter, inside in an un-air-conditioned room in those clothes makes me feel faint. In real life, I am sure, I would have detested them for their arrogance; but in these images that were all that remained of them, the Brits look so miserable I almost pity them, marooned as they were on alien shores.

We stroll through a room of scimitars gleaming dangerously in their glass cages and emerge onto an open courtyard. On the other side of the courtyard, a large group of people are waiting before the closed wooden doors of the district court. The heat scorches, the sunlight is without mercy. The air is filled with cumin and body odor, turmeric and fenugreek. Before me, a woman in a crimson cotton sari holds a child of no more than two, a little boy, on her hip. On one side his neck is stretched out by a bulge the size of a grapefruit. A tumor? Goiter?

I think some character in Dickens had goiter. Or maybe Thackeray. I feel dizzy. Why is it, I ask myself, that everywhere I look in India I see ills that in my world could be easily healed or prevented but here seem to have no hope of remedy? The young men hanging on for dear life to the elevated commuter train; this woman and her child, the crowd of people waiting almost certainly in vain for redress of their grievances—all seem filled with some deep despair I don't know, I don't want to know.

As we start back to the hotel, the driver asks if I want to stop at Marina Beach—a long stretch of sand by the sea, according to *Lonely Planet*, where anyone may walk. I agree at once. When I was a child, we would go to the ocean in the summer. In the instant my father stopped the motor, I would run out and down to the waves, I would hold one hand steady in the effervescent spume, waiting for the next wave. In the most difficult moments of my life, the sea has always brought me a pure animal joy.

At Marina Beach the driver follows me as I stride across sand, and I can feel its burning even through the soles of my western shoes. A wave slaps down; retreats; is replaced by another. The air, pleasant, tastes like salt. I'm surprised to see a few heads far out in the ocean; *Lonely Planet* warns of a dangerous undertow.

As I stand directly facing the sun, putting up a hand in a vain effort to shield my eyes, an old man with a red Hindu caste mark on his forehead and a white loincloth wrapped around his waist is standing very still before me, leaned up against a small overturned rowboat that had once been painted white. Wrinkled and thin, he holds both hands cupped together in his lap, not looking at me or anything.

I have seen expressions like this in rehabs and hospitals. Once, waiting in a hallway, I heard someone sobbing behind a closed door.

“What is it?” I asked an aide who was wheeling a medicine cart nearby.

The aide shrugged with an indifference all the more chilling because in that moment I shared it.

“Her friend died.”

The soles of his sneakers and the wheels of the cart squeaked in a familiar cacophony over the linoleum. I had seen them an hour ago, swabbing it down with disinfectant.

As I keep looking at the old man leaning up against the boat, I want to stop and give him—something, a comforting word, I don’t know what, but his suffering seems too great. He seems in a place where others have receded and only pain remains. As I stare at the old man, the blazing sand, the splintered boat, a thought flashes through my mind that in the moment seems obvious and true, as if I have known it a very long time but only in this moment am willing to acknowledge it. That the boundaries between human beings are absolute; that suffering is the normal and final condition of human life, irremediable and incommunicable; that we are fools when we think otherwise.

On the way back to the hotel the driver takes a different route, this time past one of the many slums of Chennai that *Lonely Planet* had told me to avoid—ragtag affairs of cardboard and tin structures jumbled together and teeming with human activity. Children running in all directions; women in saris carrying water in plastic pails; mangy dogs cruising for scraps; a crowd of men chanting with raised fists,

carrying signs with the photograph of a bespectacled, very bald man wearing a *dhoti*, no doubt their candidate in the next elections. Under the Indian sun, the slum stretches out from the road as far as I can see, much like slums I will see later on the road to Agra.

I'm puzzled when the driver suddenly pulls the car over to one side of the road.

"You want to look more? You make photos?" he says.

He mimics clicking a camera as if I don't understand English.

I shake my head, although later I will wish I had taken a photo of the old man on the beach, not to remember what he looked like or to show others when I got home, but to replace the real image I fear I will carry with me forever with a diminished, touristic one.

The driver looks at me with undisguised annoyance. Over the chasms of class and culture, I wonder if his pose of superiority—his *tikka* and all the *tikkas* of the world—is part of his defense against some such perception as the one I have just had.

The driver smiles a smile so fixed and cheery I cannot but feel sorry for him there under the Chennai sun, sweating in his heavy gray uniform. I doubt he has taken, or ever will take, his wife and two children to the *Taj*. Are they among the fifty percent of Chennai's population that, *Lonely Planet* tells me, live in slums? I only know for sure that every day his livelihood depends on pleasing a person who must seem so alien, so unreasonable like me.

"Really no photos, Madam?" he says again.

I shake my head, this time firm but not forbidding.

The driver smiles something I think looks closer to a real smile.

“Madam, are you quite quite sure?”