

The Slow Train to Rishikesh

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Hiresh sat that July morning in the main railway station of Surat, India, waiting for the Swaraj Express from New Delhi to arrive. It was summer and unbearably hot and people were swarming all around the station, endlessly to and fro past Hiresh, so that the primary thing on his mind had become, how long will it take for the Swaraj Express to arrive and how long will it take for the station master to turn the train around and send it on its way back north to New Delhi again, so I can escape these irritating crowds and the stifling heat.

In New Delhi, Hiresh had already booked passage on a train to Rishikesh, a holy village nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas where ancient temples dotted the Ganges and waters fresh from the snow-covered mountains churned milky-white on their way to the distant sea. Hiresh's grandfather lived in an ashram there and Hiresh had been eagerly awaiting this trip for several months.

Hiresh gazed up the tracks and wiped the sweat from his forehead one more time. The blistering summer heat would soon give way to the monsoon season, an even more sweltering tropical weather pattern that would go on oppressing India until the end of September and no doubt beyond. For a country run through by the Tropic of Cancer, India suffered disproportionately from such stifling weather. You would have thought it was run through by the equator instead, not a country which never touched it and stretched as far north as the 37th latitude. For that state of affairs, you could blame the Himalayas, which jutted majestically into the sky all along India's northern border but also stood as a towering thousand mile long barrier to the cooling winds of the Tibetan Plateau.

Heat was the first thing a person would notice upon arriving in India. The next thing would be all the children's faces, thousands and thousands of them, everywhere you looked—serious little faces, soiled and impoverished faces—but most of them quick to smile and able to express hope.

The next thing you noticed would be the *mélange* of odors, especially along the streets of large cities like New Delhi and Surat—hundreds and hundreds of odors greeting you every minute of every day—stewing in all that sweltering heat. The exhaust from diesel powered rickshaws being first among them, those fumes run through by the scent of cooked curried dishes and those scents accompanied further by burning incense and jasmine flowers and fragrant flowering trees and things like overripe guava sold by vendors at the roadside and even the earthy scent of vegetable dyes used by peasants to color their clothing.

But above all, the scent of human waste would strike you square upon arriving in India. This was true in the countryside but even more so in the cities. For want of private bathrooms and an inverse proportion of public toilets, and thanks to open sewers, and because many people wiped themselves with their hands, and because a man might simply squat down and defecate wherever he happened to be standing and because cows were holy entities, free to roam the streets and unload wherever they liked, the sweet, biting scent of waste was always waiting for you around the next corner, run through and through with all the curries and jasmines and diesel fumes and a multitude of other scents that were ubiquitous and seemed to spring right out of the hordes of people hustling by you.

Assaulted by this very same *mélange* of odors, Hireshe checked his watch and tried again to distract himself with the morning paper but it was virtually impossible to read it with any degree of peace when people were endlessly jostling by and bumping into his arms. Hireshe had thought several times to jump up and smack one of these peasants over the head with his folded up paper. His intense, dark eyes certainly suggested he was capable of such impulsive behavior. With the longish, black hair added to his eyes, Hireshe looked like a yogi, whose fire burned inside of him. You would have thought him a tiger ready to pounce, not a low level investigator, employed by the Central Bureau of Investigation, who rarely if ever acted out his innermost anger. Perhaps when he saw children being harmed in the course of an investigation, Hireshe's emotions boiled over into plain sight, but otherwise his demeanor was that of a thoroughly detached individual, seemingly unperturbed by the latest government scandal or industrial accident he had uncovered.

In fact, when it came to his career at CBI, Hireshe had never made the least attempt to advance himself and his superiors viewed him more like a piece of furniture than anything else. Those who worked most closely with Hireshe had frequently joked that perhaps it would be best if he retreated to a cave somewhere to meditate but Hireshe ignored these comments with his usual air

of detachment, did what was required of him at the office and returned home to his private world, where he often listened to old sitar music as a way of blocking out the chaos of modern existence.

Some years earlier, Hiresh had read extensively about the fate of the world but this growing body of knowledge had only served to immobilize him further, so he quit reading. Industrialized societies were steadily disintegrating into a cesspool of overpopulation and environmental catastrophe. The entire planet was about to drive off a cliff. Who cared to learn more, given these depressing facts?

Worse still, to Hiresh's way of thinking, people in India now consumed themselves more with the latest reality TV show or celebrity gossip or with winning a spot on Glee than with actually solving the country's problems, such that, their escapism had become another form of religion, and when it came to the religion and its associated superstitions, no one had a leg up on India.

Disgusted with what Indian society and the world in general had become, Hiresh focused again on that image in his mind of the cold, blue and frothy white waters flowing past Rishikesh. At this time of year, the Ganges was still swollen from the spring melt and would rush fresh and clean beneath the ancient temples.

Lost in these thoughts, Hiresh was almost startled to hear a train whistle blow somewhere off in the distance—a high-pitched whistle that brought to mind Kipling and the impenetrable green jungles of distant days. Most of India's trains were still of a piece with that era—thousands of peasants clinging onto the sides of them or squatting up on top or packed into the poorly ventilated and overly crowded passenger cars, a sea of dark-skinned humanity painted in both white and brightly colored clothing and draped like pack animals with all of their belongings.

In his mind, Hiresh had already pictured the train with its throng of passengers draped to the outside, but when it did finally appear around the bend, the clinging passengers were conspicuously absent, all of them no doubt having disembarked at or between the Kosad and Utran stations near the outskirts of the city, in order to avoid being harassed by the railway police.

In short order, the train had settled to a stop in front of Hiresh. The locomotive let out a final hiss. The doors flung open a moment later and a multitude of people poured out onto the platform. Porters rushed into action. Families and lovers greeted their arriving loved ones. The sea of humanity bustled about Hiresh, who watched it with no small degree of contempt and was greatly relieved when the bulk of the carnival like atmosphere had finally shifted out to the streets of Surat.

Being from a rural area originally, Hiresh had an innate fondness for wide open spaces and held an inversely proportionate dislike for crowds of any kind, and in India you had nothing, if not for crowds. A country not much larger than Saudi Arabia was overrun with more than a billion of people, so that it was a marvel you could find any kind of open space at all. One day Hiresh assumed that if things kept going as they were, there would be no open spaces left in India. What on earth he would do at that point, Hiresh had no idea. Probably go to live in the foothills of the Himalayas, as his grandfather had done many years earlier.

As Hiresh waited, those with tickets who had been waiting to board the train began to jostle with each other in order to grab the best seats, or to grab any seat at all, so that an entirely new state of chaos soon erupted. Hiresh's response was to wait until the masses were mostly settled onboard and all the jostling had more or less come to a halt. He then stood up and calmly went in search of his own private berth. As an anti-fraud agent in the CBI, however low level, he was paid enough to afford such luxuries, which largely explained his lack of urgency when it came to boarding the train. Besides, with summer now transitioning into the monsoon season and the heat pushing a hundred degrees and the humidity in the same vicinity, Hiresh was in no hurry to go anywhere, even the few hundred feet up to his car. In fact, if not for the allure of the fresh, cool air in Rishikesh, he might have opted to spend his entire two week vacation listening to music in his apartment.

Hearing the whistle blow and the conductor call, and realizing the train was about to depart without him, Hiresh hurried forward with those already onboard staring down at his approach. This was especially true of those in the lower class sections—a multitude of peasants, in many cases with their heads and arms draped out through the horizontal metal bars of the glassless openings.

Incensed to find these peasants reviewing his progress, Hiresh avoided all eye contact, stepped onboard and started down the aisle towards his cabin car, only to be confronted with more peasants gathered in his way. Stepping over and around them, and none too gingerly, he finally arrived to his berth, only to be faced with a further indignity. A young couple had taken it upon themselves to occupy his berth, complete with their five children and a cage filled with chickens. Hiresh promptly displayed his CBI badge, in response to which the husband jumped to his feet, apologized profusely and bowed his way out into the crowded aisle, herding his family behind him. Hiresh settled in and did his best to ignore the resulting chain reaction as the man and his family attempted to stake out a new place amidst the dozens of already settled bodies outside his berth.

The chaos ongoing in the aisle, Hiresh stared out his window and found his mind carried away by the blue-green color of an adjacent train. There was a white stripe running down the length of the windows and something about the blue and white together caused his mind to dream. There were so many colors in India—pinks, blues, fuchsias and yellows, as many colors as there were gods in the Hindu pantheon—so that Hiresh was frequently carried away by this or that wistful daydream.

Hiresh had nearly forgotten about the heat and the scent of ripe bodies and the cacophony of a thousand voices when the whistle blew and the train finally lurched forward. Good, he thought, his mind back to its visions of the cool, blue skies above Rishikesh and the rushing white waters of the Ganges as it flowed past the town. Soon, all this heat and overcrowding would be far behind him.

Leaving the station, the train promptly crossed the Tapti River and came to a brief stop at the Utran station, where the usual horde of peasants scrambled up on top and attached themselves to its sides like flies and continued to do so all the way up to Kosad station another mile north, until it became nearly impossible to see the train for all the people hanging on to it, these nonpaying masses left to cling for their lives to the outside of the train for the next however many miles, until they had come to their home village and disembarked.

Fortunately, there were no footholds near Hiresh's window and hence no peasants to block his view, allowing him to see north as the train gathered speed and approached the outskirts of the city. There was increasingly open country alongside the tracks until farmland had completely surrounded the northbound train.

Distracted by the scenery, Hiresh was startled when a luxury train came whizzing by the other way, and without one single peasant clinging to the outside or the top. Of course, if any of them had tried, the authorities would have swiped them away like ants. As with every other industrialized nation in the world, a shocking disparity existed between wealth and poverty in India, and perhaps this disparity was never quite as shocking as it was in India.

Ironically, it was Hiresh's job to ensure that wealth, in whatever form, had not been obtained through corrupt means, but when Hiresh viewed all the disparity around him, it was hard to imagine such wealth had been acquired by any other means than corruption.

Hiresh sighed and pulled out his morning paper, faced with one more epic catastrophe splashed all over the front page. A major crop failure was crippling rural farmers and had been doing so for several months now. Government experts had cited drought and a bee die off as the primary causes, and no

doubt both had played a part, but a number of independent scientists and environmental agencies had blamed Magento Corporation and their engineered seeds for the bee die off, and that went back to the very engineering of the seeds themselves. They would not generate without being sprayed by one of Magento's chemical agents and had been further engineered to be resistant to Magento's pesticides. The result being, the use of Magento seeds required farmers to spray a sea of chemicals on their plants and soil, killing off everything except for the Magento crop itself. Bees died in the process and biodiversity was lost.

Reading this news, Hiresh felt the usual sense of hopelessness descend over his spirit. His thoughts turned grim. We as a species can never reach perfection. Our problems will always grow in direct proportion to the increase of modern technology. The smarter we become, the more complex our problems. And all the while, nature just sits there laughing at our feeble efforts.

Well, he thought, whatever the reason for the crop failure, plants had withered and died before reaching maturity. People were starving and that had led to looting and burning—a state of anarchist rage that was directed mostly at anything with a government stamp to it.

Feeling somewhat guilty by default, Hiresh turned the page and found even more trouble, this time in the form of an ostentatious, white haired charlatan named Muktananda. Muktananda had organized a massive protest over the crop failure, thereby fomenting the masses into further discontent and violence. Hiresh shook his head in disgust. The man had attached a string of artificial titles and subtitles to the end of his name, far too tiresome to mention.

Muktananda had achieved notoriety by inventing a solar water pump for use by rural farmers, and thereafter donating this entire great fortune to charity. From these humble beginnings, Muktananda then built a religious empire, with ashrams all over the country and with himself installed as its religious figurehead, his initial act of sacrifice having brought the man more untold riches, whether that had been the intended outcome or not.

Whichever way you fell on that score, Muktananda was everywhere you looked in India these days, whether it be fighting on behalf of the underdog peasant in rural development disputes or battling against giant agribusinesses. Given his widespread humanitarian efforts, coupled with the fact that such efforts had made Muktananda filthy rich, the man was considered a rogue by some, a saint by others and a little of both by many.

As a government investigator, Hiresh mostly viewed the man with suspicion, but at present Muktananda's planned visit to Rishikesh the following day was the most troublesome thing about the man's existence.

Given Muktananda's thousands of devotees, and a press corps that seemed to follow him wherever he went, Muktananda's presence meant that the usually serene village of Rishikesh would be turned into a circus.

Hiresh closed the paper with disgust, unable to take any more bad news that day and deciding to enjoy the passing countryside as best as he could. It was mostly flat, dry terrain as the train traveled north, accented here and there by palm trees and peasant housing.

In time, they passed the cities of Ratlam and Kota and ancient temples and white palaces frequently came into view along the way. They eventually crossed the broad Chambal River and approached the outskirts of Agra, where the majestic Taj Majal punctuated the vast, empty land.

Growing bored, Hiresh once again opened the paper and read with some interest how workers in the south had stumbled upon a vast treasure of gold and jewels within an ancient temple. The treasure was valued at billions of dollars, and of course now everyone was fighting over what should be done with it. The keepers of the temple wanted it left alone. The government felt at least part of it belonged to them. Muktananda had made one of his obligatory appearances the previous day, arguing that this great fortune should be used to help the disadvantaged and needy. He was India's version of the Reverend Al Sharpton, always in the middle of whatever crisis came along, and especially when it involved great fortunes. Muktananda was either the luckiest guru who had ever lived, or one of the world's greatest frauds.

Whatever he was, Hiresh could only hope his stay in Rishikesh would be a brief one. Aside from crowds, Hiresh hated nothing more than just the sort of religious spectacle that accompanied Muktananda wherever he went.

As day turned to dusk, the train approached the outskirts of New Delhi, passing through miles and miles of wretched slums as it did. Then, nearing the station, monuments dedicated to wealth and ancient imperial power came to tower over the tracks.

Finally, Hiresh was disembarking and walking a short distance to his connecting train, the images of all that abject poverty still haunting his thoughts. What have I done in my life to make this world any better, he wondered? Questions like this often haunted Hiresh's mind and went on doing so as his new train headed north to Saharanpur.

Ultimately, the train veered northeast into the foothills of the Himalayas and at well past midnight, Hiresh was finally disembarking at the Rishikesh railway station. Cool night air had settled down from the snow-capped Himalayas and the muffled roar of the Ganges could be heard echoing up through the streets. Hiresh's heart instantaneously filled with gladness. For months, he had dealt with the unrelenting heat. For an entire year, he dealt

with death, deceit and corruption. To be away from the filth of humanity and to feel the cooler air on his skin was to have an all-abiding peace descend over his spirit.

His grandfather, Swami Das Naga Mahatma opened the door to the ashram the minute Hiresh knocked, as if he had been waiting there all day for him to arrive.

“You are here,” Mahatma said.

“Mostly,” Hiresh said.

The old man smiled slyly.

“There is no greater peace than being honest.”

Hiresh wanted to confess that he had failed greatly at being honest, for he knew little inner peace, but decided to err on the side of personal privacy.

“Come in, come in,” the old man said. “If you are famished from the trip, we can sneak into the kitchen for a morsel.”

“I am.”

In the kitchen, the old man quietly opened the refrigerator and held up a piece of aaloo paratha, or potato bread.

“I have yogurt and pickles and chutney, or...”

He held up a covered dish for his grandson.

“Rajma and rice.”

Rajma was a red kidney bean curry and Hiresh nodded at that. The old man scooped some out into a bowl and placed it in the microwave.”

“The marvels of modern science,” he said over his shoulder as he pushed a button to start the microwave.

Mahatma waited patiently for the bell to ring and brought the bowl over to Hiresh, along with some of the potato bread. While Hiresh ate, Mahatma watched on in silence. When Hiresh looked up, the old man smiled.

“Why are you still angry after all these years?”

“Who says I’m still angry?” Hiresh asked while he continued to eat.

“I can feel it in your karma.”

“I have many new things to be angry about. Each and every day of the year.”

“Maybe, but all this anger stems from the original thing.”

Hiresh shrugged and continued eating in silence. He hated it when his grandfather pried into his personal thoughts. At times, Hiresh felt as if he had left those distant events far behind him. At other times, he felt as if the horror of those distant events had forever stained his life and that the grief of it would never allow him to be free, just as Mahatma had said. Either way, he was in no mood to talk about it, and especially not at this late hour.

“It is okay,” Mahatma said, reading Hiresb’s mind. “You are right. It is late. Baba Raja Maharaja is teaching good things. In the morning, he will help you to find peace with your past.”

Hiresb did not respond, and in fact said little more than good night to his grandfather before retiring to bed. All was dark and quiet in the ashram, the holiness of the place mixing with Hiresb’s troubled thoughts, like a cool, mountain wind encountering a wild brush fire.

And behind everything else, the roar of the river went on unceasingly.

The Slow Train to Rishikesh

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At precisely 5am the next morning, someone in the ashram struck a large gong and the bass tone echoed throughout the ancient building. Awakened from his slumber, Hireshe literally felt the vibrations resonating through his chest.

A long moment passed as that base tone slowly subsided and then the gong was struck again. Another long moment followed and the gong was struck a third time. Finally, it was allowed to fall completely silent.

In response to the gong, people arose throughout the lodging area of the ashram, in preparation for a new day, but Hireshe remained lying in bed. As the grandson of an important member of the ashram, he had been provided with his own private quarters but could hear the many devotees rustling into action in the adjacent rooms and could imagine the crowded group bathrooms, everyone pretending to be cheerful as they jostled for a place at the washbasin or toilet.

What Hireshe did not hear were voices. That was the first rule of the ashram each morning—silence and quiet contemplation of the hours ahead. There was no room for meaningless chatter.

With the world still dark outside his open window, and his room virtually black, Hireshe reached for the light switch but nothing happened. That was India, especially in rural areas and especially along the frontiers. The power was always going out. You expected as much. You were more surprised when the lights actually came on.

Hireshe groped around for some matches and lit a torch. Light and shadows immediately danced along the walls. Hireshe brought the torch with him into the bathroom and set about shaving, grateful that he did not have four people elbowing with him for use of the one basin and toilet.

As he shaved, Hireshe heard other pilgrims performing various ablutions but he had no ablutions of his own to perform. Nor did he believe much in the superstitions of his own people. The pantheon of Hindu gods was deeply embedded into the mind of every young Hindu child, but belief in those gods had mostly been bled out of Hireshe, first by tragedy, then by education and

Finally, at 8am, everyone was freed to participate in an hour of Seva yoga, which meant joining in with the various morning chores around the Ashram. Some helped with preparing breakfast. Some scrubbed the floors. Hiresh went out to help in the garden, where he found signs of tension occasionally arising between various members of the uninitiated, which was made all the more grating by their inability to utter what they really thought in words.

At 9am, everyone sat down to eat breakfast in the continuing silence. You became very aware of your own chewing in the quiet and the chewing of others. The food was purely vegetarian, mostly fresh fruit and grains.

Without any particular order, people arose from their meal and went to wash their dishes. There was one long basin provided for this task, along with soap and cloths and several faucets. Having washed, rinsed and dried his own utensils, Hiresh started back toward his room. His intention was to walk into town and spend a relaxed day down by the river watching the world go by. He had no desire to engage in another hour of yoga or to sit through the hours and hours of lectures and study time. The entire day was mapped out for the faithful at the ashram, from lunch to dinner and right through until you settled back into the great hall around 9pm for a group discussion. Then it was off to your narrow, hard bed and another night of slumber.

Hiresh had hoped to sneak off unnoticed but his grandfather mysteriously appeared from the far end of the long hallway and came his way.

“You are not staying for Baba Raja’s teachings,” Mahatma said as they met.

“I came to relax, not study.”

“Then study life.”

Hiresh made a facial expression that said, okay, I get it. Be present in my own body. Be wherever I am. But must you constantly remind me of it?

The old man smiled in return.

“Especially study your own thoughts,” Mahatma added.

“Even that begins to sound like work to me.”

The two men stared at each other.

“At least come back for the group discussion. That is never painful.”

“I’ll be back tonight,” Hiresh said. “Probably in time for the discussion.”

They hugged and went their separate ways. Hiresh, unable to suppress his urge to look back, did so and found his grandfather staring straight forward, as if looking anywhere except where his feet were taking him was against the rules.

Hiresh shook his head and continued on. He had never entirely understood the point. To awaken, yes. To have that awakening reduced to a straightjacket of dogma, no. Then perhaps Hiresh did not understand enlightenment very well. He was willing to concede the fact. Whatever enlightenment he knew

came as fleeting moments, when his mind was inexplicably transported to places of rapture, like the way he felt walking down the long, garden path that led out to the road from the ashram. Trees overhung the way and turned it into something of a tunnel, and a shaded, enchanted one at that. The shade of the path was splashed with flowers and Hiresh suddenly felt a dream of something long forgotten pass through his heart as he walked forward. Then Hiresh reached the brightly lit road and the dream swiftly passed away, leaving behind only a hint of its existence, like the threads of your midnight slumbers.

Disappointed by the dream's departure, Hiresh turned left and headed towards town. From across the river and above the rooftops, the Swarg Niwas Temple came into view, golden in the morning sun and Hiresh felt himself transported away by a new dream like moment. He was still nursing that dream as he came alongside the Ganges, swollen from the spring runoff and with its milky-blue colors looking carbonated with the churning whitewater. The towering Swarg Niwas Temple was across the river to his right now. The town and the Raj Resort were straight ahead. Small coves existed along the banks of the river where people could bathe and sanctify themselves safely, but one false move and you would find yourself swept all the way down to Allahabad.

Everywhere Hiresh looked, there were brightly painted buildings splashed against the green foothills of the Himalayas and farther up behind town, towering snow-capped mountain peaks peeked out here and there from between the folds of the hills—as if to say, yoo hoo, we're here. And then they were gone again behind the folds of the green hills as Hiresh walked along—as if to say, we're hiding again.

Hiresh passed more people cautiously purifying themselves along the edge of the river and others practicing yoga, alone and in groups, and young people, especially westerners, seated at the feet of withered, dark-skinned yogis and somehow in all these distractions, Hiresh found himself at the outskirts of the village. He picked a spot in the sun where he could watch the milky-white river rush by and sat down. The sun felt warm on his skin, but not too warm. A fine breeze blowing down from the mountains tickled his ears. People came and went. The sound of bells and chanting wafted on the air. Hiresh was amused when two yogis pulled up to a jutti vendor on their Vespa. The colorfully embroidered cloth shoes covered the entire front of the store and the two yogis chattered back and forth while picking through them like two women at a mall.

Hiresh had been seated there alone for some time when he noticed a woman coming down the road from the direction of the ashram and realized it was the lovely Caucasian lady who had been distracting him earlier in the

morning. When their eyes met she smiled and Hiresh's heart raced away. It raced away even more when she veered over to where he was seated.

"Hi," she said. "I remember you from the ashram."

Her hand came out.

"I'm Chelsea."

"Hiresh."

Chelsea smiled.

"I take it you speak English."

Hiresh nodded.

"I take it you are English."

Chelsea laughed.

"It's 'at obvious, is it?" she said in a salty Cockney accent.

Hiresh nodded.

"So why aren't you studying at the ashram?" she asked, having dropped the Cockney but still sounding British.

"Why aren't you?"

"I've been here a week and this is my last day. I decided to play hooky."

Hiresh nodded without offering an explanation of his own.

"So?" she said, not about to let him off the hook.

"I come from Surat," he said. "With thousands of people around me every minute of every day. For me, sitting in that crowded ashram is like being back in the crowded city."

"Well, feeling that way," Chelsea said. "Why did you come to the ashram in the first place?"

"Now I am beginning to suspect you are a reporter."

Chelsea smiled.

"Sort of."

Hiresh nodded and stared.

"Oh, you'd like me to be specific. I work for Human Rights Watch. Monitoring NGO's mostly these days. I presume you know how it is. NGO's have been multiplying in India like tech startups over the past few years, half of them rotten to the core. Really rotten to the core. So we slap wrists here and there, or try to put them out of business, if they are engaged in really serious abuses."

When Hiresh continued staring in silence, Chelsea took it to be indifference.

"What do you think of young girls being sexually abused, and young children being sold into slave labor?"

"I think it shouldn't happen," Hiresh said.

"But it does," Chelsea said.

“Yes, it does.”

“Oh, well. You don’t seem particularly disturbed by the idea.”

“I’m on vacation and trying not to think of such things for a few weeks.”

“Oh, well, of course,” Chelsea said. “Jolly well good. I’m sorry to have disturbed you and your pleasant vacation. I hope you have a nice day.”

Hiresh stared after Chelsea as she walked away, wondering why it always seemed to happen this way. A hint of sincere attraction, the racing of one’s heart, the possibility of two people actually having something in common and here it had turned to insult and injury in a matter of minutes. He looked back at the churning river with Chelsea still there, like a tear in the fabric of spacetime, like a flaw in what had been an otherwise lovely morning, a reminder of every failure and stupid thing Hiresh had ever said in his life. Why did he find it so hard to respond positively in these situations? Perhaps because he feared exactly what had happened—people insisting that you adopt their point of view... or else.

Good god, he thought. This is how wars get started. People off on a crusade with their noble causes, no thought for the way they might be trampling over other people’s feelings in the process.

Well, it had certainly put an end to Hiresh’s silly hopes. Which would have been far easier to take, had he not found himself liking Chelsea so much.

Hiresh had been thinking to head further into town when he heard a raucous sound coming from the direction of the Swarg Niwas Temple. Looking up, he beheld Muktananda Sri Ali Baba, dressed in white and leading his entire entourage of dancing devotees across the footbridge, their bells ringing, voices chanting and the usual phalanx of media following along after them.

Damn him, Hiresh thought. I have already seen the ruin of my pleasant day. And now this. I may as well go back and study at the ashram.

Seriously intending to do that, or to hire a driver to take him further up into the Himalayas, Hiresh’s phone rang and he saw with a glance that it was Sanjay, the Senior Superintendent of Police in his Special Crimes Division. Why on earth would he be calling me? Hiresh immediately feared that it was some sort of emergency.

God, not even one day in the mountains and my peace of mind has been completely upended, first by Muktananda and now by this call from the superintendent. Hiresh’s inclination was not to answer at all.

On the tenth ring, he finally succumbed to the call of duty and picked up the phone.

“Yes,” Hiresh said.

“It’s your superintendent, Sanjay.”

“I know, sir.”

“Well, have you seen the news?”

“I’m in Rishikesh, and doing my best to ignore it.”

“So I will tell you. There is some kind of medical emergency developing down at Indore. We don’t know yet what it is. Personally, I suspect one of those new super bacteria outbreaks. The local hospitals are overrun with people who show just these very types of symptoms. But whatever the case, several people have died so I have been ordered to send someone down to investigate.”

“So, why are you calling me?”

“Why, obviously, I want you to go there.”

“Sanjay, I just arrived here for a two week vacation.”

“Look, I’m not asking. I’m ordering you. All my other deputy sub-inspectors are tied up with other cases right now so get on a train and get down to Indore as soon as you can. Okay?”

“Sir...”

“Don’t ‘sir’ me. I want you down in Indore today.”

“But, sir. The next train doesn’t leave here until early tomorrow morning.”

“Then find a driver to take you to Delhi. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, I hear you.

“So when can you be there?”

“Be where?”

“To New Delhi?”

Hiresh checked his phone for the time.

“I suppose by four o’clock. Something close to that. It will depend on finding a driver.”

“Well, however you do it, find one and leave right away. I will book you passage on whatever train I can find leaving New Delhi around four o’clock. I’ll also reserve you a room in the Hotel Apna Palace for tonight.”

“No need for that, sir. It will take me all day and night to get there. Book the room for tomorrow and reserve me a private cabin. That way I can sleep on the train going south.”

“Very well,” Sanjay said. “I will call you again as soon as I have made the reservations.”

“Sir,” Hiresh said.

“Yes?”

“Do you mind telling me a bit more about what is happening?”

“I told you. I don’t know. Why on earth do you think I’m sending you down there? So, are you on your way yet?”

Hiresh stood up and started back towards the ashram.

“Yes, I’m on my way,” he said.

“Very well, then call me along the road so I’ll have a better sense of your timing.”

“Fine, sir. I’ll call you in a bit.”

Hiresh hung up and cursed under his breath. Damn him, anyway. The mountains and river and the fresh air had brought so much peace to his heart already and now it was all slipping away. Hiresh came to the tree-shrouded path leading into the ashram, the dream like bliss he had experienced there but an hour earlier nowhere in sight.

Not immediately finding his grandfather inside, Hiresh hurried off to change and pack his suitcase. In the quiet of the ashram, his holstered gun seemed like a very strange sight, lying there beneath his folded clothing, but Hiresh had grown accustomed long ago to carrying the weapon wherever he went.

With everything packed, he went in search of his grandfather.

“Ah, trouble,” Mahatma said upon seeing his grandson. “It is evident in your being from a hundred meters.”

“There’s some sort of medical emergency brewing down in Indore.”

At hearing this, even the usually mirthful Mahatma grew somber.

“They could not find someone else.”

Hiresh shook his head, not wanting to explain why he had been chosen.

“I need to find a driver who can get me to New Delhi.”

Mahatma studied his grandson.

“You can take ours. Come, I will give him instructions.”

They found the withered old driver silently washing the car, looking as if he had stepped straight out of a Kipling story. The old Hindustan Ambassador did not look much younger than the old man, its once lovely sky blue and white colors now chipped and mostly faded with the years. The diesel engine belched black smoke when fired up.

“I am sorry to be leaving so soon,” Hiresh said with a hug of his grandfather. “Maybe I will be able to come back when I’m done.”

“We all have our duties in this world. Just be wherever you are, my son.”

Hiresh was half in the car when he heard a woman’s voice calling out from a distance. He climbed back out and stared over the top of the car. It was Chelsea, running down the path beneath the overhanging trees. She came up out of breath and bent over.

“Are you going into town by any chance?” she said.

“Not exactly.”

Chelsea took a deep breath and stood upright, her face flushed from the exertion.

“Well just exactly where are you going, if I may ask?”

“New Delhi,” Hiresh said.

“Splendid. So do you mind terribly if I tag along? I need to get there too. There’s some sort of medical crisis brewing down in Indore and I absolutely must get there without delay.”

Hiresh looked at his grandfather.

“Well?” Chelsea said, looking from one to the other.

“This car will most certainly accommodate an English lady,” Mahatma said.

“Thank you,” she said, bowing to him in a way that implied her irritation with Hiresh. “Now if you can just wait here five minutes, I will dash off and grab my luggage.”

She gave Hiresh another look and hurried into the ashram. Hiresh looked at Mahatma. Mahatma smiled.

“They are like bees, are they not? They sting, but they also make honey.”

Hiresh sighed deeply and climbed into the backseat of the car. Mahatma waited for Chelsea and opened the front door for her as she ran up.

“Thank you so much,” Chelsea said and bowed with her two hands together.

The old man drove away with Mahatma still standing in the road. Chelsea was staring straight ahead. Hiresh had a long look at the back of her head and slumped down against the passenger side door.

The Slow Train to Rishikesh

3

The road south led away from the holy places along the river and through the backside of town. They quickly passed through a modest industrial zone and at the far end of that merged with the Delhi Road. Soon the misty forests of the Rajaji National Park surrounded them and they drove along for miles in a shroud of trees. Troops of monkeys that had gathered on the road scattered into the brush as the car passed by. Hiresh glanced back once and saw the monkeys quickly reappearing on the road behind him.

He was still looking back when the old man suddenly slammed on the brakes, hurtling Hiresh forward into the back of the front seat. With a curse he righted himself and found a full-grown elephant standing in the middle of the road. The old man honked, in response to which the elephant simply flapped its ears. The old man started to open his door.

“No!” Chelsea said, grabbing his arm. “You’ll be trampled alive.”

The old man said something in Hindi and climbed out anyway. Both Chelsea and Hiresh watched as the old man went forward scolding the elephant. Having come to within forty feet of it, the elephant finally let out a high pitched trumpet, dropped a load of dung and lumbered off into the forest. The old man returned muttering to himself and climbed back behind the wheel. The hand brake came off and the old car lurched forward again, the old man swerving hard to the right in order to avoid running over the dung.

A few miles later, they emerged from the deep forest and passed through the small town of Mortichur. Then, roughly two miles later, the road came along the Ganges and into the town of Haridwar. This was the place made famous in photos, where the devoted came from all over India to bathe in the river and the broad stone steps leading down to the river were literally papered over by a mass of humanity struggling against itself in an attempt to find a spot in the river. Behind and above this spectacle, brightly colored temples painted the skyline but the once blue and milky-white river had now turned a dirty dishwater color.

The road paralleled the river for nearly ten miles, with country clubs and parks and the Prithri Raj Chauhan College bordering their journey to the left. They then came to Bahadarabad and the Delhi Road veered sharply to the left, headed towards Roorkee. The land around them was flat and nondescript. The heat and humidity increased with every passing mile. At one point, Chelsea gathered her long, sandy brown hair into a knot on top of her head, leaving her delicate neck and blushing ears exposed. Hiresh stared for a long moment and looked away.

At Roorkee, the road turned sharply south and they passed through more flat, nondescript countryside. Depressed that the magic of the mountains had completely disappeared from the day, Hiresh slumped back down in the seat, his thoughts haunted by the way the snowcapped peaks had been peeking in and out from behind the folds of the hills earlier that morning.

The entire time, Chelsea sat up front, busying herself with both running an office from her I-pad and I-phone and talking away with the old man in Hindi, and not doing such a bang up job with her Hindi. In attempting to communicate with the old man, she was for all intents and purposes talking to herself, pointing out the peasants in the fields and their cattle drawn carts and explaining how everything in their world would be so much better, if only the rich weren't so greedy and the politicians in power really cared.

Tired of hearing her, Hiresh was about to intercede when his phone rang. It was the superintendent.

"Yes sir," Hiresh said.

"Where are you now?"

"South of Roorkee. About twenty miles."

"Can you make the Nizamuddin Secunderabad Rjdhni train? It leaves at 4:00 o'clock."

Hiresh checked his phone for the time. It was 12:30 and they were a hundred miles out from New Delhi.

"Yes, we can make it. By 3:00, I think, or 3:30, even with trouble."

"Okay. I will book you a private berth."

Chelsea leaned over the seat, attempting to get Hiresh's attention.

"Just a moment, sir. Yes?" he said to Chelsea.

"Are you by any chance booking a train to Indore?"

"My superior is."

"Would it be too much to have him book a berth for me too?"

Hiresh stared for a moment before conveying this request to Sanjay in Hindi.

"What is this woman doing in your car?"

Hiresh explained that too.

“Well, you tell this Chelsea that the government of India is not in the business of booking passage for civilians, I don’t care what organization she works for.”

“Yes, sir.”

They discussed the most recent developments in the case and what Hiresh would be doing when he finally arrived in Indore.

“Well?” Chelsea said once Hiresh had hung up.

“He said the government of India is not in the business of booking passage for civilians.”

“Bloody scoundrel.”

Incensed, Chelsea turned forward again. With her hair up, Hiresh could see that her ears had turned a bright pink color. He smiled to himself. They were lovely ears, blushed or not and she had a lovely neck to go with them.

Finding himself distracted by her beauty again, Hiresh turned back to watch the passing countryside. His thoughts were of the case ahead and his ongoing failure to engage in any meaningful way with his own career over the years, which somehow turned his thoughts back to the history of the CBI itself. From investigating conventional crimes at its inception, the bureau’s mandate had evolved into the realm of assassinations, kidnappings, hijackings and crimes committed by extremists. Any violation of the Official Secrets Act also came under their purview. So did large scale bank fraud and insurance schemes.

There had been several sensational cases, which served as turning points in the history of the agency, like the Bhagalpur Blindings, where local police had poured acid into the eyes of 31 convicted men, and the Bhopal tragedy. Contemporaneously to the time of these events, the constitutional courts had begun to assign everything from murder cases to dowry deaths to instances of rape in the CBI’s direction, if for no reason, because of their growing notoriety. At this juncture, the CBI was split into two separate divisions, the Anti-Corruption Division, where Hiresh worked and a Special Crimes Division. The former dealt primarily with conventional crimes and economic offences, but with the establishment of a Special Investigation Team, to deal with important and sensational cases, the roles of the Special Crimes and Anti-Corruption Division investigations often paralleled and overlapped each other. Then, with a liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990’s and the resulting increase in corruption, a Special Task Forces unit was added, along with a Bank Fraud and Securities cell, a Crime Records and Statistics Division, a Research Division and an Economic Offences wing. All these changes had taken place before Hiresh’s time in the agency, and while training at the academy, he had found it nearly impossible to keep up with the growing

labyrinth of competing interests. He was not alone. Once Hiresh actually went to work in the field, he realized no one knew what the hell was going on from minute to minute. There were endless interagency skirmishes, and quite often right in the middle of an investigation.

In the most recent reorganizational efforts, the CBI had been broken down into three separate investigation divisions—Anti-Corruption, to deal with cases of corruption and fraud committed by public servants of all Central Government Departments, Central Public Sector Undertakings and Central Financial Institutions—an Economic Crimes Division to deal with bank frauds, financial frauds, Import Export & Foreign Exchange Violations, large-scale smuggling of narcotics, antiques, cultural property and smuggling of other contraband items, etc.—and a Special Crimes Division, to deal with cases of terrorism, bomb blasts, sensational homicides, kidnapping for ransom and crimes committed by the mafia/underworld.

As such, the CBI was now constituted of an Anti-Corruption Division, an Economic Offences Division, a Special Crimes Division, a Directorate of Prosecution, an Administration Division, a Policy & Coordination Division and a Central Forensic Science Laboratory, all clearly defined, supposedly, and still Hiresh was forever stumbling over other agents in the course of any one crime investigation, as if the entire Indian government was playing a game of Cold War cat and mouse with itself.

The fact was, every attempt at streamlining things had only led to greater complexity. Every attempt at cleaning house had only led to greater internal fraud.

Ultimately, Hiresh thought, someone, somewhere was always beholden to create yet another division in order to clean up the last one they had created, and then another division to clean up that one, on and on, until somewhere in the future, there would be nothing but agencies investigating other agencies. Something Hiresh had read in his college philosophy class popped into his thoughts. From the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing has ever been made, and never was this as true as when it applied to the government.

As Hiresh came out of his thoughts, he saw they were approaching the outskirts of Muzaffarnagar, another flat, sprawling lifeless city breeding with slums for miles and miles. Traveling southeast, they had soon left the city behind and were passing through rich agriculture fields. The day was unbearably hot. The windows were open with a hot wind blowing through the car. Hiresh glanced up at Chelsea. She was no longer on the phone but still busy with running her rolling office. She was also still incensed about the tickets. Hiresh could see that and it gave him a great pleasure to think it.

Twenty miles further ahead, they came upon the clean little provincial town of Khatauli. There were brilliantly white buildings and fields of flowers and a dark sky above the red roofs of the town.

Soon, it began to rain and the open windows quickly went up. Chelsea got back on the phone. From her discussion about transportation issues, Hiresh assumed she was talking with someone at Human Rights Watch.

Good luck, he thought. Her people would never have the same pull as the CBI when it came to this sort of last minute reservation. When the Indian government wanted something, everyone else got out of the way. When you were someone like Chelsea, it did not matter how big your organization was, you were left to the whims of a stationmaster and his willingness to be bribed.

The fields south of Khatauli went on for miles. Then they came to Meerut, which was still provincial but mostly modern with only a smattering of buildings left over from the colonial era. They quickly passed through it and the road jogged directly south again, headed for New Delhi. The towns grew closer together now, until soon it was one, vast sea of commerce and slums.

Hiresh checked the hour on his phone. They had made good time. It was a little past 2:30. By the time they reached New Delhi and navigated their way to the railway station, it would be approaching 3:30. Perfect timing. Hiresh did not want to be late. Nor did he wish to be sitting around the railway station for hours and hours. The Nizamuddin Secunderabad Rjdhni train was no luxury line. The first class trains went through the New Delhi Railway Station where the trains were immaculate. That station looked like it had been transported from outer space. Comparatively speaking, the Nizamuddin Secunderabad Rjdhni departed from a freight dock.

Chelsea was still on her phone, desperately trying to pull some strings with a coworker's help, but it was not easy in such a labyrinthine culture that she and few foreigners would ever completely understand.

If she had not been so snooty earlier on, Hiresh thought, I might have been willing to help her. But since she seems to know everything about how this world works, let her find her own way.

As they came to the outskirts of New Delhi, the storm broke and in a magical moment, the clouds parted over the city with the great temples and palaces gleaming golden in the late sun, as if some paradise had materialized out of the clouds. Around them and closer in, the streets of the slums were wet and muddy and the poorest of the poor who had been hiding from the rain were now scurrying about, attempting to make up for lost time before darkness set in.

Once they had entered the city proper, the streets became paved and overrun with traffic. Hiresh leaned forward and spoke with the old man in

Hindi, instructing him to turn this way and that. It required aggressiveness to make your way, something the old man did not possess, so that Hiresh nearly leapt over the seat to take hold of the wheel.

They eventually found their way to the railway station, and like every railway station in India it was swarming with a sea of humanity. Hiresh jumped out, grabbed his suitcase from the trunk and squatted down to speak with the old man through the driver's window.

“Will you be able to find your way back out of the city all right?”

The old man grunted and nodded his head. Hiresh handed him two thousand rupees for the gas and his troubles. The old man grunted again.

“All right then, so long, and thanks.”

Hiresh stood upright.

“And so long to you. Best of luck.”

“Oh, is that it?” Chelsea said. “You're just going to leave me here, in the middle of this.”

She gestured with her hands out at the crowded railway station.

“I really took you for some kind of gentleman.”

Hiresh stared for a long moment before speaking.

“From your behavior, it did not occur to me that you were looking for a gentleman.”

“Well, I certainly haven't found one here, have I?”

Hiresh shrugged and turned away, having no use for women of her sort. They liked to beat you over the head with the feminism card, then ask you to hold the car door open for them. Hiresh was fine with either approach, but felt disgust for any woman who tried to have it both ways.

At the ticket booth, Hiresh pushed his way to the front of the line and flashed his badge to the attendant. There was much grumbling behind Hiresh, but no one dared to make a further fuss. They knew a cop with a bad attitude would delight in throwing one of them in jail.

Hiresh quickly had his ticket in hand and pressed back through the crush of bodies along the platform to reach his car, obligated once he had found it to step over and around a swarm of passengers crowded into the aisles. Once inside his berth, he made himself comfortable and bought the evening paper from a boy passing by his window. The crop failure besetting Indian farmers was still splashed all over the front page. News of the medical emergency down in Indore was relegated to the third page. There was a photo of peasants holding some sort of religious ritual outside the hospital.

And for this, Sanjay had to ruin my pleasant vacation. Hiresh stared out at all the poor people gathered on the train platform, both pitying and despising them for their gullibility and superstitions. They always responded to death

and destruction by making offerings to the gods and praying for miracles. People were so naïve as to place their life savings into a so-called “invisible box” at a temple, expecting to be saved from their selfsame penury. Hiresh shook his head at the ignorance of his fellow Indians.

Hiresh had been lost for some time in his thoughts when he noticed a familiar figure out of the corner of his eye and turned to find Chelsea standing in the crush of bodies along the platform, looking absolutely lost and forlorn. Hiresh was about to pull the curtain down over the window but Chelsea noticed him before he could. She shrugged as if to say, please help. I’m here with my luggage and have nowhere to go. Hesitating for a moment, Hiresh finally nodded and Chelsea gathered her two suitcases. A few moments later, Hiresh heard the commotion of Chelsea fighting through all the bodies out in the aisle. Then she appeared in the doorway, looking at once indignant and beaten at having to accept Hiresh’s gesture of kindness.

“You might have helped,” she said.

Hiresh smirked and shook his head.

“You’re welcome,” he said.

Chelsea set her suitcases to one side and sat down opposite him, now looking more defeated than not.

“Thank you,” she said after a long moment.

Hiresh shrugged back.

“So, how do you rate?” Chelsea said with a wave of her hand at the private berth.

“CBI.”

“Well, you might have told me.”

“You were too busy informing me how everything worked in this world.”

“Okay, I can see that this is one of those conversations where someone has to come out on top, so if that’s the way you want it, fine. You win.”

Hiresh gestured at the crowded platform.

“You might be fortunate enough to find a spot up on top.”

“Scoundrel.”

Hiresh raised his eyebrows and looked back out the window. Chelsea took a moment to freshen herself up from an overnight case and with that done, stared out the window with Hiresh. There were furtive glances over in his direction, as if she wanted to say something more but didn’t.

Amidst the din of voices and children laughing and babies crying and locomotives coming and going from the station, the Nizamuddin Secunderabad Rjdhni train finally lurched forward and gathered steam. Once they had cleared the metal overhang of the station, the sprawling city of Delhi came into view and to see it was to see the whole of humanity—slums for

miles and miles in every direction, temples and busy city streets, garbage dumps and parks and market places, all of it set against a modern high rise skyline, and that skyline set against the golden sun and parting clouds of a now spent summer rainstorm.

Aware that Chelsea kept glancing his way, HiresH occasionally glanced at her but his mind was elsewhere. Why had Sanjay ruined his lovely vacation over this petty little problem?