MY WORLD BOOK

②

Also by Ben Batchelder

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Borderlands USA, or, How to Protect the Country by Car

To Belem & Back, Backroads Brazil with my Black Lab

My World Book 1, Hitching the Globe on $10 a Day

MY WORLD BOOK ②

Tramping the Globe on $10 a Day

Ben Batchelder

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Maps by Simon Ducroquet

For more: www.benbatchelder.com/world

Some names have been changed
to maintain privacy.

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To Annie and unlived lives

Author's Note

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This manuscript, for many years, was like the son I never had, an inscrutable, difficult son who went away under sad circumstances only to show up later in life.

I wrote the story, divided into a pair of books, in my thirties during nights and weekends when I had nothing better to do. Life, especially work and then marriage, became too consuming; so it got tucked away in a desk drawer.

Circumstances change. The prodigal child, after a manner, returns. In main, I have tried to pare it down while staying true to who I was then.

This second book takes up where the first leaves off, with the narrator slipping south into the heart of Africa.

Anything more fearfully touching or lamentable cannot be imagined than to see a free spirit, once bold and defiant, once soaring in a giddy arc above an astonished world, now creeping broken back to his mother's arms.

– Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*

1 – The Sudan

> I generally think of nothing at all, despite the elevated thoughts one is supposed to have in the presence of ruins.
> – Gustave Flaubert (1850)

After a few days of traipsing around New Kingdom grave sites in Luxor, most of the time on a rented jalopy of a bicycle, I found my way to Aswan in preparation for the weekly boat across Lake Nasser to Wadi Halfa, Sudan. Both Luxor and Aswan were an immense relief after manic Cairo: smaller and lusher, green in the effluvial ripeness of the Nile. I began reading both of Alan Moorehead's *The White* and *Blue Niles*, and imagined myself a Dr. Livingstone intent on finding the source of ancient riddles, hidden somewhere in the Nile's upper reaches. As Moorehead writes in *The White Nile's* prologue:

> No unexplored region in our times, neither the heights of the Himalayas, the Antarctic wastes, not even the hidden side of the moon, has excited quite the same fascination as the mystery of the sources of the Nile. For two thousand years at least the problem was debated and remained unsolved; every expedition that was sent up the river from Egypt returned defeated.

For me the journey to the Nile's main source proved nearly as difficult – in more modern ways. Instead of fighting angry tribes and Arab slave traders, I would do battle with malicious customs officials and flee from revolutionaries. Whereas Dr. Livingstone had cunning and guile and a small army of porters to protect him from the rigors of the road, my only defense, and a paltry one at that, was my innocence, that most American of saving graces.

In Aswan, inevitably, I bumped into a number of characters from the not so distant past. Iowa Dave, whose visa had been issued a few days before mine, was staying at the same cheap Hotel Marwa; then there were Serge and Christine, the volatile French couple I'd met in Israel, staying at the nearby Hotel Continental – all of us Sudan-bound on the same once-a-week boat going south.

For our Saturday departure Dave and I met on the eight a.m. train from Aswan to Aswan Harbor, which deposited us in no time on the scruffy banks of Lake Nasser. Customs was rumored to open at ten a.m. and take nearly all day. Arriving earlier than anticipated we walked back to the Aswan High Dam and enjoyed a portable breakfast halfway around its three kilometers. On the far side stood a garish and massive monument to Soviet-Egyptian relations, five sharpened pillars flailing outward and upwards, six or so stories into the blue sky. The Soviets, in imperial mode, had financed the massive dam which created Lake Nasser and regulated the flow of the mighty Nile for the first time in history; while eliminating punishing floods, the dam also reduced the annual silt deposits along Egypt's agricultural breadbasket. The sculpture, aggressively ugly, doubles as a monument to political folly, for no sooner had the Soviets financed the dam's construction than Nasser kicked them out of the country and welcomed the Americans back in. Would my harebrained trip build to similar, more personal follies? Was I, likewise, gifting elusive Daniela to Leonardo's benefit?

When we returned to the customs area, crowds of people were steadily gathering outside the Egyptian control gate, a portal to the unknown. Flanking them were an incredible amount of belongings: motorcycles, bicycles, cars laden with goods, and enough bundled parcels for three times as many people. Indeed, most of the afternoon would be spent waiting for the returning Sudanese to clear everything through customs and carry it, one load after another, on board. A small community of pale-skins, mostly Westerners, gathered to one side of the imposing gate; among them two French (Serge and Christine), three Germans, four Swiss, one Australian, four Brits (all bikers), and, besides Yankee Dave and me, a couple from Berkeley. The sun reached and

floated past its zenith before the slightest movement was detected beyond the judgement gates. In the meantime we chatted nervously, exchanged travel advisories (trouble ahead, it seems), and did our best to keep out of the intense desert sun. Though we were just north of the Tropic of Cancer, it was a dry, parched heat, relentless and unforgiving. Besides travel alerts I also exchanged traveler's checks for Sudanese pounds with an enterprising Egyptian at an excellent rate of over two pounds to the dollar, off to the side of the road so the Egyptian police wouldn't arrest us.

After two false alarms, with everyone needlessly rising to their feet, we were at last allowed through the open portal down a path lined by Egyptian soldiers whose man-boy faces showed a marked physical difference from those of the softer, darker Sudanese. The crowd instantaneously jammed into a dense, airless pack, while we waited over fifteen minutes for a few steps' progress.

Thankfully a kindly customs official beckoned our mostly European crew through an opening to the left and waved us by several stopping points on the slope down to the lake and waiting boat. Just when I thought my departure from Egypt, unlike my arrival, would be blissfully hassle-free, I learned at the ticket inspection area that alone among the Westerners my ticket lacked an official "ticket application." So I would need to return before the first control gate to an office (really, a shack), in order to secure one. I pointed out my ticket was bought fair and square at the official Nile Navigation Company in Cairo, but this argument had no noticeable impact on my tormentors. If it weren't for the mind-numbing heat and thick crowds it would have been a breeze to wind my way back to where we had started; as it was I nearly melted in the sun dragging myself and my mobile home up the fair banks of Lake Nasser. If only my departing impression of Egypt had been that kindly, fatherly official who waved us through after only a fifteen minute bake in the sun, but no, that was not to be.

At the checkpoint I learned that the "ticket application" was indeed a government departure tax of one pound, to be paid on the spot. I tried to explain that I had no Egyptian pounds left, having carefully mapped

out my food purchases and train expenses so as to be piaster-less upon departure.

It was searingly hot and stuffy in the shack and, needless to say, not conducive to polite conversation. Naturally my temperature rose even further when the fat, officious personage behind the desk bluntly replied, "I don't care." At least he was direct.

Other than the secretive money-changer trying to unload Sudanese pounds, I had seen neither place nor means to exchange money, so I was in a bit of a bind. With no other alternative I gave the official a dollar bill (overpaying by a fifth or more) and left disdainfully, clutching my precious pink slip.

Returning to the third checkpoint, the sweat trickling down my spine, I juggled my hefty possessions (luggage and groceries), along with passport, ticket, and slip, on the verge of dumping everything. Fortunately I was allowed to bypass luggage inspection and, after filling out a Non-Egyptian Departure Form, was given a resounding exit stamp in my soggy passport, damp from my neck wallet. Good riddance!

While overly familiar with the country I was leaving, due to the long visa wait, I hadn't the faintest notion of what lay ahead. One indication came with the first full view of the steamer tied up lengthwise along Lake Nasser's bank, with two large barges strapped by ropes to each side like rickety training wheels to a beat-up bicycle. In the only correspondence I had received in Egypt, a bundle of late Christmas letters from the Batchelders, Dad wrote:

> When you go up the Nile in one of the tourist steamers (if you do) keep a life preserver handy. An associate in our office took the trip 6 months ago and said that when the boat ahead of them (12 hours) caught fire, the captain and crew took the lifeboats to shore and let the passengers fend for themselves.
>
> Have a good Xmas. Maybe when you call there is something that you need that we can send ahead for you. If not, we'll save it for the celebration when you get home.

Love,
Daddy

Whatever its charms or the competence of its crew, the dilapidated steamer would be home for two days if not longer.

I had booked a first-class cabin unlike most of the Europeans and Iowa Dave, who quickly claimed space on one of the third-class barge decks packed with returning Sudanese. My cabin, in the steamer itself, had two bunks, two beds each, and was surprisingly cool and dark (no electricity) after the tropical drumbeat of heat. I chose the least bumpy bunk, stowed my belongings, and checked out the attached bathroom, quite a luxury, which included a large sink with running, brackish Nile water and a toilet filled with unflushed urine. Best of all as no one else showed up before cast off, the cabin turned out to be private for which I was deeply grateful: a peek into several cabins with local folk revealed mountains of packages piled on every square inch of floor.

The Berkeley couple had also splurged ten dollars on first class, which we agreed was shabby but worth it, and I immediately invited Dave and the Euros from third class to use my Nile tap water and toilet anytime. A visit to the boat's head, which was open and filthy enough to perfume our entire flotilla whenever the wind died down, prompted the gesture.

After endless loading, shifting, and reloading, at the end of which four heavy-duty motorcycles were brought on board and strapped to railings, the old engine finally shuddered to life and we pushed away from Aswan Harbor just before sunset. From the bow of the Nile Navigation steamer we watched the sun dissolve into the sudden dusk, where after the hot, scorching day of waiting we were tickled by the fingers of a cool breeze.

Back in Aswan when Dave told me he packed a small gas stove, it had motivated me to buy provisions such as spaghetti and margarine, which now inside the privacy of the cabin we cooked up into a hot, luxurious meal. Serge and Christine, as well as the two French-speaking

Swiss, arrived toward the end of our small feast offered all around. After tea I brought out my soon-to-be-illegal whiskey and offered whiskey and waters to my fellow heathens, who were surprisingly thirsty. Dave, overly impressed by the hot meal and alcohol, gushed at the hospitality shown by "a gentleman" to "a third-class crew." He exaggerated, but I would appreciate his return generosity a month hence when he would save me during a chance encounter from a much worse fate. Cheap travelers are, by and large, a trusting lot.

The full, second day on the man-made lake went smoothly enough: we glided forward as if on rails in space, endlessly approaching but never arriving, like Zeno's paradox. Again and again we passed the same dry, rough terrain at lake's side and never saw another boat or sign of life the entire still day. Boredom spread like wildfire.

In daylight I spent much of the time reading and writing on the steamer's empty top deck, trying to rise above the constant hub-bub of the lower ones. When Dave joined me we were amazed at the crew's ceaseless attempts to shuffle us from one area to the next on the slightest pretext. Dave (not a fan of Arabs to start with) suggested we ignore them next time, so when told to move due to some plan to water down the deck, I did just that, ignored the person. Unbeknownst to me the lone Australian on board saw the interaction and, rushing forward, took offense, demanding I leave the deck at once.

When I suggested he mind his own business and told him I didn't care for either his tone or attitude, he approached menacingly and wagged a finger not far from my face. I ignored him too. Whether heat or bad karma caused the flare up I don't know. Although the deck watering as far as I could tell never occurred, Dave and I got up to leave, the peacefulness of our secluded spot broken. On the way down we saw the Aussie pull a Sudanese aside and, pointing to me, pronounce that I was "bad luck!" By the end of the voyage he had antagonized every other Westerner on board. The Berkeley woman later declared authoritatively that she had detected a host of psychological problems during a brief conversation, casting further doubt on the efficacy of

travel as therapy.

Later that afternoon I chatted up one of the British bikers, an attractive woman in her forties named Sandra Honey – in more ways than one, straight out of a James Bond tale. It turned out she was Zimbabwean and had met her three English biker companions back in the U.K. Stranger yet, Sandra claimed to be descended from the empire-building General Gordon, whose death in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum at the hands of the Mahdi and his rebellious Sudanese, I had just read about in *The White Nile*. Tracing her ancestor's footsteps she was traveling up the Nile for the first time.

A gaggle of us decided to watch the sunset from the quiet of the top deck. From above we looked down into the bow of the pilot's cabin and marveled at the skill with which the navigator handled the ship's large wheel with his dexterous black feet. Ahead of us the lake stretched glassy-smooth into the distance, the waning sun an unrippled shaft of light lashed to the steamer.

I offered the use of my facilities to Sandra, which she appreciated, and invited her to dine with Dave and me on another spaghetti feast in my cabin that evening.

Dave was shy at first with Sandra as they were of similar age, but eventually had much to discuss from his four year stint in South African construction. Sandra kindly gave me her Harare address in case my plans changed and I made it to southern Africa. Our spaghetti turned out well: this time I minced a garlic clove into the hot buttered pasta, creating a wonderfully pungent aroma which seemed out of place on our urine-scented barges.

Indeed it was, for we had hardly begun to devour our freshly cooked meal when the cabin was raided by a delegation of three Sudanese. The garlic had been too aromatic, tipping the crew off to a meal being cooked in a closed cabin, so there we were: busted. The officious threesome demanded Dave's gas stove. Not sure if they just wanted it for themselves we naturally refused. When they threatened to kick me out of first class, Dave relented after assurances of the device's return. Not quite understanding how the small cooker worked, they

immediately rushed it into my bathroom – precautions must be taken! – and doused it with a thick stream of Nile water despite the fact the flame had been extinguished minutes ago. On reflection we should have been grateful for their vigilance, as we later learned it was fire caused by a mishandled stove, and not engine failure, that had incapacitated a sister-boat for weeks. Up to then the use of gas stoves had been common.

That night our chug-a-chug steamer passed Abu Simbel, the massive twin monuments to Ramesses II and Queen Nefertari, in the shroud of a half moon. No lights were on, sadly, as no tourists had flown in that day. Nevertheless the ancient monument (transplanted stone by stone from its original home, now at the bottom of Lake Nasser) was an impressive, obscure sight, leaning out of darkness and still water at lake's edge. Farther south, after midnight, we passed into Sudanese waters.

The morning broke brightly over the Sudan. By ten o'clock we docked in Wadi Halfa, one of the hottest spots on earth after Death Valley. Similar in other ways Wadi Halfa offers little other than a few dust-blown and scruffy one-story shacks which, for reasons unknown, are widely separated – to maximize the time spent between them? Old Wadi Halfa had also been drowned by the lake, which made the new, cruelly fragmented one bafflingly by design.

Getting off our bloated African Queen was like our arrival in reverse: a mad crush followed by a long wait. Once again a kindly official, this time Sudanese, allowed our motley Western crew to advance through customs before the locals choked the system with possessions. After my interminable, month-long wait back in Egypt for a Sudanese visa, our prompt entrance into the country felt anticlimactic.

Suddenly, our main decision entailed whether or not to take the thirty hour train across the Nubian Desert to Khartoum, or to proceed a more roundabout way by hitching rides on open trucks along the winding Nile to the capital. One thing was certain: departing oven-like Wadi Halfa was of utmost importance.

Our amiable crew soon split into two groups. A soon-to-depart truck to Dongola, the next town south, was expensive at twenty pounds with onward travel to Khartoum uncertain. Without schedules a long wait in Dongola was all too possible; and for what? – an open truck ride to Khartoum of unknown cost. All the Euros and Dave chose this rugged option, while the Berkeley couple and I went for the relative security of the cheaper two day train ride. Too much uncertainty bothers me.

The walk to the station stretched over two miles – a nice, warm desert stroll. New Wadi Halfa looked as permanent as a shanty town: random rows of shacks partially suturing vast, purposeless expanses. At the station, after some negotiation, I bought a second-class ticket for a compartment whose seats were blessedly intact. Between boat and train rides the last several days were pricey. But while reviewing cash and traveler's checks in the compartment, I calculated having spent only eight dollars a day in Egypt. Encouraged by such thriftiness I settled in for the luxury of a long, dusty journey across the Nubian Desert.

According to Moorehead the railroad to Khartoum was built across the bristling desert by Lord Kitchener. Following a failed rescue mission, Kitchener had been sent by the British War Office to avenge the murder of General Gordon by the Mahdi, "the new reincarnation of the Prophet," in 1855, and to retake Khartoum for the Queen. From Cairo it took two years to march his army up the Nile to Khartoum, while securing his supply lines via the newly laid desert railway. It felt oddly exciting to be following the tracks of a colonial conqueror, conducting my own, private rescue mission – of whom?

In Wadi Halfa I noted that the skin color of the local tribe, the Nubians, was the darkest I'd ever seen, a grayish cobalt blue. Seeing more and more Nubians from the train window made me hypothesize why: the desert sun was so glaringly bright only the darkest pigment could protect. Our train stopped frequently, at least once an hour. Even when it ground to a halt in the middle of nowhere, in no time a small souk formed with women, children, and old men selling food or liquids.

With no roads in sight, the arrow-straight train track is their only lifeline.

Moorehead writes of the transformative desert this way:

> An immense silence possesses the surrounding desert. The heat is so great it stifles the appetite and induces a feeling of trance-like detachment in which monotony dissolves into a natural timelessness, visions take on the appearance of reality, and asceticism can become a religious object of itself.

The Berkeley couple shared a compartment with me during the trip. Named Lorand and Carol, they had kept mostly to themselves on the African Queen, but now in the shared penance of a stiflingly hot compartment, they became looser, more open. Lorand had escaped from Hungary five years previously and then found his way to the Golden State, where he met Carol also doing graduate work at Berkeley. I don't recall the details of Lorand's escape through Yugoslavia, but I do remember his insistence on how naive most Americans are. Over the years he has tried to explain to friends and acquaintances how miserable the Soviets and life behind the Iron Curtain were, but very few believe him; the concept of such relentless repression was just beyond most Americans' limited grasp. Most Californians, he lamented, would listen politely but then ask with some credulity, "Is it really that bad?" or "Shouldn't we really just learn to get along?"

It made me realize that less than a year ago I would have been among those who poo-pooed his experiences, believing Lorand too susceptible to Cold War rhetoric. After months in Europe, with peeks through the Iron Curtain and chats while hitching with escapees, I was beginning to think differently. Now his former life experience seemed all too possible, even palpable.

Storytelling was a good way to break the tedium as our train advanced farther and farther into a dusty, featureless eternity. Sleep after dark was intermittent; our seats, though whole, were uncomfortable, the ride with many noisy stops throughout the night. The most dramatic

was a prayer stop when the train stuttered to a halt in a place even more barren: no people, no life, just moonlit desert. Slowly but surely much of the train emptied onto the desert plateau, with each and every Muslim followed by a crisp shadow moving over the sand's moon-splashed white. One after another fell to his or her knees, prostrating themselves east toward Mecca along twin tracks that converged at the flattest of horizons.

When the train jerked to another start with the clanking of metal against metal and gathered speed, I closed the shuttered window against the dust, but it was of little use. The dust and sand and smoke, sucked up by the train's passage, swirled easily through the latticed wood windows into our compartment and covered us with a thick layer of grime. The air became so thick we all wrapped handkerchiefs around nose and mouth. We sat so still in the African *chiaroscuro* of the compartment, the only movement was the fluttering of our veils and the heaving of our chests as though trapped in a living tomb.

The next day passed similarly, with stops for food and people where none were before and, perhaps, none would be again. The train rested in one town called Shendi, now a huddled group of adobe brick and mud huts, but once near the lush capital of a pharaonic kingdom. Without movement the air became stifling hot and thick.

From a hunger born of boredom we bought glassfuls of hot, sweet tea and various food stuffs at stop after stop. One, though, was nearly vendorless: only beggars. It was dusk the second day. As the train slowed a series of small children, barefoot and in rags, ran alongside pleading for charity. One thin girl with a particularly sweet face ran while bleating with the most mournful tone, until a hand dangled a package of bread from the cabin ahead of ours. Instead of tossing the bread to the girl, the donor was content to wait until the small girl caught up with visible effort and snatched the prize. I gave bread as well, without exacting a like price. The village looked particularly forlorn – if possible more desolate than the rest – surviving precariously on the rim of the vast dust bowl desert. Where did they find their food,

their water? No passengers got on or off and the train never clanged to a full stop; yet by the end the half dozen children all had packages of food. Even as the train accelerated and they fell to the wayside, the children still intoned their sad pleas while inspecting their modest loot. "Karaan, karaan!" is what they seemed to repeat, again and again.

A sense of guilt filled me, my body deprived of sleep, my defenses down, as I thought back to younger brother Ricki, just as needy in his own way. I had left him behind to fend for himself at an age similar to these waifs', withdrawing my help, my consolation, my arm pulled back from the open window. To save myself, I wondered if I had sacrificed him – and if so, would I, could I, ever forgive myself?

Our exhausted train reached the outskirts of northern Khartoum around nine that night and slowed for the bumpy last leg to the main train station. Along the way, our heads poking outside to catch the evening air, we noticed a group of protestors blocking a road parallel to the tracks and burning signs in Arabic. They were all black and none wore the flowing white robes which distinguish many Muslims.

It was our first sign of the long-simmering rebellion which was tearing northern, Muslim Sudan from the Christian and animist south. From what travelers told me, the Sudan was ruled by the Arab north and had been for many years. Yet only the recent imposition of Muslim law (*sharia* or "the way" in Arabic) had angered the southern, non-Muslim populace into open rebellion the past year. While hearing the south to be mostly off-limits due to the armed conflict, I hadn't expected violent protests in the capital as well.

From the train station six of us – five guidebook-less Germans and I – went in search of accommodations. The city, if it can be called that, stretches lazily from the train station in wide, dusty, and strangely quiet avenues; though February it felt like a hot, humid summer night. My guidebook, Lonely Planet's *Africa*, suggested several nearby hotels, but the first was closed and the second full. The sandy streets were without street signs and, following a grid pattern, were virtually indistinguishable. With no other cheap hotels listed, the few others we

chanced upon were also full. We were out of luck.

At one of the few open corner eateries we paused in order to seek advice and discuss what to do next. A pleasant-looking Sudanese sitting at the open-air counter overheard us and, speaking clear English, asked if he could be of help. His name was Salah and he had recently returned from working seven years for an American company in Saudi Arabia. His contract over he was back home with his wife and year-old daughter, applying for more work with another multinational.

"The work is good there," he said.

Also at the counter was a bearded, hatted white man who suggested the Port Sudan Hotel. So off we went, a haggard and dirty group of young Westerners who hadn't slept well or showered in four days, and our friendly guide Salah, dark against moonlit white robes.

After four failures, this, our fifth attempt, succeeded: the Port Sudan had vacancies. Considering the accommodations it was no surprise. For one pound and sixty-five Sudanese piasters (or under a dollar), one receives a cot and thin mattress to be set up anywhere in the courtyard. Due to the rarity of rain the courtyard was left open to the night, but protected by walls from Khartoum's shifting, sweeping sands.

After registering I left my mobile home on my strategically positioned cot, in a not too public area, and then followed Salah back to the corner restaurant for a late night sandwich. On the way he kindly bought me a glass of fresh juice, made from flowers instead of fruit. After such a long and dusty journey it tasted like a delicious nectar.

The sandwich was foul, but lacked any of what Moorehead called the town's food staples, in colonial times, of "cats, crocodiles and river-horses." Salah's company more than compensated: he appeared earnest, hardworking, and thoughtful from the start. He offered to show me his nearby home in case I should later need to find him for any reason, a welcome offer. On the walk there he pointed out the Khartoum Hospital, outside of which police and several stragglers watched each other warily. He commented he was glad the police were there and attributed the disturbance to the "political problem," that is South vs. North. He also referred to the blacks outside the hospital as

"protestors," but would say nothing else on the subject. I later learned that a student had been shot and killed during a march against the firing of a university teacher, which may or may not have sparked the demonstrations.

Back at the Port Sudan I tried to clean up only to find that the showers doubled as toilets, with a single large hole in the floor and both floor and walls slimy to the touch. I barely noticed, covered in four days of grime, yet the smell of excrement did detract from the shower's enjoyment. The annoyance was temporary for once I lay down on my cot under the stars and breathed in the night air, the two sleepless nights caught up with me and snuffed out my consciousness with a gust of desert wind.

That morning I found a two-bed room at another hotel, the El Khalil, for only double the price: well worth it. The room's tall ceiling sported a large fan, the bed sheets, and the hotel a comfortable courtyard full of blooming flowers. Best of all, showers and toilets came separately.

I continued on to the American Embassy to register and learn the latest news about travel south. My goal was to get to Kenya as cheaply and safely as possible, with an added interest in navigating as far up the Nile as feasible, perhaps to Lake Victoria in Uganda. Overland travel south of Khartoum was confirmed as all but impossible, with much territory between here and Juba, the southern provincial capital, in the hands of the Sudan People's Liberation Army and off-limits to foreigners. Juba was still government-held and presumably safe, but what was it like farther south?

At the Embassy two fellow travelers, bearded and in their thirties, were already discussing the subject, so I listened in. According to one, travel south of Juba through northern Uganda was becoming increasingly dangerous. One town near Juba was rebel-held and another, north of Kampala in northern Uganda, had recently been decimated by guerrillas – a whole village he emphasized.

An Embassy official, young, clean-cut, and cross-eyed, told me he

personally thought continuing on from Juba by land to be both impossible and unsafe, and relayed reports of bandits controlling the Sudanese-Kenyan border region. When we discussed the possibility of flying from Juba to, say, Nairobi or Entebbe in Uganda, he emphatically warned against flying the state-owned Sudan Air, and recommended a visit to the airport to see one of their 737's still nose-deep in the Nile after an aborted takeoff. When asked about the possibility of charter flights he suggested looking into Juba-Nairobi charters and, instead of going to Juba first, to check with charter companies here in Khartoum. Juba, he warned me, could well be a dead end.

Without knowing the addresses or telephone numbers of the charter companies he mentioned (such things being elusive without the convenience of a telephone book), he suggested I go to the airport and visit the hangars themselves. There I might get the main office address and return to town to find them. A helpful, engaging fellow.

Meanwhile I found the Sudan Air office and, as a means of comparison, inquired into flights south. Straight to Nairobi cost three hundred and fifty dollars, which ruled out that option on two counts: it was expensive and, despite the airline's recent nosedives, unadventurous. Flights to Juba, however, only cost eighty dollars; that plus overland travel to Kenya could save a lot of money.

After a sardine-packed bus ride to the airport I walked onto the taxiing area without any hassle and found several hangars with charter companies' names, such as Nile Safari, emblazoned over them. At one I met several English pilots milling about a small plane.

"Hi," I interrupted, "do either of you know of any spare seats on charter flights to Juba?"

In a friendly manner – I hadn't met an unfriendly person in the Sudan yet – they told me they couldn't be of help, but that I should try Nile Safari's main office in town, whose address they gave me.

At the next hangar I met a Canadian aid-pilot (Western aid is a big business in the Sudan, perhaps the biggest) and posed the same question. Not only did he know of a flight, he replied, he was flying a small Cessna to Juba himself the next day. Trying to mask my

excitement I asked if by chance he had a spare seat, but the plane was full. When I pressed, saying how difficult it was to navigate up the Nile and that I had been trying with limited success for a month and a half, he relented.

"Could you pay in cash?" he asked. "American dollars?"

"Sure," I replied, "depending on how much."

"With extra fuel and risk I could take you for one hundred dollars even."

"Ah, thanks, but Sudan Air is charging only one hundred and sixty pounds, or eighty bucks – and with them I would be entirely legit. . . How about fifty dollars?"

"No can do. But okay, I think I can do it for seventy-five. And remember, at a lower altitude in a plane like this you'll get a great view of the Nile. . ." (Clearly this wasn't the first time he'd peddled a spare seat.)

When I hesitated long enough he continued, "Alright, alright. Sixty in cash, but no less." And this from a middle-aged man working for a charity organization.

"Deal," I replied.

Mike told me the flight left at eight in the morning and instructed me to show up half an hour early. He suggested I pay him at that time, beforehand in the hangar, which didn't sound like a good idea to me. The words, "Well, honey, no one's ever gonna con you again," of the kindly Southern woman at the Tourist Police in Cairo, came back to me.

But what else could I do? Although leaving Khartoum more quickly than anticipated I felt relieved things were working out. Taking the expensive state-owned airline would have seemed like a cop-out, a wealthy, American kind of thing to do.

Back in town I found Nile Safari's address, and while the main office could not guarantee an empty seat on a charter from Juba to Nairobi, they suggested the possibility was strong and the flight would only cost one hundred dollars. Good news! Combined with the next day's Cessna ride, I could make it to Nairobi for half the cost of the direct Sudan Air flight and see much more along the way.

Feeling more upbeat I then visited the officious Alien's Office in order to explore travel permits south. None, of course, were available overland, and by-air permits to Juba were being delayed by "present political uncertainties." In other words they weren't sure what would happen next. But why be left high and dry by the Sudanese bureaucracy? So I decided to wing it to Juba anyway. Among other things they would only issue permits after purchase of a Sudan Air ticket, which could only be paid for in pounds at the official exchange rate or in dollar traveler's checks, swelling the price.

In one encouraging note, my tormentors mentioned travel permits from Juba to the Ugandan border were feasible and easy to get in Juba. (Then again the cross-eyed Embassy official had called such travel both "impossible and unsafe.") So at least one option, from a paperwork perspective, was legitimate.

The desultory afternoon passed with a telescoped sense of time and foreboding. I tried to wash my boat- and train-sullied clothes in cold water but, the sand and grit being so imbedded, mostly failed. Drying was easier: when hung in the courtyard they blew sun-dry within minutes.

While out for a walk I was drawn toward the Nile, or the Blue Nile to be precise, for Khartoum ("elephant's trunk" in Arabic) is just above the intersection of the White and Blue, the latter departing the former in the form of a trumpeting trunk. (The Blue wends eastwards into Ethiopia, while the White, much longer, ascends farther south into Uganda.) Across the wide river, which looked murky and anything but blue, I saw lush fields dotting Tuti Island, itself barely visible through a thick white haze of dust and heat. Turning around I returned by the back of the ragtag zoo, where graceful giraffes intertwined their muscular necks in loopy embraces.

When the proprietor at a juice stand couldn't find sufficient change he trusted me to retrieve smaller notes from my hotel. What a contrast from the plague of short-changing in Egypt! To top things off my Somalian roommate kindly offered me a number of English-language

magazines to read. While Khartoum is the most desolate and God-forsaken capital I have ever seen, its people are genuinely welcoming to any bedraggled visitor sufficiently lost to drop by – whether rescuing or being rescued, no matter.

2 – Juba

That evening the El Khalil Hotel turned into Travel News Central, abuzz with strange overlanders breezily exchanging rumors and reports. I learned, for instance, that the truck ride from Wadi Halfa to Dongola takes two days and, once in Dongola, the ferry to the next semi-civilized patch at Karima – only halfway to Khartoum – takes three days and runs twice a week. In retrospect I had no regrets about taking the train across the Nubian Desert.

My new hotel also had its share of wanderlust Germans with the obligatory horror stories. The town of Kassala, called a "jewel of Sudan" in one of my books, was under military control after the Sudanese Army had ransacked the Ethiopian Consulate in retaliation for some similar fun with the Sudanese Embassy in Addis Ababa. As a result all Westerners passing on their way to the Red Sea were at the receiving end of full body searches, while travel permits were no longer being issued for the town. Where after Khartoum, then, could one securely visit in the country?

One of the Germans had a short wave radio and, after tuning into the BBC World Report, breathlessly related that a steamer along the White Nile from Kosti (south of Khartoum) to Juba had been attacked and sunk by the rebels. Five hundred were reportedly on board and only half survived. So much for leisure trips up the Nile. Was going to Juba, even flying there, really a smart idea? After the elimination of land and river routes, the only semi-safe way in and out of Juba was now by air.

At six-thirty in the morning, the sun was pleasantly low for the two mile walk with shouldered bag to the airport. When I reached the

hangar, the Sudanese there didn't know of a Canadian pilot named Mike and nonchalantly told me he must have left already. Although his Cessna was indeed gone I waited anyway, which was fortunate for within half an hour Mike showed up in a car to explain they had changed hangars. On the way there I slipped him sixty dollars and he asked me not to mention the transaction to his co-worker.

When I climbed into the co-pilot's seat at the next hangar, I couldn't restrain my enthusiasm at the prospect of flying out of Khartoum and up the White Nile. This is the way to get around! With the airport all but empty, permission to takeoff was a mere formality. We lifted off at one hundred and forty-four miles per hour ground-to-air speed and climbed to thirteen thousand feet, or nearly two miles, at a cruising speed of two hundred miles per hour. The smallness of the plane made me highly interested in its smooth operation.

While lifting into the heavens we were soon rewarded with a view of the airliner, as promised, nose down into the thick soup of the Nile. Not only was I saving money by avoiding Sudan Air, but a few heart palpitations as well. More rewarding still was the sight of the White and Blue Niles' confluence, a slow and mighty mixing of darker and lighter waters, both gradual and inevitable.

Such was my obvious joy in flying that Mike dipped the plane's wings and showed me how the rudder pedals make the tail wag back and forth. The bulky machine protruding from the floor behind us, Mike explained, was a topographic camera that shoots 8x10 negatives. It was being used to create a detailed survey of the land between Khartoum and Juba, in anticipation of a large Canadian Government forestry project.

I didn't see how such a thing was possible. Besides the clearly incised and erratic line of the White Nile, all I saw was a vast, red dust bowl of dryness to the horizon. Could irrigation from the Nile really make mass forestry possible? On top of which weren't we in no time flying over rebel territory?

After three hours of crisscrossing the upper Nile we finally approached Juba, at first only a dirty smudge in the distance. The

landscape had at last changed from arid red to jungle green: perhaps here among the lush floodlands called the Sudd a commercial forest could grow someday. In the meantime the jungle looked more than dense enough to hide Christian and animist insurgents.

Juba was built next to the old explorer and slaver's post of Gondokoro, which was barely distinguishable in the jungle to one side. During our descent Mike misunderstood the ground controller's instructions and landed us on the taxiway, but with no other planes remotely active it didn't matter. What disturbed more was the quantity of military equipment strewn about the dinky airport. Was this a safety or combat zone?

In no time we settled on the latter, for a gust of panic was in the air. First things first, a customs officer approached to ask if we were from Nairobi. Fearful that he might discover I lacked a travel permit for the area, I exulted inwardly when he accepted our negative answer and left. Apparently other things were on his mind, as we learned that no petrol was available for Mike's return flight despite assurances back in Khartoum of plentiful supply. Causing the shortage, we soon learned, was the emergency evacuation by the French construction company, called CCI, of all its French personnel from the region. Only halfway through building a new runway for the airport, the company was abandoning the project due to threats from the rebels who had killed one and taken several CCI employees hostage the prior day.

While this explained the harried group of Westerners loading baggage onto a mid-sized plane, it didn't explain why a pickup truck, fully loaded with people seated in the back, accelerated off the tarmac and spilled one of its passengers onto the asphalt like a sack of potatoes, insensible and without reaction. Several times Mike told me we should check out the situation thoroughly before panicking. That sounded like a good idea to me.

When Mike laid plans to head for town I asked if I could tag along, not caring to strike out on my own under such circumstances. The maxim to "find your way out on the way in" seemed more pressing in

Juba than in most cases, so I asked Mike if he knew any pilots who might with sufficient fuel be flying to Nairobi. He promised to ask among his flying friends and, along these lines, we headed to a hangout for pilots on the outskirts of town.

Khartoum Navigation was a small compound of ranch houses and yards delineated by a tall fence, the sort of compound you'd expect to find in the tropics: lazy and desultory-looking. The friendly and burly Canadian manager, named Vic, welcomed us and immediately offered cold beer, which was a treat given the muggy heat and the government's new ban on alcohol.

Vic wasn't encouraging about finding a charter flight south and told a cheerless story of a Polish traveler he had given a lift to, who had been sent back to Khartoum to get the necessary travel and exit permits to fly out of Juba. Apparently a combined clearance and customs check is required before departure. My spirits sagged. From the look of it I had jumped into a rapidly worsening situation where the only safe *and* legitimate means of escape was to backtrack to Khartoum. Maybe I had been too hasty this time and would pay for it.

It reminded me of a recently read passage from Moorehead: "by 1856 even the most determined of explorers on the White Nile had not been able to get beyond the neighbourhood of the present township of Juba. . . ." Would my exploration of the upper Nile end similarly?

Vic, not prone to overreaction, treated us to a meal of Italian pasta cooked by a Thai and served by a Ugandan – not bad! Afterwards he offered us top drawer in local, homesick entertainment, a variety of poor quality tapes and a VCR. Whether in shock or in extremis from the heat, we watched with rapt attention an episode from the nature show "Life on Earth" and some random Airplane Fair & Festival in England – real pilots' fare.

A new arrival, the captain of a DC-3 flying to Nairobi the next day, regretted to inform me his client, Norwegian Church Aid, disliked offering lifts. Furthermore, he warned, the Sudanese were reluctant to give security clearances for such rides because it took revenue away from state-owned Sudan Air.

"Please, anything but Sudan Air!" I tried to joke.

A white Kenyan pilot, Dave, showed up and offered a glimmer of hope: he thought he might be able to get me a security clearance from a recently bribed customs official. In the meantime he plied me with more cold beers at the bar drooping with dry palm fronds and refused to let me pay. Going beyond the call of duty – but then Juba is the kind of hardship post where people go out of their way to be helpful – he assured me he could find me a bed that evening even though Vic had suggested I find a place in town. When it came down to it I felt debilitated by fear and couldn't imagine leaving the relative security of the compound – with all its rough-and-ready pilots, something out of a WWII air-war drama. Our arrival in the airport and the sight of that insensible man tumbling off the tail of the pickup had shaken me. Panic was in the air and I didn't know how to deal with it.

That evening provided a cloak-and-dagger look into the small community of expats and local politics. Events were happening so quickly that people were looking for information, and the Khartoum Navigation compound, with its concentration of mobile, news-hungry pilots, was a good place to get it. A procession of light expats and dark Africans dropped by to exchange news and drink outlawed beer. Maybe for that reason government employees (mostly Arab) were nowhere to be seen, as the punishment for alcohol possession, no matter your religion or nationality, is public flogging.

Patching bits and pieces together I soon developed a picture of the situation, perhaps clearer and more current than the BBC's. At the time there were three major construction projects in southern Sudan, all financed and managed by foreign concerns: the draining of the Sudd (the vast southern swampland) through the building of the Jonglei Canal; the prospecting for oil; and the expansion of the Juba Airport. While all would presumably help the southern economy, the Anyanya (or "snake poison" rebels) were opposed to all three on the assumption they were tools of the "corrupt" northern Arabs. The Anyanya's opposition, sometimes violent, had already ground the first two projects

to a halt. Only today, with the evacuation of CCI's employees, had the third and last project been aborted. According to Kenya Dave the Anyanya had warned the company to leave long before, but needed to seize the downriver town of Malakal, kill one employee, and take a family hostage for the French company to cry uncle and leave. In more unsettling news the rebels were demanding that CCI evacuate Juba in a day or face reprisals, which could include an attack on Juba as early as tomorrow.

This was not as remote a possibility as one would hope due to the rebels' recent string of successes. Besides taking Malakal after a five-hour pitched battle with government troops and mining the port's one airstrip, the rebels had recently captured Aweil, a junction town on the main north-south railway, as well as Bor just ninety kilometers down the Nile from Juba. Following the recent sinking of the Nile steamer (whose human toll rose from several hundred as reported in Khartoum, to one thousand soldiers as rumored in Juba), all train and boat traffic to Juba had been cut off. All that remained, Dave speculated, was for the Anyanya to attack and mine the Juba airstrip the next day for all formal routes to the outside world to be cut off. This, along with the destruction of Juba's one bridge across the Nile, would sever all means of transport to Juba and southern Sudan, precluding any further Army reinforcements. Whatever the merits of the war I was not thrilled by the prospect.

After CCI's hurried evacuation that afternoon the Sudanese Army had moved into their campsite to loot all that remained. Unperturbed, Dave boasted that with the one serviceable rifle he had scavenged there he planned to be "the master of my own fate." When I asked Dave what motivated him in all this I thought he might place charity high on the list, what with all the Western aid-pushers down here, but instead he laughed and said he was only in it for the money. A touch of Casablanca Rick here in Juba.

One of the black Africans who stopped by, named Matthew, spent his time trying to find out what Dave and others knew, and vice versa. (Dave later described Matthew as an influential tribesman and spy for

the Anyanya.) At one point Matthew opined that if the Anyanya attacked the next day, independent eyewitnesses such as Dave would be essential to their cause. (But where did that put me? As a witness to the eyewitnesses?) When it came to the prospect of violence, Dave and other expats said later, they were less afraid of the rebels than getting caught in the crossfire when government troops rampaged back into town bent on massacre and revenge. In any event the rebels had advanced to Bor, just ninety kilometers or three hours away, and moved most freely at night.

Later that evening Dave, the Thai cook, and I watched Disney cartoons on tape. Due perhaps to the absurdity of our situation, the two of them laughed a bit too loudly for my comfort. Yet as promised Dave helped me to secure a place to sleep, a cot shrouded in an eerie white veil of mosquito netting. On Vic's return earlier that evening I had beseeched him, saying that given all the turmoil I would be very glad just to camp out in my small tent on the compound lawn. To which he graciously responded, I was most welcome and not to be concerned. I thanked him but was unable to follow his advice. It seemed a long night of vibrant African noises, among them nocturnal waves of prey and predator, with squadrons of mosquitos attacking my well-used netting. Were the Anyanya, during the same long hours, preparing their own attack?

In the morning, after an almost North American and pleasantly full breakfast, I devised a plan for escape for escape was the only thing that interested me. Juba could have been the most fascinating and thrilling provincial town in the world (which it wasn't), and I still would have abandoned it. This civil war was just too close for comfort, and the thought of being stranded in Juba during five hour pitched battles didn't appeal to me one iota.

My plan was to visit the Norwegian Church Aid people and see if, out of humanitarian concern, they might let one frightened Yankee to get the heck out of here before it was too late. The pilot told me he would gladly give me a lift with permission from the NCA's local

representative, while Dave thought he could swing a clearance from the recently bribed official. Things were looking up with the help of a full stomach and half a strategy.

When I walked to the charity's compound, though, and met with the big and blond Erling Sevareid, he would only give me a lift for the exorbitant price of two hundred and eighty-five dollars. What a rip-off! While he claimed the price was at cost, I suspected that rather than being charitable about it he was milking me. I argued with bull-headed Erling for a while, emphasizing his plane might be the last to Nairobi for some time, but he didn't budge.

Undeterred I turned to my backup plan, which was to check out the Sudan Air flight to Entebbe leaving that afternoon. Although Sudan Air was neither safe nor trustworthy, and Entebbe, in the midst of war-torn and exhausted Uganda, even less so, it was among my last options.

On the way into town I hitched a ride with two Americans also looking for transport out of Juba. We arrived at the Sudan Air office just at its nine a.m. opening and were informed that the afternoon flight (for fear of attack?) had been moved up to a ten a.m. departure – only one hour away! The next scheduled flight to Kenya or Uganda was a Nairobi flight three days away, but the Americans told me the last one had been canceled. The ticket agent was demanding one hundred and thirty dollars in cash (under half NCA's extortionist price), which with luck I just had. I figured my options were down to three: 1) take the Entebbe flight and discover southern Uganda; 2) risk a fifty dollar truck ride to the Ugandan border despite the Embassy's warning it was "impossible and unsafe," and then march through a northern Uganda controlled by a rogue army or bandits, or both; or 3) wait in Juba three or more days for a Nairobi flight that could be canceled or incapacitated by a blown-up runway. Without further ado I handed over nearly all of my cold cash in exchange for a ticket to Entebbe.

I barely had time to return to Khartoum Navigation, pick up my belongings, and thank my comrades-in-arms before rushing by cab to the airport. As partial thanks for the meals and lodging I left my remaining Sudanese money (fifteen pounds) and, without meaning to,

my towel and African guidebook as impromptu donations.

With all this I managed to arrive at the airport half an hour before flight time with ticket in hand. The immigration official, however, after glancing at my passport and doubtlessly looking for a travel and departure permit, decided to ignore me. He attended to four other, non-pressing departures and then stood up and just walked away. I asked a subordinate what was going on, to no avail. When the officer returned I questioned him again, pointing out my valid visa and purchased ticket – again stony silence. (Was he looking for a bribe? I don't know and had too little cash to try.) The subordinate returned to say it was too late, the plane was leaving. With growing anger and fear I sputtered that the ticket was purchased at nine o'clock, the plane was scheduled to leave at ten, and here it was only quarter 'til. *Why couldn't I go?*

After an appropriately obscene pause the man finally relented and took my immigration card with obvious disgust.

"Go!" he barked, his first words to me.

Not waiting for him to change his mind I ran out of the dark, makeshift structure and into the blinding sun, only to see the stairs being pulled back from the plane. Worse, the high-pitched roar of jet engines informed me of its imminent, irrevocable departure and my heart sank at the thought of being trapped in Juba for days or weeks or for good.

All but cashless and uncertain if my ticket was transferable I paused for a moment before deciding to risk it. Hefting my mobile home up in the air and over my head with both arms I started to sprint toward the plane which, to my quickening disbelief, began taxiing toward the runway.

I altered course to run intercept, to make the pilot notice me and stop, to get the heck out of here. The urge to escape, to survive, to live, was stronger than it had ever been in New York, Boston, or Cambridge: it was an overwhelming impulse as if on autopilot. I felt shaken and all of a sudden changed to the core.

By now an airfield attendant had caught up and was trying to pull me out of the way, to safety he likely thought. But I ignored him while

madly waving my plane ticket at the pilot, who finally recognized my existence and stopped, suspending the engines' high-decibel whining. Another customs official arrived on the scene and the airfield attendant at last took his hands off of me, our motions slowly freezing in the tropical heat. When I tried to explain the situation to this second even more officious customs officer, I could barely articulate the words for my mouth had turned bone dry with fear. Would he free or detain me?

After a moment's hesitation he relented and explained the situation to the pilot, who by now had stuck his head through the small cockpit window to find out what was going on. My relief was short-lived for the customs man then demanded a departure tax of fifteen pounds – fifteen pounds! Yet again no one had told me about this one. When I explained I had no more pounds and asked if he would accept dollars, he replied no, only pounds. Fed up with greedy and malicious bureaucrats I fished out the last of the cash from my neck wallet, twelve single dollars or twenty-four pounds' worth, and shoved them into his hands. Without waiting for a reply I walked up the stairs which had magically reappeared and into the plane whose door had just been opened by the lone stewardess.

"The Captain would like to speak to you after you've found a seat," she instructed me.

Save for a handful of passengers the plane was empty. Both relieved and soaked in sweat I stowed my bag in front of an empty row of seats and walked up to the cockpit, where I knocked and entered with some trepidation.

The pilot, both northern and Arab, was smartly dressed in a clean-cut uniform. In clear English he got straight to the point.

"That was very dangerous, you know. I could have killed you."

"I'm sorry, Captain," I began, "but I had no choice – I was afraid if I missed your flight I could be stranded in Juba."

"That's why I stopped," he replied, and turned away.

Back in the main cabin a man seated at a window caught my eye and congratulated me on my storming of the plane. I thanked him and, beginning to feel faint, sat down in a seat in his row.

"Your forcefulness," he continued, "suggests you've had prior experience in these sorts of things, am I right?"

At that moment the stewardess offered me a cup of water, which I gladly accepted for my desert mouth. When I turned to reply to the man, whom I later learned to be a Canadian journalist, the best I could do was point to the cup of water which, oddly enough, shook so strongly it drenched my hand and shirt front. So much for prior experience: my body told it all, I was a complete novice at abject terror.

3 – Uganda & Nairobi

And so it was: I flew into the mess at Juba with one Canadian and then bolted out of it with another. This one was named Robert and his matter-of-factness reassured me, including his confirmation we had gotten out in the nick of time. He looked a little gangly, like me, and with a touch of nerdiness which made me wonder what either of us was doing here: the whole thing seemed too absurd to be true. On reflection, though, Robert was here on a job and would likely file a story for his wire service the next day which would differ substantially from Khartoum's version of events – a socially worthy outcome, no doubt. I, on the other hand, was doing this just for fun, running in front of airplanes and then jet-setting off to Uganda. Yet what I was flying *out* of was possibly no worse than what I was flying *into*, as the Entebbe Airport is known for deadly battles between Israeli paramilitaries and Palestinian terrorists, and Uganda itself was still reeling from Big Daddy Amin and nearly two decades of civil war.

On our descent into Entebbe from a much higher elevation than that of Mike's swamp-jumping Cessna, the shabby but calm-appearing airport rose from the lush savannah until it slapped our underbelly with a resounding thud. Our small group of refugees was corralled inside the hot and cluttered immigration area, where Robert was promptly denied access to the country despite a valid visa after admitting to being a journalist.

Uganda, in other words, was still too war-torn to allow much journalistic light. But this lack of witnessing has cultural, even historical roots. Moorehead quotes a British colonial administrator who described Ugandan history as like a "crime to which there have been no

eyewitnesses." Which sounds, on a more intimate scale, like some families I know.

Only recently had I learned what a suspicious breed journalists are, after my close call at the Sudanese Embassy in Cairo. It was a pity for Robert and I had planned to travel together to Kampala, the capital, and then take the train to the Kenyan border. Feeling more vulnerable than at any prior time I could have benefitted from his company.

Fortunately for Robert, the Ugandan officials did not insist that he fly back to the Sudan and instead offered he catch the next plane to Nairobi, which he did. At over a hundred dollars the flight was out of the question for me, despite my frayed nerves and nearly manic state of over-excitement. Besides, a part of me still wanted to see Lake Victoria, the famed origin of the Nile, in order to attain some sort of resolution to my long, haphazard source-of-it-all quest.

When Robert and I said our goodbyes and agreed to rendezvous in Nairobi, I was left with the unsettling question of what next. Without my African guidebook, local currency, or dollar bills, my next steps were uncertain. After some effort I found a desk where I could exchange traveler's checks for Ugandan shillings, but it wasn't clear how many I'd need to get to Kampala, much less to Kenya.

It turned out a cab ride from in front of the airport – which tourists were expected to take, though I didn't see anyone who looked remotely like a tourist my entire stay in Uganda – cost a whopping twenty dollars to Kampala or nearly six times average Ugandan monthly wages. This was worse than the extortionist Cairo Airport. I searched for another route, reasoning that the airport's employees must have an inexpensive means back to the city, but could find no buses. Eventually I stumbled on a reasonably inexpensive group taxi, available at a considerable walk from the terminal, so when I returned to the desk I exchanged twenty dollars, calculating two days to the Kenyan border.

The ride to Kampala was cramped and uncomfortable, but the thought of saving nearly twenty dollars consoled me. After numerous stops we finally backfired into Kampala itself, which looked worse for wear after roughly eighteen years of civil war, less from being bombed

or burned out than from neglect.

I found the train station without great difficulty and, not caring to spend any more time in Uganda than necessary, bought a ticket for the afternoon train at less than two dollars for second-class. Direct trains to Kenya were no longer possible after the East African Railways with connecting lines between Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania had been dissolved, so I had to make do with the six or seven hour ride to Tororo, not far from the Kenyan border.

The train itself was immaculate compared to those of North Africa. No trash, little dirt, with running water in each compartment. My lone compartment mate was a friendly Ugandan who taught aviation on the ground. He mentioned there were no connecting trains from Tororo to the Kenyan border and, as we were already running late, that I would likely have to spend the night at Tororo. My concern was that the next day was Saturday, and finding a place to change money, the Ugandan warned me, might be difficult.

In the luxury of the comfortable dark-wood compartment I contented myself with writing in my journal for the first time since departing Juba. My fellow-traveler was curious as to what I was writing, yet when I told him a little about the drama of southern Sudan, he advised me to stop writing about such things as they were "too painful" and it was "dangerous news." (In other words, eyewitnessing is not allowed.) With Robert's experience at Entebbe fresh in mind I assured him I wasn't a journalist, but he warned me I could be mistaken for one. Thinking this much too paranoid for words I scribbled on.

Within a few minutes, however, a train conductor who looked more like a policeman came by and, catching me writing, asked me to read the first sentence of the last paragraph. At first shocked at his request (what? no First Amendment here?), I nevertheless complied. Fortunately for me the paragraph began innocuously enough:

> I am sitting in a second-class carriage compartment waiting to leave Kampala to Tororo and, beyond, the Kenyan border.

This was sufficiently innocent for even the most suspicious train conductor, so he moved on without comment. Luckily he didn't ask me to read on, for the next sentence read:

> The series of events that led to this moment are almost too incredible to recount. . .

Humbled, I told my aviator friend I would no longer write about the Sudan and only about the journey itself, which relieved him. Yet he admonished me against sharing my journal with anyone in Nairobi, where "the police are much stricter." Was it safe to write anywhere in East Africa?

Less risky and difficult than writing – difficult due to the train's bucking, jerking ways – was simply watching the scenery slide by, effortlessly as if in a dream. At one village stop, bathing in the peculiar golden late afternoon light of East Africa, I noticed the fallen flowers of an immense flamboyant tree, in the sunlight flaming red against the earth's burnt amber. A woman, white hair over a brown head, carried a walking stick and a yellow-patterned sarong with the dignity of a toga-clad Roman. Earlier I had noticed a boy standing at attention on a rock or ant hill watching the train curve past, a lone sentinel in a vast, uninterrupted landscape.

On the train's south side I began to see glimpses of water bodies, which soon revealed themselves as the massive Lake Victoria: the Nile's main source as revealed to the world after millennia of doubt by the likes of John Speke and H.M. Stanley. In short order we were passing over a long bridge which, I abruptly realized, marks the outset of the White Nile. Not only did the bridge's length indicate the gaping thirstiness of the Nile's rush, but beyond the ceremonial islands and upright white rocks I could hear a distant roar as lake quickened into river. Straining to see out the window I could just make out the misty ghost of the famed Ripon Falls, now tamed by the Owen Falls Dam. My pulse quickened as well, for here at last the circuit was completed: after traveling six weeks since early January I had made it from one end of the Nile to the other, by train, boat, and low or high flying plane. It

had been a horrendous, tedious, and iffy journey but I had made it. My self-esteem, after the long Nile climb, exulted for a few moments and I felt thunderously alive. Somehow I felt freer than ever before.

Such emotional peaks are nearly always, for me, followed by physical declines. As the train ride lengthened I could feel the ticklings of a cold, my body absorbing the last two days of panic. As though on cue a Ugandan minister arrived in our cabin with an appropriately beatific smile, wife, and child. We chatted seriously about little nothings and at one point his wife sighed, Yes, progress was being made, but the parishioners "still dig on Sundays."

At the Jinja train station we stopped for an inordinately long time, pulling us further behind schedule. But it was worth it, for through the station houses and over the fields I saw a flaming orange sunset against a lush, twilight green. In Egypt and northern Sudan the setting sun had been asphyxiated by the dry haze and floating dust; the East African sunset, in comparison, looked clear, radiant, primordial.

As dark descended on both sides of the train, the moon rose red from the black trees, climbed into orange, and found fullness in white overhead. Lone fires spotted the dark horizon, sucking in the perfumed air. Grass burnings sent layers of gauze slicing through the twilight: an unchangeable landscape since the dawn of man.

My new Ugandan friends, owing to the train's lack of dining facilities or vendors, shared their bananas and nuts with me. Without interior lights our cabin fell into a murky dusk of its own, which quieted my scribbling and our conversations until an introspective calm amid the train's clacking settled upon us. The minister's wife, before all light had drained from the hypnotic tableaux, brushed the floor with a twig broom and, after laying an assortment of shawls on the cleaned floor, slept there.

The train arrived in Tororo after midnight, too late to safely walk the country mile to town: for in Uganda bandits own the night. Accordingly the train station quickly turned into a campsite at the end of the line,

with most of the remaining passengers lying down on the platform and using assorted bundles as pillows. With permission I pitched my small tent on the grass outside the Railway Police Station, brushed my teeth and, removing my sweaty clothes, fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

That night I was visited not by bandits but by dreams of first loves, of riding between moving cars, and of jumping into treacherous waters; dreams which lingered briefly at dawn before dispersing as easily as the morning dew. No matter. My days were getting too full to belabor the nights.

I woke to find the railroad platform empty with all other overnighters gone. I quickly packed my things and walked the mile into town in the gathering morning heat. In Tororo I found some coffee and a taxi which took me to the Kenyan border, charging me extra, at first ten and then fifty shillings, for baggage. I smiled, paid, and left.

The border consisted of nothing but dozens of idle trucks, motionless and seemingly immobile, flanking both sides of the decrepit road. Walking through this eerily quiet funnel I saw no customs and ambled into the small town on the other side. There I found out that the train to Nairobi would leave at four that afternoon, but after changing all of my Ugandan shillings I still didn't have enough Kenyan ones to buy the ticket. No one would take or change my traveler's checks, and after being sucked dry in Juba I was without any dollars in cash. The station master suggested I might have better luck changing money in nearby Bungoma even though it was Saturday, so I risked a few of my Kenyan shillings on a half hour, hell-bent taxi ride there.

My mad rush for cash was almost for naught when I discovered the town's Barclays Bank had closed half an hour earlier at eleven a.m. That left hitchhiking to Nairobi over roads with scant traffic or staying the weekend with little money until the banks opened Monday morning: the choices were bleak. Inside, fortunately, I spotted the bank manager, who in response to my persistent pleading opened the door and took pity on me by changing my traveler's check. To celebrate such good fortune, I found a restaurant named the Lucky Star and had a greasy but

filing noon meal for a dollar of Kenyan shillings.

The train to Nairobi was even nicer than the last: marvelously done up with a hardwood interior, bright work, and six berths, four of them folded away. And bliss of all train blisses, my compartment started with only one other occupant. I felt transported to an extravagant Express of another era.

Keeping with the British colonial theme, a porter in white livery came by to take orders for dinner in the dining car. While my compartment mate contented himself with his own food bundle, I ordered a soup and a pot of tea, feeling pinched after so many flights. My companion was a Kenyan train conductor himself, on his way home to visit family in Nairobi. Although well-intentioned he was so breathlessly inquisitive about my travels that I snubbed him by returning to my book. Not that I feared more thought-police. Rather, I felt drained and simply wished to savor my various escapes, from Juba and now Uganda, basking in the thought that tomorrow I would be in Nairobi.

When dinner was served the porter in white, bright against his rich, dark skin, led me to the well-appointed dining car next to ours. As there were only two tables set up with tablecloths and silverware, I had no choice but to sit across the table from an aging British woman with short-cut hair. So much for privacy.

It turned out to be a fascinating meal. My eating companion, Mary, was an actress from London's Royal Shakespeare Company. Why, then, was such a distinguished actress visiting the wilds of western Kenya?

Her story was pleasurable and involving, just the sort one hopes for in chance encounters on the rails. Mary, it turned out, was visiting Kenya for the sole purpose of seeing the impoverished boy she had, through an aid agency in London, adopted and supported for the past year. Her search had taken her to the Kenyan-Ugandan border by train, bus, and on the back of a motorcycle for the last twenty-five miles, to find the boy and her mother deep in the Kenyan interior. The child was so angelic she burst into tears upon meeting him. For the occasion he

had not only dressed up but learned to say, "Thank you very, very much," which he said while thrusting one hand out in greeting, the other clutching her postcards and letters with regal British stamps. The mother had been heartbreakingly thankful for the support she couldn't provide, and the grandmother invited her to an "English" tea ceremony. Mary wondered if she could be the first white person to visit the village, at least in a long time. For during the taking of collective photographs the villagers had lost their timidity and, all curiosity, reached out to touch the paleness of her bare arms. On her return to London she planned to write the story of her visit for BBC Radio – which made me the first person to receive it, as a gift.

As we slowly settled into her tale, so we settled into a pleasant, courteous meal. Seeing the limit of my menu Mary kindly offered me her vegetables and dessert, while I shared my tea along with a brief story of how and why I had gotten here. When I mentioned having seen one play, "Great and Small" with Glenda Jackson, in London toward the beginning of my trip, she professed a great friendship with the actress and offered to introduce us on my next trip to town. I thanked her and replied that when next in London, it would be to visit her and only secondarily the esteemed Miss Jackson. Such diplomacy! The train's colonial air and formal dining had transported me to another era.

On returning to the compartment I found a new occupant, a middle-aged teacher. Train trips are full of surprises! Whether it was the sociability of my conversation with Mary or misgivings for having snubbed the home-bound train conductor, I stayed up late into the night with the new arrival discussing African and global politics and other such weighty matters. Overly impressed with my travels and desire to see and learn more, he speculated I could be the U.S. President someday and, one thing leading to another, that my current visit could be of significance to his country. Rarely have I thought of myself as presidential material, so his vote of confidence surprised me. Such misplaced if yearning speculation, along with his gratitude for my being "very open," made me realize how starved for information my curious, open-minded teacher friend was and how precious my dim knowledge

of the outside world could be. As we settled into our bunks I also realized that, like it or not, I was mistaken as an Ambassador-at-large, a representative of my country. As the train rattled me to sleep, giving me an unwarranted feeling of safety and security, we crossed the Equator sometime in the dark, my first time entering the southern hemisphere by land.

I had first crossed the Equator by plane only a year before, after my stepfather's invitation to help him film animal documentaries for the Encyclopaedia Britannica at the bottom of Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater. (Although an architect by profession he long maintained interests in filmmaking and photography.) Starting from Boston the trip had become a five day ordeal to find Paul, his soon-to-be third wife, and my younger brother Ricki, over Christmas. Despite a whiteout blizzard which necessitated an outdoor run between terminals at JFK Airport, I caught my overseas connection and survived the Air France flights to Paris, to Jeddah, and then to Dar es Salaam in Tanzania. After a short hop to Arusha I found the pre-arranged tour company, only to be flummoxed by their refusal to find me a spare seat on a tourist excursion to the crater. Contrary to what was agreed with Paul they wanted to charge me full load, or four hundred dollars, so I decided to try hitchhiking across the Serengeti Desert, a several day haul. My first attempt failed despite the passing of jeep-fulls of tourists embarking on photo-safaris. Not one of them even stopped to question a solitary traveler on Christmas Day.

The next two days of hitching were more successful and, after a stay at Lake Manyara, brought me to the bottom of the huge crater, inhabited by much wildlife and one anxious family. I remember how especially glad and relieved Ricki was to see me. (During the recent tumultuous years of divorce and family dissolution he had come to depend on me as a constant: an older brother who, due to the nine years between us, could also provide some needed parental warmth, even guidance.) An image that stayed with me from those first, strange days of hitching in East Africa was the mysterious sight of lone Masai

tribesmen, walking along the road's edge in the middle of nowhere, with the last village twenty miles before and the next twenty miles after. We would drive on and on, for an eternity of time, without any sign of human life or habitation. So where were they coming from and where were they going? Somehow they looked contented.

Reaching Nairobi by morning I found with little delay the misnamed New Kenya Lodge on the seedy side of town. I had heard that cheap, brightly painted hotels were prevalent there. At two dollars a night in a clean triple, the New Kenya Lodge fit the bill.

It being Sunday, however, I couldn't pick up correspondence either from home or anticipated hosts, which deflated me. Although Nairobi's sun-bright, ordered cityscape was the most familiar since Tel Aviv, I felt tired beyond repair, an emotional pull after such a physical push. Yet only a fortnight had passed since sending hopeful-guest letters from Cairo, making the likelihood of waiting invitations low.

With minimal sleuthing I learned the prospect of boat travel from Nairobi to India was slim. When a Swiss-German roommate offered the cheery news that flying to Europe cost one thousand dollars I reckoned direct flights to Bombay, if they existed, would cost even more. Dispiriting news. Nairobi had been such a shining goal in my mind, both a decision point and a place of rest. Now the thought of stewing in my juices for several jagged days, with wild images of venturing farther south to southern Africa, left me drained and listless. I considered sending a telegram to Daniela in Italy, but didn't want to expose myself to rejection. I thought of writing, calling, or telegramming home with news of my safe arrival through the crucible of warring Sudans, but did nothing. I couldn't move.

When I went out again a girl with beaded hair told me to slow down as I, preoccupied and New York-rushed, passed her on the sidewalk. We spoke and, after running her fingers down my arm several times, she suggested we meet later at a restaurant she recommended. Why not? A little lusty company might suit me just fine, starved as I was for human contact.

Small surprise she didn't show as my lack of enthusiasm is often contagious. So I ordered lunch and caught up on journaling. But before I had a chance to eat a morsel, a tall Australian ambled in with gym shorts and a shirt unbuttoned to his navel, and insisted on joining me. His aim: information about the Sudan or else. There was something weirdly thick about him. Although he was the one seeking information he insisted on contradicting me whenever possible. When he told me six tourist groups had been robbed at gunpoint along the Kenyan-Tanzanian border and that the entire frontier was closed due to an outbreak of the bubonic plague, I doubted his sanity.

When two fast girls entered the restaurant in full regalia and marched straight to our table, I heaved a sigh of relief at such a welcome distraction. They demanded to know if either of us knew where to find Gustav, my Swiss-German roommate. With neither of us able to pacify them, they puffed hard on cigarettes whose smoke slinked around the darkened room. The one who professed to be Gustav's girlfriend guessed that I was American, which bothered me.

"That's right," I replied.

"You look it," she continued, with no compliment in her voice.

"Why's that?" I asked. "What makes me look American?"

After a short pause, she replied, "You look rich."

I protested that my clothes were dirty, that I was traveling cheaply, but to no avail: the verdict was rich.

When I returned to the lodge and climbed up the pastel blue staircase to the second floor, with added interest I searched in vain for Gustav. Only later did he show up, flopping into the room looking professorial with spectacles and thinning hair. As if on cue his girlfriend Mona entered immediately thereafter, having caught up with him at last.

Theatrically she whined about his impending departure to Mombasa and complained about how difficult it would be to be left alone. When Gustav handed her fifty shillings I realized she had been out to shake him down all evening, to catch some of his departing currency. After she left Gustav mentioned he had stayed at her apartment for several months, an unnecessary explanation.

When Gustav and Mona arranged to meet later at a bar and invited me to join them, she looked at me slyly and promised to fix me up with a "nice girl." Perhaps she thought that rich Americans only go with nice girls. Was I so obviously inexperienced?

After a dinner of cheap Kenyan fare consisting of greasy meat chunks of unknown origin, we met up with Mona and her companion-in-arms at the local bar where I offered the first round of drinks. Gustav's departure to Mombasa the next day was still the main topic of conversation and the most unwelcome news. Looking at me Mona complained, "And what about me?" as if I could help in Gustav's absence. Earlier she had tried to kiss me on the lips in a way that was forward even by Somali call girl standards, but I had brushed her away with the high-pitched complaint that her boyfriend was sitting right next to us. Worse, Gustav looked unperturbed, even accustomed, as though wishing I might substitute as Mona's sugar-daddy. Either Mona had smelled an overripe libido or traveler's checks or both. As night descended she tried to taunt me by saying she wasn't interested, her nose pulleyed into the air. By that point I had been teased enough, so I replied, "Thanks, but no thanks," and left the rest of my beer to the nice girl who had been, for a while, sitting on my lap. On the way back to the New Kenya I recalled Gustav's observation from earlier in the evening, "They have to get their money from somewhere." Charity, I suppose. I had never paid for sex before and didn't intend to start now.

In the morning I thought it best to make my presence in the country legal, by visiting a government building for an entry stamp and currency declaration form. The people were refreshingly polite and courteous, even after I admitted to completely missing the customs shack at the Ugandan border. Perhaps I wasn't the first. With a personal check at the local Amex I bought more traveler's checks, as well as several hundred dollars in cash, but with the currency declaration form it would be a challenge to exchange the greenbacks on the black market. I also picked up no less than fifteen letters from concerned family and friends. What a bonanza! I hadn't realized they cared so much.

I wasn't alone when it comes to the importance of mail. Of the early explorers, Moorehead writes:

> The absence of news from the outside world seems to have afflicted the explorers almost more than any other hardship. In the hope of finding mail at some outlandish spot they would rouse themselves from their illnesses and march on for weeks or even months on end. . . .

Letters, like gold, are to be hoarded. So instead of reading them straight off I tracked down Robert, my partner-in-flight, who had shared his hotel, the InterContinental, in a note along with my mail. His room was a cabana next to the pool where we chatted for a time before walking around Nairobi on errands. He showed me the Reuters wire offices where he filed reports, the kind of nondescript, tropical hole-in-the-wall newsroom you'd expect.

We agreed to meet later at his pool, so I hoofed back to the seedy side of town to retrieve my bathing suit. When Robert didn't return at the arranged hour I simply stripped down to my speedo, went for a swim and, basking in both the sun and a faint glow from the home crowd, slowly began to read my letter hoard.

Paul wrote a long, caring letter, his most caring correspondence in memory – our relationship after a tumble was on the mend. He appeared more concerned about my safety than anyone else, perhaps because he knew Africa better. At one point, belatedly, he cautioned, "I hope you have *not* gone to Uganda where the Nile leaves the lakes and plunges north. . . ." (Oops!) He continued:

> I hear the border from Kenya to Tanzania is open again, but presume you are planning to head East from Mombasa via perhaps the Seychelles. Please don't go near Somalia or Yemen or any of the places where violent struggles are going on. God, how I envy you this part of your journey, but I have no sense of how it's going for you. . . . If you need some money, for X sakes let me know! Don't be too fanatical, please, about penny pinching, to get from A to B, or to find a place for the night or to eat. Your health is the

> most important thing you have, and it may prove fragile if you eat and sleep badly. I remember my own bout of dysentery in Granada, in southern Spain. It was no joke, and I was lucky to be near a doctor with penicillin. You could be less lucky. Please tell me what's going on, and how the money is holding up.

Adam, my old college roommate and now a roomer in Mum's house, wrote his first letter since my departure. Our last encounter had been on the third floor with Ricki, when I asked Adam to keep an eye on my little brother and in turn urged Ricki to depend on him for help and support during my absence. While Adam made no mention of the pact he wrote with the charm of a Connecticut Yankee:

> Dear Benja,
>
> I was even more glad to get your Xmas letter than your previous one, as I am so grateful not to have my prolonged silence resented. I am sometimes incapable of putting pen to paper for long periods of time. . . .

And later:

> Today is [sister] Liv's 21st birthday. It was a cheerful day at last, there having been a certain gloom about the house since I wrecked my father's car – nobody seemed *too* anxious to speak to me – or all that happy that I wasn't injured (in some painful but inexpensive way) but gradually the clouds have been dispelled. I'm going to try letting my father whip me at chess.

And finally regarding Mum:

> I think things will get better. . . . Try not to worry too much about her – I am trying to be a help and while I'm not you I am getting better.

Dad and Molly wrote as well, with Molly's letter as usual first.

> I'm really curious to know how you're feeling about your

> trip. You've been gone for *1/2 a year* !! now. Is it going as you'd expected? Better? Worse? Different? Why? How much actual hitchhiking are you doing? Do you ever feel lonely, cold, hungry, tired? How is your journal?

Dad followed with three pages of his own, his second full letter to me and this one longer than the last:

> Your letters are wonderful. Especially the stories about Cairo, where there is meat on the bones. As Molly was suggesting, tell us more about yourself – how are you reacting to it all and whether you are pleased or disappointed relative to what you expected.

Later, Dad expressed his concern in his own characteristic way:

> By the way, at Jean's request I checked with Blue Cross/Blue Shield about medical insurance coverage. They will pay the bills, but I have to pay them for you first, if you get near a hospital. Best idea is don't.
>
> Have a very good time. We are proud of your progress and very interested in your perceptions. . . .
>
> Love, Daddy

Enclosed with Paul's missive were the first two letters from dear Ricki.

> BEN!!
>
> HOW'S YOUR TRIP GOING?? Sorry I haven't written to you sooner, but I've been really tied up lately. You always seem to call Mum when I'm not there! Everything is going well here in Ol' Cambridge. I'm chugging away at school.

His second letter began similarly:

> BEN!!:
>
> How are you?? Sorry not to have written you sooner, but I've been so tied up with all my school work! Did you have

> a nice Christmas? We all missed you here. You better be here next year! Or else!

The truth was Ricki had been tied up with Mum, as I discovered toward the end of his second letter.

> Before Thanksgiving I went through some rough spots with Mum. After you left, she began to really drink alot. I'd find her strewn across the table, totally out of it, and other things like that, as you as well as I have encountered before. This began to bother me alot, so I sat her down and we talked. She gave me the routine she always used. ("I'll stop. I know I have let you down, I promise". . .etc.) She was then fine for about 4 days and began drinking again. I kept telling her "If you keep this up Mum, I'm gonna leave." 4 times I said this, and 4 times she would stop + start again. I had had it. I left. I came over here to Dada's and said I wouldn't see her a week (literally *not see* her). I talked to her every night. She was really upset and stopped drinking. I found myself really breaking down on her and she hated it. I told her that if she started drinking again I would leave again. A week passed. She was fine and I really thought it was over. I went back the next day (or no, I guess I just called her the day before I was to go back). When she came on the phone I could immediately tell she had been drinking. I told her again, that I *would not* see her for a week. She again got really upset. A week passed (I called her every night) and she was totally sober. There were 4 days till Thanksgiving and I told her that if she began to drink again I wouldn't go to Pennsylvania with her, and I wouldn't come home until she started seeing a doctor. Fortunately she hasn't started up again. We went to [Uncle] Spencer's for Thanksgiving, talked to you and had a great time. Ever since, she has stopped. There have been one or 2 incidents of a little drinking, but for the whole she has stopped, altogether. We both have a blast doing things together now, and it's fun to be with her. She has joined AA, she goes to the meetings and she goes to a doctor now. Let's hope it lasts!

And at the end:

> Well, I hope you fend off any muggers and attackers that you might meet. Call us here at Dada's. I'm sure everybody would love to hear from you. I practically always missed you when you called Mummy! Thanks for your letters and post cards. Send more! I'm sure you're having a great time. I wish I could do what you're doing, maybe I will!
>
> Love, Ricki

Ricki's letter disturbed me as the tropical sun waned and the colors turned sharper. Neither the pact with Adam nor the emergency phone number of our family pediatrician, who was also a cousin, had helped. Ricki had been forced to assume my old role and, worse, completely on his own.

From Mum I received over half a dozen letters, mostly from her self-imposed exile at a ranch in New Mexico. I read these with the most anticipation. I was hoping for a response to my long letter sent from Jerusalem, which speculated on the sources of the Troubles and reiterated the reasons for my trip in this way:

> By leaving I had to accept the possibility of your drinking yourself into a near vegetablehood, like your mother, or to death. In either case I would have blamed myself – yet I had no choice but to leave.

But from the first airmail-thin sheets I could tell she did not care to discuss the matter. The letter itself was curt, uninviting.

Subsequent letters were warmer, but there was still no mention of my departure, or Ricki's moving out, or the nearly aborted Thanksgiving. Due to her prolonged absence in New Mexico, she explained:

> He'll be with Paul until mid-Feb and I know he'd love a letter or so from you. You are his hero, you know that. You soften the brunt of the way I am and the way Paul is. You are truly a gift. For me, too! All my love, Mum

She penned many long, talky meditations on what it was like to be

alone in a desolate, winter landscape with her new Husky puppy, Chloe. And three years after the fact she seemed to be coming to terms with her breakup and divorce with Paul.

> I can't honestly say I've come to any completed peace about Paul yet. It made me furious when he mistreated you but I was both infatuated and a coward. It makes me angry to hear that you were always somewhat frightened of him. I was, too. I feel guilty, too, for having married him and put you children at a certain amount of peril. . . .
>
> During some of the long drive here I thought a lot about Paul. There were some marvelous and connected times during those 15 years (particularly the time in East Africa when he was so far away from the Office and 'making it,' but even there he had some brutal moments). . . . He was more like a Pied Piper than a thoughtful, sensitive family man. I was drawn to that, and I miss some of the excitement of it. But I don't want any of it back.

Then she started communicating concern for me in the first tangible way since I left, by clucking over the near-loss of my possessions. Slowly she appeared to be emerging from her long bout of self-absorption.

> I hate the thought that you could be wiped out by the loss of your bag. And, true, replacing what you are carrying with you in the third world could be nearly impossible. The closer you and the bag stay, the better you have an eye on it. Do you carry money and documents and the essentials for overland travel on you? Around your neck? How have you worked it out? I should have asked you from the very beginning of your trip, but if anything serious happens to you do you have a card or something so that I can be there? I will come to you, anywhere, but you need to have information on you for how I can be reached. . . .
>
> I can be often too selfish and self-absorbed to think out the caring parts which are in me. I was reminded by [ranch manager] Dan Kipp, who today asked that I leave a note about where I intend to go when I'm riding. I mean, wow!

> Here I am in a vast but encompassed space. There *you* are with much behind you and miles to go. PLEASE have something on you to let us know if anything happens. I would be there in a flash, as soon as possible. Helpful or not, just to be there.

Perhaps my near-calamities in Cairo had shaken her out of her reverie, for it was the first time she had written detailed questions about my welfare and modus operandi – or as the last sentences implied what she could do in case I was waylaid or died. I felt as though my mother was gradually returning after a long journey to a distant land. . .and yet before her long-awaited arrival I had already left, fated to never see her at home again.

It took me two hours lounging at pool side to read these and other letters. Robert, happily for my bout of homesickness, didn't show up until later. I felt depleted after reading through so much and so many. While many parts made me feel loved and missed, other parts such as Ricki's solitary struggle left me feeling physically empty, even useless. And yet with Mum in Alcoholics Anonymous, according to Ricki, and seemingly on the wagon, were the terms of my return already fulfilled? Could I go home now? Was anything ever permanent or permanent enough?

With the equatorial sun sagging along its year-round path, approaching the horizon's same vector of night and no farther, I dove into the pool for the last swim of the day, a shock of water and refracted light.

4 – Kenya

Buried in the letter pile was an invitation to visit a Kenyan friend of a friend named Jim Allen, who lived in Mombasa on the coast. Rather than waiting for Nairobi invites I decided to hitch to Mombasa and the Indian Ocean, to see Mr. Allen and check on the possibility of boat travel to the Indian subcontinent. But more than anything else I wanted to find an inexpensive place to recuperate, to re-energize.

In the morning I packed my mobile home and by noon walked to the outskirts of Nairobi, in the hope of hitching a ride. I wanted to try hitching in East Africa for the first time since the holiday rides two Christmases before and figured the road between Kenya's two largest cities would be the busiest. Alas, I was already breaking the hitcher's first rule of the road, to get an early start.

Like last time I had limited success flagging down cars, even with a makeshift sign with *Mombasa* penned across it. Worse yet the midday heat was oppressive. Despite partial cover under the canopy of a large tree I gave up after two hours when I started to feel physically ill.

After dragging myself back to the hotel I felt like vomiting and wondered if it was from heat exhaustion. I washed my sweat-soaked clothes and took a cold shower before, at last, lying down. Within ten minutes I felt better, only to be overcome by the most powerful urge to shed weight. After sprinting to the oriental toilet with two isles of traction for your feet and the target-practice hole in between, I had the dubious pleasure of my first African episode of diarrhea.

With some more rest and sufficient time for my clothes to flap dry in the arid heat, I decided to pamper myself and bought a ticket on the overnight train to Mombasa. Now and then it is best to admit defeat.

* * *

The train was fancier than the last with even more dark wood and brightly shined trim. Best of all I had the luxury of a compartment to myself. The welcome solitude allowed me to watch the sun disappear over a green horizon, flat and uninterrupted save for a herd of wildebeest. I studied the fading landscape with such rapt attention it felt like an out-of-body experience.

Heeding the letters which had nagged me to eat well to keep healthy I splurged on a three and a half dollar full dinner. Served with silver and pewter settings in the dining car it was my best repast since a home-cooked meal in Israel. I felt in the lap of a bygone luxury – and for what price? If only three and a half dollars could always so easily rejuvenate me!

My dinner companions, a Dutch couple, were more accustomed to such luxury and heartily recommended I continue north from Mombasa to Lamu, a quaint and hard-to-reach Swahili coastal village. As Robert had extolled its virtues as well, why not take some time off to rest in Lamu?

In Mombasa's early light I walked around the dusty, sun-washed town, avoided a shady money transaction (where I was invited down a winding alley), picked up more letters, and had no luck in finding sea transportation to India. As Isak Dinesen writes in *Out of Africa*:

> The sun burns and scorches Mombasa; the air is salt here, the breeze brings in every day fresh supplies of brine from the East, and the soil itself is salted so that very little grass grows, and the ground is bare like a dancing-floor.

Around midday I began the search for Jim Allen's residence (he had invited me to drop by for a meal and a chat anytime), which would have been impossible without the post office's help.

Arriving mid-afternoon I found a thatched-roof home and forested oasis with a garden in front and a view of the Port Reitz River beyond, but no Jim. His tall, friendly housekeeper, Jacob, placed his return around five o'clock that evening. So I pulled out Jim's invitation and

asked if I could wait. Jacob readily agreed. When asked if there was a place nearby to find lunch he replied no and offered to cook up some scrambled eggs served with toast, a slice of pineapple, and sweetened grapefruit juice.

When Jim, a middle-aged writer, returned on schedule, his appearance wasn't what I expected. Pale-looking, portly, and sweating, he seemed out of place for such a sweltering climate. After perfunctory hellos, he bathed and napped. Only then did we sit down to chat over several cups of hot tea. A man of routines he then watered the garden and released a turquoise yellow-breasted parrot from its cage for a spell in the jungle.

While writing a "revolutionary" history of Africa's East Coast Jim told me he leads a rather solitary bachelor existence. A native Kenyan of Australian parentage he spoke fluent Swahili and would be leaving in a few days for a job on a luxury cruise to Sri Lanka, to lecture Europeans on regional history and culture.

I stayed for a dinner of overdone lamb ribs silently served by Jacob. My favorite story was of the armies of safari ants which, in the thousands on the occasional nocturnal visit, would attack Jim in bed and cause him to spend the rest of the night in the bathtub painfully pulling them off. A nearby troop was spotted that very day, so Jacob had already spread a thin line of ashes around the wide perimeter of the house, to fool them into believing fire lay ahead.

Halfway through dinner our conversation lagged despite my mighty attempts to resuscitate it. Only when I described chasing the plane down in Juba did Jim rouse himself to anything bordering on active interest. Perhaps he just wanted to write, but how solitary can you get? Before I left he confirmed that few, if any, boats between Mombasa and India accept passengers anymore. (The old, colonial route had been pioneered, he pedantically explained, by the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama on his first sail to India, the first European arrival by sea.) He also gave me several names and addresses, including those of a photographer whose book on the Masai I had just seen and who might be in Lamu. It seemed as though anyone worth their sea salt was in

Lamu or on the way: Robert had left me a note that day saying he was going there himself.

Jacob, large and lumbering, walked me to the nearest bus stop so I could catch the last bus back to the hotel. Jim had sent him to protect me from robbers, but the only jarring noises were chorus upon chorus of tree frogs and cicadas.

Even in the heat I slept well under the whirl of a ceiling fan that discouraged sleep-robbing mosquitoes. I dreamed about the dozens of people I had seen near the post office that evening, sleeping on cardboard along the sidewalk.

Accepting the inevitable I joined the Lamu-migration by catching the nine hour bus along the coast. The bus was so crowded with people and chickens that my mobile home had to go on the roof, which I disliked ("the closer you and the bag stay, the better you have an eye on it"). Shiva Naipaul – whose East African travel book, *North of South*, I picked up a short time later – relates the same trip this way:

> The bus is crowded. Suitcase, boxes, bundles of many sizes and shapes cram the roof racks. Live poultry flap and squawk under the seats, releasing downy, asthmatic vapors.

When passengers thinned out I lay down and closed my eyes, even though after Malindi the road all but gave up the ghost, causing the ride to become teeth-chatteringly rough.

In such a supine state I remained for hours on end, my thoughts wandering to all points of a familiar compass, from childhood memories to family concerns, from an eventual return home to what I should do for Christmas ten months hence. In other words it was another long tussle with homesickness. I fretted about the true purpose of my trip and wondered if I was doing the right thing. Having made it through the Sudan I no longer felt unduly challenged by traveling around the world, suspecting that one way or another I would slog it through. I was at a crossroads and wasn't sure what to do next. Options included kidnapping Daniela directly to India, diving as far south as South Africa, or simply returning to northern Italy. In Italy I could take up my

widowed friend Monika's invitation received in Nairobi saying that she was looking for a "friendly madman" to help with the animals. And if Mum was actually sober I could even call it quits and go home. Too many choices and I felt stretched too tightly to weigh them.

Lamu turned out to be just the distracting rest I needed. Situated on an island the town faces the sea with a row of odd coral buildings. Most of them are two stories high with sharply inclined, almost Dutch thatched roofs – something you wouldn't expect in a snowless climate. The overall effect seen from the water is a crowd of squat buildings sporting grandiose hats. The architectural styles are similarly peculiar. Many seafront houses boast columned porticoes, but the columns appear unusually far apart and are topped by awkward boxes for capitals. Calling them Doric would be a stretch. Jim in his fussy way had classified Lamu as a fourteenth century Kiswahili town, largely unmolded by subsequent Arab or British influences.

My cheap hotel, the Bahati Lodge, displayed an even more eclectic hodgepodge of materials. White coral walls rose three stories to a wonderfully crenelated roofline and flat open roof, on top of which were scattered various bedrooms, a solitary toilet closet, and a thatch-roofed sitting area. The rooftop brood was designed to catch harbor breezes, which was most welcome as the night was virtually windless and quite hot. To protect against mosquitoes my roommate lit a small incense coil, whose sweet-smelling smoke permeated my dreams. After waking under a blue patch of a sheet draped over my sleep-stunned body, I watched the sun mount into moist morning clouds as the town and several backyards came to life below. For less than two dollars a night I had found a cheap traveler's paradise in the nick of time.

During my stay I saw much of Robert, delivered Jim's letter to the photographer Carol Beckwith, cleaned clothes, and caught up on correspondence. Lamu could be quite sociable. Carol, a fellow Cantabrigian born in the same hospital as I was, suggested a several mile beach walk to visit a pleasant American and Italian couple working

Lamu Fort

on a UNESCO conservation program. During the introductory rounds, two vodka tonics made me not only social but happily so. Only in the country for a few days I was already hobnobbing with the likes of globetrotting journalists, photographers, and U.N. bureaucrats. What next?

Robert and I dined together two evenings in a row. There's something about meeting other North Americans overseas, particularly in the third world, which sparks friendships. During our first dinner he told me in some detail about his Canadian upbringing, family, and start of his career. At our second he asked me what it was like to be an American traveling abroad. The question, catching us both unawares, caused an outpouring from me. Launching into topics I hardly knew I'd been thinking about, I ranted about German pacifism, NATO, the Middle East, travel as escape, and exile: a real tirade. Robert's eyes drooped toward the end, but he rallied afterwards by joking he hadn't realized it was such a loaded question. By this point we were at Lamu's only bar, called Petley's, on a veranda overlooking the harbor, when a dark face poked through the balustrade and whispered something inaudible.

I leaned forward saying "What?" and dimly recognized the word "Swahili" in the response.

"Swahili what?" I asked.

After several more soft whispers I finally understood "Swahili girl" and waved him away.

When I told Robert he said he had been offered the same the night before. "How much did he ask for?" he wondered.

I didn't know, but Robert had been quoted forty shillings a shot or under four dollars. Yes, Lamu was already sufficiently tourist-trendy to support two or more pubescent prostitutes, as I had already met one:

> Two mornings ago, a young Muslim girl, who I remembered from my bus ride to Lamu, sneaked out of an American's bedroom next to mine, and padded down the stairs, presumably home. She couldn't have been more than fifteen. Sleepy-eyed, the American found his way to the

> bathroom. Later that day the girl gave me a resounding hello – on the authority of our bus ride together I thought – which troubled me: evidently she was looking for more. A pretty Muslim, at such a young age: fully Westernized.

Then again, as Dinesen points out, Lamu is one of "the remnants of the towns of the ancient Arab traders in ivory and slaves." Perhaps not that much changes.

The next day Robert and I roughed the daylong bus ride back to Mombasa, where we separated. On the strength of selling several articles he bought a first-class ticket on the overnight train to Nairobi, while I checked into the Hydro, a cheap hotel where indeed the showers worked. When I walked to the station to see Robert off, he kindly offered to send me books if I sent him my itinerary. What good luck – a sponsor at last!

The next morning I had another go at hitching, this time better rested and protected from the sun. I caught a ride with a native Kenyan who asked for sixty shillings, which was below the cost of the overnight train. Having paid my way I didn't feel obliged to chat. This left me to my thoughts and to the scenery, which was spectacular. We passed through the Tsavo West National Park, where baboons, wildebeest, Thomson gazelles, and birds of prey were abundant. Had I taken the train again, which only runs at night, I would have missed most of it. Kenya is a wild and stunning country, rising gradually from coast to highlands.

I checked back into the New Kenya Lodge, with no signs of Gustav or his on-and-off Somali lover. As no rooms were available I reserved a spot on the roof and/or lobby floor for only fifteen shillings. I had told Robert about the New Kenya and was surprised to find him there as well, also camping on the roof. While much cooler the roof had the downside of being exposed to the elements, which included a rare storm that evening, a little early for the March rains. Robert and I ignored the first sprinkles while buried like mummies in our sleeping bags, but the rain persisted, causing us to beat a retreat to the lobby floor with

everyone else.

I saw Robert off to the airport the next day and tried one more evening of roof-sleeping, but the rains again drove me below. This time the lobby was particularly noisy and bright, abetting a powerful headache. After two days of hoofing it over Nairobi's hot pavements on errands, what rest I'd found in Lamu was gone.

The errands were productive at least. I looked into visa requirements for travel both east and south, and found cheap flights across the Indian Ocean for under five hundred dollars. Hallelujah! I finally knew I would be able to leave Africa without having to backtrack down the Nile or pay exorbitant airfare.

Best of all several invitations awaited me on my return. One from friends of friends of family named the Dudgeons invited me to stay with them in the nearby suburb of Karen. When I got through by phone that afternoon they offered to pick me up in town on the next. What a find! And not a moment too soon.

The last day in town I met up with the U.N. couple for lunch. It was pleasant, but I was so exhausted I had to lie down afterwards, just as I had after errands that morning. (Intestinal purges since returning from Lamu were wearing me down.) I was in such uncertain shape that, after accepting the Dudgeons' offer of hospitality and eating a large first dinner with them, I revisited the entire meal in the privacy of their guest bathroom.

The Dudgeons, Gilly and Patrick, could not have been more hospitable: it turned out that I convalesced in their suburban home for a fortnight. Nothing too serious, just playing tag with a series of physical and mood disorders. Yet I couldn't help notice that while my mother was getting better, I was only getting worse. I slept eleven hours in a big, soft, freshly sheeted bed that first night, but still slinked back to lie down early with a stomach disorder the next day. Patrick checked in on me around seven o'clock when I complained of a minor stomach ache. Luckily within half an hour I felt well enough to join him for several frosty beers, followed by a wholesome dinner which stayed

down.

Such was the state of my temperamental health for more than a week: intermittent diarrhea, faintness, and sudden exhaustion, calling for frequent naps in my sea of a bed. I tried to make the best of it with the Dudgeons, who were British enough to make little of it and accept my low energy levels as travel exhaustion. After only three days they offered that I stay on for as long as I wished, which was truly a godsend for my recovery was doggedly slow.

Home away from home was a single-story ranch house surrounded by an East African lawn, that is the meanest, sharpest crab grass ever found in suburbia, looking more brown than green on a bed of red, dusty soil. At times I wondered where I was. If the brown grass and red dirt didn't give the continent away, the graceful umbrella-like acacia trees did flanked by blooming red hibiscus and white and yellow frangipani.

During weekdays I mainly read or wrote, in the guest room or the surreal backyard. On occasion when left home alone I listened to Chopin's Preludes, whose sweet familiarity made me weepy. In total I wrote twenty-five letters to family and friends, as well as ten more travel missives either forward or backward, supplicating future hosts or thanking prior ones. I read Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* (our neighborhood of Karen, after all, was in honor of her actual first name) and lined up *An Area of Darkness*, by Shiva's older brother V.S. Naipaul. About their ancestral land of India I had exchanged it for my *Blue Nile* with a cheap traveler in Lamu. In case Daniela took the plunge and decided to travel with me I thought I should read up on the subcontinent.

Those first evenings the Dudgeons introduced me to various neighbors and to the elaborate security systems they all maintained. These included panic buttons, all-night open shortwave radios, day and night guards as well as guard dogs, and private security patrols only a minute and a half away who could be called by the night guard with his very own panic button. An uprising the prior year had so frightened whites in the neighborhood that, regardless of how deep the security

levels were, many were leaving the country. Not only were some neighbors returning to Denmark in April, but the Dudgeons themselves were moving permanently to England in August. The most common complaint was lack of future for their children (the Dudgeons had two noisy boys under the age of two), due to reverse discrimination and the lack of prospects for the country as a whole. They loved the land with their hearts – lands where the family blood had been shed and where Gilly's parents still lived – but by the end of the first evening and several whiskeys, both Patrick and his Danish neighbor transformed for the worse. Gentle men by most standards they began referring to the natives as "savages." I saw it in the way Patrick ordered food from black waiters or Gilly purchased gasoline from black attendants and criticized the cook for clumsily clearing the dishes. I heard it in the soft resentment that expresses itself in voices slightly intimidated. What was there to do but leave? Their time had passed.

Gilly was the quintessentially good Scottish girl of hardy stock: resourceful, lively, and endlessly patient with the children (and me). Patrick, in contrast, maintained a certain English reserve save for the occasional evening outburst. (I found a book in the living room, a guide to the endangered *English Gentleman*.) We rarely spoke at length, outside the several times he gave me a lift into Nairobi. During one ride he elaborated on the prior August's uprising and described how two foreigners were killed, including a Japanese tourist, while staying at the Hilton Hotel. The hotel security was so lax that the would-be rulers stormed through the building and, breaking down locked doors, raped many guests. The suicide rate among tour operators (Patrick's business) rose sharply afterwards. Kenya seemed too calm and pastoral for such unrest, but what did I really know?

While enjoying my hosts' hospitality I reached out to other contacts, including white hunter friends of my safari grandparents. (Wildlife documentaries had brought Brownie and Dick to East Africa for several filming expeditions.) Allen and Nora Ker answered my introductory letter by mailing me their phone number, but it took several days to get through. In the meantime the nightly social round robin continued,

including several evenings at Patrick's nearby cousin's, where all the men got exceedingly "pissed" before subjecting us to videos on the recent performance of a British Olympic skating couple and a documentary on – whom else? – Queen Elizabeth. This royalty stuff so far from the empire's roost could have been quaint, even reassuring, had it not been so melancholic.

During our second evening, a dinner at the cousin's, the gas stove proved cantankerous, delaying the start of the roast's roasting and prolonging a generous hour for drinking. Relatively speaking I fit in a spartan three stiff ones, which I balanced later with three large servings of meat. After dinner more British patriotic songs blasted from the cassette player, including one about a Royal Navy ship serenaded by a thousand sweet-voiced sailors. Matters soon deteriorated from there into dancing. Patrick and Gilly were easily the most graceful couple on the dance floor, but Gilly's Grandma was the star attraction and managed to trot me out onto the living room floor for a turn or two. When it was thankfully over she hastened to ask if she had terribly embarrassed me. Not at all, I lied.

Themselves of the grandparent set, the Kers promptly invited me to lunch on the other side of town. Gilly, already with lunch plans in the neighborhood, offered to drop me off and pick me up, which was much appreciated as public transport was unreliable. Although we arrived ten minutes early Mr. Ker was already standing in the driveway, looking jaunty in short-sleeved shirt and tie, black polished shoes with high cream-colored socks, and wonderfully flared green safari shorts above bony knees. Gilly called his safari shorts "Empire Builders." Mr. Ker was delighted to see Gilly who as a young girl had worked at his family's company. When he ushered me into the sparse living room, whose mantelpiece was decorated with shooting medals and epaulets dating back to the 1930's, conversation crawled from animals to stars, from independence to my grandparents. A charming old man, Mr. Ker had an amazing ability to speak non-stop for ten minute intervals. During these feats of speech he would visibly jump in his seat at sporadic moments and quickly stroke the length of his green tie, as if

punctuating a thought. He offered me a beer from warm to ice-cold. When I requested the latter he brought me the coldest brew I've laid lips on. The comfort food meal included rolled stuffed chicken, potatoes, vegetables, and a slightly sweet homemade white wine, fermented from granadilla. Before leaving I was shown to the toilet cheekily labeled "The House of Lords." The entire meal had the transformative quality of stepping in and out of a different world.

Despite setbacks my health and energy gradually improved, prompting me to deliberate on what next: India, Europe, or falling south? I at last found the courage to telegram Daniela and ask her for her plans: my fate in twenty-five lines for ten dollars. Chances were remote, but why not give her one last opportunity? If the response came back negative I was leaning toward heading south. Along with Gilly's simple advice – seeing that I was "already here," I might as well traverse the continent – the Dudgeons had also supplied me with more South African addresses. This swelled my booty of contacts, which already included one in Johannesburg with reportedly fetching daughters. Recently received connections included an address in Arusha, Tanzania from Paul and the German Frau Ambassador's address in Malawi from Monika. If I did plunge south, however, there were legions of errands to perform, from securing visas to finding a replacement guidebook. Just thinking of the logistics exhausted me.

That weekend the Dudgeons left for a long weekend retreat, leaving me with little Timmy and their three servants. Kipsoy, the Kikuyu cook with stretched ears that wag when he walks, was the most talkative. Without the Master and Misses around he no longer pretended to not speak or understand English well. Much of the time I spent alone, reading and considering what next. Literature, which had for so many years lifted me above the confusing muck of the present, was now strangely a letdown, which I described this way:

> Incurable, ineffable sadness. The ending of *Out of Africa* has too forcibly brought home the sadness that is my own. An expanding sense of departure, as a sun grows larger over the horizon before descending; and in exactly the same

> way, an intolerable sense of loss. . . . I am again terrified at the prospect of travel: a small, shrunk person inside me only desires to be led by the hand home.

Worse, my next book, Shiva Naipaul's *North of South*, only complicated matters, igniting something akin to a crisis of spirit. It didn't help that on touching down in Kenya, he declares, "On all sides Africa stretched away into wild infinity, a continent of undefined threat and mystery." After such table-setting it didn't surprise that his experiences were relentlessly negative. Naipaul's visit to the tea plantations, so lovingly described in Dinesen's *Out of Africa*, brought an epiphany not unlike Bellow's in Jerusalem:

> Suddenly, one realized how fragile it all was. Nothing was assured; nothing was safe; nothing could be taken for granted. An older life pressed. Old instincts threatened. At any moment, Africa could close in. The house, the lawn, the monomaniacal acres of tea – it could all be swept away without trace. There was nothing inevitable about "progress."

Taking my own pen to paper, I wrote:

> The first hundred pages of *North of South* didn't amuse me; being here, it's much too real. The sense is of reigning absurdity, irrationalism, in which there is little protection against wanton harm and violence. Never before have I been made to feel the important place of benign government through its non-existence here, that is in Africa. Again, something that was taken for granted. It's excessive, I know, but I feel the only thing that keeps me slightly above the pervasive squalidness and the concurrent loss of purpose and values is my meager amount of money, which, in African terms, makes me wealthy. Last year I was fascinated by the strange look in the eyes of the Masai who lined the roads around Arusha – for a large measure, that fascination led me to undertake this journey – yet now I feel too well aware of the meaning behind the look, the hollowness and despair.

My fragile health was fueling a depression sparked by fear and the

thought of endless travel. The irony returned to me: that while my mother pulled together I only seemed to be falling apart. Meanwhile I had written my old roommate Adam that if I died now, I could leave the world largely at peace. Strange as it seems my troubled relations, mostly with family, had attained some sort of resolution: I was free to go. Yet why did this freedom only accentuate a yawning emptiness which terrified me, as much as free falls in recurring dreams since childhood? Time to move on.

In their absence Gilly had generously offered me the use of their 4-wheel drive Suzuki, which I drove into Nairobi to pick up mail. I collected letters from Mum and Robert, and one telegram from Daniela with her reply. It was the only written communication I ever received from her.

> DEAR BEN JUST STARTED NEW JOB IMPOSSIBLE TO TRAVEL NOW MAYBE IN A FEW MONTHS DONT REARRANGE SCHEDULE ON MY ACCOUNT GO AHEAD ITS A LONG WAY HOME DONT STOP WRITING IF NOT INDIA AT LEAST YOUR LETTERS A HUG
> DANIELA

That settled it. Traipsing through India with Daniela would have been too easy. Now that I could press forward alone I promptly decided on the riskiest option, to travel farther south. Mum wrote to say she had already sent the African guidebook I'd requested and asked that I call. My telexed reply, setting the wheel in motion for more and more travel, went like this:

> TRAVELING SOUTH CALLED SUNDAY NO ANSWER MAIL AMEX JOHANNESBURG SPREAD NEWS XO
> BENJA

5 – Arusha

The guidebook from Mom never arrived, which was poetic justice of sorts. After sixteen days and scouring all the English-language bookstores in Nairobi I couldn't delay any longer and decided to ask for advice. Gilly, ever helpful, drove me to the infamous Mrs. Roche's, a renowned slum-traveler hotel and hangout where I found a two year out-of-date Lonely Planet guide to the continent, as thick as a Gideons Bible and nearly as informative for only fifty shillings.

Now all I needed was a plan for the detour south, for neither in New York nor in Cambridge had I considered anything so rash as going all the way from Cairo to the Cape. I was thinking of returning to Mombasa and making my way along the coast to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania's capital, where the Planet people assured me trains to Zambia could be found. Then during some last errands in Nairobi I picked up one more piece of mail, an invitation from Paul's friend Hayat Khan to visit him outside of Arusha, in northern Tanzania. Should I go?

It would greatly slow my southern dive, but then I had dropped any pretension of keeping to a schedule months ago. Besides, I wanted to revisit Arusha where I had been with family just over a year before.

While in town I checked the Thorn Tree message board, a veritable communication lode among lost-and-found overlanders, for any news from the African Queen crowd. Notes to Iowa Dave, Sandra Honey, Serge and Christine, Lorand and Carol were all unanswered. Feeling a tad wistful I added a postscript to the messages saying that I was overcome by madness and falling southward.

An unfolded and pinned up note caught my eye:

> Ari Naim,
>
> I missed you in Kenya – too bad Israel has declared a state of war – God bless you! Maybe we shall rendez-vous elsewhere in another place and another time.
>
> Love Lisa

From *in another place* on the script was cursive, with the name *Lisa* itself particularly florid in the style of a sappy greeting card, which it essentially was. Clearly all travelers have a story to tell, no matter how lonely heart or sentimental.

As a last errand I visited the taxi and bus stand at the southern edge of town, where I learned a *matatu* leaves Nairobi for the Tanzanian border at six every morning. With luck I could make it to Arusha the same day. I bid my adieus to the Dudgeons, leaving a hundred shillings for Kipsoy and the other servants, and checked back into the New Kenya Lodge for one last night.

While the matatu didn't arrive until nine (meaning I could have enjoyed one more night in suburbia), driving to the border at Namanga was painless. So was entering Tanzania, in the border-formalities jacket and tie I donned despite the heat. I had expected a slow crossing after the border's closure for several years due to disagreements over the East African Railways. But even this went smoothly, as the Tanzanians seemed glad to have tourists dropping in by land once again.

The price for hassle-free entry was the meanest currency declaration form I've seen. Not only would I have to record all (legal) transactions, but on the spot declare all hard currency on my person which was meant to discourage bargain hunters from trading on the black market. All money in excess of that declared, they warned, would be confiscated on departure, which seemed severe. Shiva Naipaul noted the capriciousness of customs officials this way:

> Something of that eighteen-century atmosphere of rapacity persists at the border posts of the modern states.

Luckily I had been forewarned from travelers coming in the opposite direction. In preparation I bought a few Tanzanian shillings in Kenya at an advantageous rate and hid nearly a hundred U.S. dollars in the lining of my hiking boots. Black market rates, in fact, were four to five times higher than official ones as Tanzania had long practiced a form of "African Socialism," patterned after the Chinese post-World War II model. This, I soon learned, meant that everything to do with currency and pricing were wildly distorted. Consequently nothing worked very well.

From Namanga I took a Peugeot 404 to Arusha at the steep official rate of nine dollars, which was particularly exorbitant considering the number of stops we made, half due to police checks, half to engine trouble.

Arusha looked its same sleepy, quiescent self when we arrived mid-afternoon. Following the advice of Paul's friend Mr. Khan I found a certain Tanzania Cartons – an uninspiring name – but couldn't find Eric the Dane, who was supposed to fly me out to the farm which Mr. Khan oversees. When I phoned Mrs. Khan, who lives in Arusha with the children, she invited me to dinner but had no way of contacting her husband herself.

Once more unexpectedly stuck in Arusha I looked for accommodations with Jim, an ex-Peace Corps volunteer I'd met on the ride from the border, but every room in town was booked due to a conference. Behind the misnamed New Arusha Hotel, the same I had stayed at before and not a day newer, we found a small, well-tended lawn attached to a Christchurch. I sought out the most Reverend and asked if we could camp on his clean-cut lawn, to which he compassionately concurred.

Jim joined us for dinner at the Khans', where their young daughter, Hanida, tried teaching us Swahili with limited success. The meal was novel in that the men – Jim, the nineteen-year old son Haneef, and I – ate first, while the women ate second. Following Haneef's lead we ate only with our right hands, which diminished my usually rapid intake.

After dinner Jim and I retired to the Christchurch lawn and prepared

for bed, still sweaty from the day's travails. Our only shower came in the middle of the night, which drove Jim, who lacked a tent, to take refuge on the Churchporch. Sleep came fitfully for me as well. Besides the staccato sounds of falling rain magnified by the acoustics of my wedge of a tent, nearby footfalls – whether bipedal or more, I couldn't tell – startled me awake. Reflexively I reached for the hunting knife I kept, whenever camping, in the bundle of clothes under my head.

The last time in Arusha, a year before on my extended journey to find Paul, Ricki, and Elise at the bottom of the Ngorongoro Crater, I fell asleep in the New Arusha more quickly than intended. Following the two day and two night flight to get there, and my unsuccessful attempt to thumb out of town that day, I had checked into the hotel on Christmas day more depleted and tired than usual for the holidays. I opened the bottle of duty-free whisky, intended as a Christmas gift to Paul, and along with several swigs took an overdue bath. After barely drying off I fell onto the bed while still naked and, remembering to phone, asked the receptionist to call and wake me within an hour so I could come down for dinner. I never heard the call and eventually woke up around midnight to the sound of the hotel's throbbing disco on the eve of Boxing Day. Only then did I realize that I had neglected to let down the mosquito netting and was covered with mosquito bites. Welcome to malaria-land.

In the morning Jim and I had a good breakfast of eggs and coffee at the New Arusha for only fifty shillings (one dollar on the black market, or five officially). Afterwards I changed a ten dollar traveler's check at the hotel to record my second official money transaction: this currency form had me spooked. When Jim left for Moshi, the nearest big town on the way to Dar es Salaam and the coast, I walked to Tanzania Cartons at the arranged hour to rendezvous with a ride out to the farm. Much like my failed attempt to hitch that exhausted Christmas, the car never materialized. Only after several hours did an employee come by to inform me that the car had been diverted to

another company farm. With the sun already at its punishing perpendicular height I considered another afternoon in Arusha, followed by another night on the Churchlawn with nothing to do. During times like these, I wondered, why bother to travel?

The day was saved by the arrival of Solo, a friend of Haneef's, on a weekend off from the International School in Moshi. He spoke American English and boasted an interesting parentage, a Madagascar mother and a Ceylonese father. When he learned I was looking for a friendly lawn to sleep on he offered me his parents' and arranged to pick me up in his mother's banana yellow Ford Mustang for a drive-by. The lawn looked as clean and comfortable as the Christchurch's, so I accepted.

After dinner at the Khans', Solo drove me back to his home, with my sleeping bag and tent under my arm, but then offered me a spot on his bedroom floor, softened by a bed of cushions. It felt good to take my first shower since Nairobi. We stayed up until after midnight, as Solo had plans to relate including dreams of attending college in the States. Discussing rosy futures, in hushed tones while lying in bed, reminded me of childhood confabs and late night sleepovers. Solo positively beamed with hope, but did I?

With Solo's help in the morning I reached Eric the Dane by phone from a nearby Israeli 77 Hotel, and arranged for the second time to hitch a plane ride to visit Mr. Khan. Visiting Mr. Khan, after all, was why I had come through Arusha. Yet once again it was difficult to arrange anything for sure in this town. Feeling frustrated I considered skipping the farm visit, but there was some obligation involved. While I had never met Mr. Khan myself, he had been instrumental to Paul's filmmaking expedition the prior year. Furthermore, as he wrote me in Nairobi, he was feeling neglected for Paul had not responded to his last two letters. In his invitation he had asked that I buy him a box of .22s and some bath soap, as it was in short supply in Arusha (along with much else, including cooking oil). The Dudgeons had strongly recommended against the .22s, warning I could be arrested at the border for obvious reasons. Beyond that the gun shop in Nairobi had required

letters from both the Kenyan and Tanzanian governments, which seemed excessive. Instead I picked up a pint flask of brandy of comparable value, which along with numerous bars of bath soap I just couldn't dump on Mrs. Khan in Arusha and then flee – though flight comes easily to me.

When after two days of hitching I had found family in the enormity of Ngorongoro, it was like entering another world. The animal-infested crater is surrounded by a thousand-foot escarpment whose walls enclose an entire ecosystem. We camped, with permission from the authorities, and our black guides lit fires to keep away lions at night. Our month-long filmmaking safari was characterized by flight in its own way. Members of nearly every species are sooner or later consumed by predators, whether it be old age or disease that fatally slows them. We too were vulnerable outside the Land Rover, a condition brought home viscerally one day when our jeep got stuck despite four-wheel drive. As the fastest runner of the group I volunteered to return to base camp for more rope, to winch the jeep out of a bog. Sprinting from tree to tree the long mile back I intended to climb to relative safety at the first sign of cat-family attack. (Even though I've read somewhere that lions are twice as fast as the fastest bipedal sprinters.) My senses have never been so adrenaline-pumped. When I made it to camp and found another coil of rope, none of the native help was eager to accompany me for the run back.

Compounding the challenge of paying a courtesy call to a remote farm was the difficulty of finding information on travel farther south. My outdated guidebook characterized the Tazara express from Dar to Zambia as highly unreliable. While it only departs once a week, on what day wasn't clear. No one in Arusha, I mean no one, could provide information on the train, and neither was there a telephone number in Dar, or anywhere else, to call for the schedule. I would have considered dawdling up to a week in Dar, but had heard only the worst about the capital from fellow travelers. To complicate matters the Arusha-to-Dar

bus service was booked for the next several days. So when Haneef came through with a ticket on the Saturday night bus, which leaving that evening could get me there in time to catch the presumably early-week train south, I took it.

Getting through by phone to Eric the Dane that morning I asked him if our visit to the company farm would be brief, as I had a bus to catch that night. He replied affirmatively.

Meeting Eric at the appointed hour I climbed into his puddle-hopper for the quick ride to the farm. In comparison with the Kartoum to Juba flight we flew even lower over the expansive plains, seeing mobs of ostrich, wildebeest, and zebra. When we landed on a makeshift airstrip of hard red dirt in the middle of nowhere, Mr. Khan was already there waiting for us.

He wore a wide-rimmed animal hide hat which sat squarely over a weathered face and soft, sensitive brown eyes. When he saw that I had no luggage he looked more than disappointed. As Eric was only delivering a few supplies, we would turn around and fly back as soon as possible. Mr. Khan suggested we go and talk nearby, so we walked a short way from the clearing before he motioned me, in an expansive way, to join him squatting in the dry grass.

Wishing his family had forewarned me of his disappointment, which he mentioned three times, I tried to apologize for the briefness of my visit and promised to return someday. What else could I do? It had taken three days of missed connections to get here; had I stayed it could have taken as many to get back. Yet there was something of the obligation I had always felt, and at times resented, around my former stepfather. As I had grown up with Paul since age six it wasn't an obligation to be nice, but more the force of his personality and demands which burdened, encouraging me to rebel.

A part of me wished to stay and sample the rugged life on a Tanzanian farm, but I just wasn't up for so many uncertainties. So I handed over the bath soap and brandy as we finished our chat crouched like prey in the tall grass, and left.

We made it back to Arusha in time for lunch with the hospitable

Khans, but Mr. Khan's disappointment had seeded my own and I felt strangely despondent, as though always letting good people down. Such was my state, while thinking back to earlier times in Tanzania with its embrace of family, that I felt oppressively alone for the first time since Israel. There had been plenty of problems growing up with Paul, traveling with him – even to places as exotic as the Crater – a mixed pleasure due to his mercurial temper, but most of our time together his love and devotion came through. Maybe returning to Arusha had been a mistake.

I also remembered my last day in Arusha with Ricki, and taking him down to the local market where I bought him a beaded Masai bracelet in the shape of a wristwatch, much like the one I was wearing. (Made of colored beads and leather it lacked hands and appeared lost in time.) He gladly tied it on and wore it until it dropped off of its own accord. Where was Ricki now and how was he doing? "Ricki!" I wrote in my journal,

> A mute, written plea brings tears to my eyes; feelings run deeper than imaginable. . . . (Is he my lost youth, which I tried so strenuously and lovingly to protect?)

Feelings of guilt from spurning Mr. Khan were watering seeds of shame for forsaking Ricki, so innocent and defenseless at such a young age. It was as if he were alone in the stranded jeep and I, running away from tree to tree, had never returned: I had abandoned him.

I was not very good company after lunch – once again, the wayward guest. But Haneef performed yeoman duty by drawing me into his plans for travel to America, that strange Mecca for the developing world. The Khans had already given me a long list of items requested from The World That Works, including corduroys, a watchband, and a rifle, to which Haneef added U.S. hunting magazines and another rifle. I could already imagine, if a box of .22s lands you in jail, what a couple of rifles would do. As enticements Haneef offered to teach me how to hunt on my return and to give me a large skin from an unspecified beast. I didn't

quite know how to deflect their confidence in me – when could I afford such a list, along with the cost of the lengthy return flight? – but thought better of disillusioning them. In some real and grounded way what is there besides hope?

Solo and Haneef took me to the bus station in the banana yellow Mustang and tried to persuade me to stay, promising to introduce me to several girls at a dance that night. Solo offered his bedroom floor for another evening and, after driving me to Moshi, to put me on the Monday train to Dar es Salaam, but I refused. Besides my growing anxiousness there was all the work Haneef had done to get me a black market ticket and the relief that a friend of his was on the bus, who could see me through to Dar. Not to mention that I had declined Mr. Khan's hospitality, due to a ticket for that very evening. . .

The bus interior was insufferably hot, but Solo and Haneef insisted on keeping me company during the damp wait even after I encouraged them to leave as delays can stretch into hours. When the bus eventually filled to overcapacity and left I felt curiously elated by the late afternoon sunlight, cut intermittently by dark, threatening clouds: a cooling rain would be welcome. As partial thanks and a small deposit on all the future loot to come, I left some clothing with Mrs. Khan and, already feeling lighter, promised to Solo and Haneef that I would return someday. I never did.

On the outskirts of Arusha we traveled through the foothills of Mt. Meru, whose plowed furrows and sun-striped landscapes looked positively Flemish, no doubt confusing the early settlers. Nearer Moshi the clouds parted to reveal the snow-tipped Mt. Kilimanjaro, the fabled Mountain of the Moon once thought to be the Nile's source. The view was fleeting, as violent blue clouds soon closed ranks and prematurely set the sun.

> The bus delayed a long time in Moshi to take on innumerable freight. I cooled off in the evening wind that blew in darkness; the dark clouds threatened rain. Children gathered shyly around me, close but never touching. They

> called me "muzungu" (white man) and squeaked "Good morning, Teacher" no matter how many times I replied "Good evening." A town drunk swayed crazily past. At the intersection, two roads receded in perspective to blackness. And still the bus was putting on a tall, top heavy hat.

A medical assistant joined me in the circle of children and, speaking English, drove them off by robbing them of my attention. He took great interest in my haphazard plans. As we spoke several female friends separated from the enveloping darkness, emerging as if from the periphery of a moody Rembrandt. When I asked about the Tazara express from Dar to Zambia, one woman replied in Swahili that it only runs on Wednesdays and Saturdays. I had just missed it. But she herself was going by bus to Mbeya, near the Zambian border, which could help. At the medical assistant's suggestion she could show me all the way to the Mbeya train station, from where I could purchase a ticket on the more frequent trains to Zambia. Everything which had been so mysterious and impenetrable in Arusha was all of a sudden clearer in Moshi, like a glimpse of mountain snow. The elusive Tazara had become something akin to a quest.

At our next stop, in Mombo, the medical assistant helped me buy some dinner from Swahili-speaking vendors, while Haneef's friend saw to it that I changed seats with a short-legged man sitting at the front of the bus where leg room was long but the engine hot. I felt as if showered by kindnesses.

The bus made numerous stops with the strangest of all occurring not long after Moshi. At first I noticed people waving at us from along the dark edges of the road – or at least I thought they were waving. Were they trying to catch a ride? But no, as the road to Dar passes closely to the Kenyan border, these were none other than enterprising Kenyans hawking goods hard to find in Tanzania. I had already heard about the shortage of cooking oil, more of a bare necessity than most, but didn't know that toothpaste was also in short supply. Then I realized it was tube after tube of toothpaste that they were waving at us. The bus slowed to a stop, allowing a small group of Kenyans to swarm aboard

selling none other than Colgate toothpaste and various soaps. Accepting Tanzanian shillings they were clearly adept in currency exchange as well. In short order the tide of sellers receded and we went merrily on our way. Like most trades it was a mutually beneficial exchange for all involved: the Kenyans got to moonlight, making money on both sales and currency exchange, while the Tanzanians got to clean their teeth.

Could most human exchange be viewed similarly despite all the complications? I thought back to Mum's letters received in Nairobi, in particular one about her mixed feelings toward Paul. It made me realize how confused I felt about my ex-stepfather, with whom I had grown up for so many years. For sure I had been frightened by his temper and the flaring violence of his fights with Mum, which sent her to the hospital several times. But he had also taught so much by his sheer energy and determination, which had made me feel more alive.

There had been a time a year back in Ngorongoro when I was driving the Land Rover, and Paul urged me to creep ever closer to a mother and child pair of rare white rhinoceros. He wished to better film and record them, and told me to turn off the motor after each advance. Eventually we got too close and, despite our downwind approach, provoked the mother to charge. Paul bellowed "Back up!" I clearly remember the next moments as the protective mother barreled toward us, her long horn foremost. I had to start the cranky ignition, throw the jeep into reverse, and floor it. In those drop-dead seconds I clearly visualized the long horn easily slicing through the tin door, entering my side just under the rib cage, and lifting me up. Only later did I learn that most fatalities are from when tourists, in similar encounters with African wildlife, die inside their jeeps flipped over by provoked elephants or rhinos.

With these and other thoughts I remained awake next to the rumbling engine on the bus to Dar, until one-thirty or so in the morning. While nightdreaming and gazing at the full moon flooding in and out of the clouds I felt the hot motor's constant presence, like an overworked heart. Woken up one last time, now by the sunrise as we pulled into Tanzania's capital, I realized that my body and clothes were

covered by a thin film of sweat, as if by sticky memories.

6 – South Tanzania

Although I spoke no Swahili, and Mariamu, my guide, no English, through hand signals we made it to the well-hidden bus station for buses west and south. (It amazes how much we, or our bodies, can communicate nonverbally.) There I purchased my one hundred shilling ticket for the overnight bus to Mbeya, scheduled to depart at dusk.

Exhausted and with a full day in Dar es Salaam, I found the address of a YMCA where for twenty-two shillings I was given the use of a shower and a cot for the day.

Feeling immeasurably better after a lukewarm shower I left my bag at the reception desk and went to explore Dar, or what I could find of it. Besides the throbbing midday heat, what struck me was the absence of things: absence of people, absence of cars, and absence of manhole covers. Apparently, iron manhole covers of all vintages are valuable enough to steal and melt down, and too expensive to replace. Cunningly, both sidewalks and roads were obstacle courses for the unsuspecting. Yet in the scorching white heat the dark holes appeared oddly enticing, an invitation to a cooler realm.

Dar es Salaam looked like a jungle city reverting to it roots.

Back at the YMCA I rested on my cot while reading Naipaul's chapter on the country, until interrupted by the transformation of the open dining room into a disco floor. With tables and chairs removed, a loud sound system was set up and immediately put into hyperbolic use. While a large crowd of children sipped sodas on the lawn, the dance floor remained stubbornly empty.

With a start I realized that I had seen only one other muzungu the entire day, a young man also staying at the YMCA, but he had appeared

so mean-looking, with such a grudge against the world, that I avoided him. Was I more approachable?

Evidently the country makes a lot of visitors irritable. From his Tanzania chapter I found Naipaul scathingly critical of everything remotely Tanzanian, including Dar itself:

> Everywhere – dust, neglect, decay: the unpainted facades of the buildings, the potholes, the unswept and crumbling pavements told of a city that was falling to pieces.

The only fleeting praise was at the sight of Lake Manyara. Even the lovely Ngorongoro Crater was dismissed as a "Disneyland," which goes to show how too brief a visit can cloud the judgement of the most perceptive writers. While Shiva resisted enthusing about anything, in truth his experiences were suitably horrific. It was oddly comforting to know that he, too, had experienced interminable all-night bus rides and admitted to "that state of depression which arrival in a strange place nearly always arouses in me." Which begs the question, so why travel?

When I met Mariamu at the bus station that late-afternoon we mounted the bus to Iringa, only halfway to our destination, as tickets for the direct bus to Mbeya were sold out. I felt wary about the ride, for the Iringa bus was not only much worse for wear but gave us no guarantee of onward passage. Yet within minutes of pushing through all the sweaty bodies to our seats, a friend of Mariamu, named Hamisi, arrived with two tickets on the direct bus to Mbeya. Mariamu pulled out two, then three hundred-shilling notes to pay for her ticket. After much hand signaling I figured out two hundred accounted for the difference in fare between Iringa and Mbeya, while the last hundred was the black market premium similar to that charged for my last minute Arusha-to-Dar ticket. It was worth it: not only was the Mbeya bus newer, but Hamisi had also secured the front seat with legroom for me.

After some delay we departed Dar after dark, whereupon I immediately fell asleep until a ten p.m. rest stop. Mariamu kindly shared her pears and tea with me and with Hamisi, who spoke fragments of

English and seemed to like her.

From exhaustion I slept much more soundly than the night before. So when we arrived in Iringa at five in the morning and were unexpectedly forced to change buses, I was slow to wake and one of the last off the bus. Someone kindly explained the situation to me in English, but not before the driver had expressed his impatience by calling me "Muzungu!" in a good-natured way.

An hour wait stretched into three. It was a cold pre-dawn, warmed weakly by the rising of a distant sun. For breakfast Hamisi offered to buy some tea and *mandazis* (African donuts). Although I gave him twenty shillings he returned no change, either pocketing the difference or, better, treating himself and Mariamu. Surprisingly for this far south and west into a lusher Tanzania, I saw several Masai tribesmen looking as out of place at the bus station as I did.

Back on the bus I dozed until ten o'clock, when the bus stopped for a full breakfast break. With only three hundred shillings or, at official rates, thirty dollars left, I had to slow down the spending since I wasn't sure what the Tazara train would cost or if foreign currency exchange was feasible in Mbeya. I hesitated therefore from ordering or buying any food, but this was not to be. I tried to explain I could wait until Mbeya, that I wasn't hungry (which wasn't true), but in a comedy of misunderstandings my refusal only succeeded in causing a scene. Food was brought anyway, on the house I thought. It seemed rude not to eat food so generously presented, but when Mariamu offered to pay I feared she would do so for my meager portion as well. This, after all her kindness and generosity, would have been ungrateful of me – so I paid with a hundred shilling note. To say the service was slow would be too kind. When the bus revved its engines I had yet to receive my change, which only arrived after persistent reminders and just before I had to dash back on board. When I discovered my change was only sixty-six shillings I was upset: my several dirt cheap pastries had cost over four dollars, enough for a full meal in parts like these. Even if I had paid for Mariamu's pastries as well, the bill was ridiculously high or I had been shortchanged. Like my disappearing notes I felt spent – and was clearly

losing perspective.

Two nights on a bus had taken their toll, with my patience as pinched as I felt. So I tried to tell Mariamu and Hamisi that I was disappointed from being shortchanged more than once, which was ungracious of me. Hamisi looked surprised and just walked away (not a bad reaction), while Mariamu didn't say much. In no time, though, things were back to normal with Mariamu asking for my picture. So I got out a spare passport photo and wrote the parents' address on the back. (I also copied the address onto a scrap of paper for Hamisi.) The two of them after all had made my journey on Tanzania's chaotic public transport possible. When I gave them each a shiny new U.S. penny as a souvenir, they looked pleased.

For the remainder of the nine hour ride from Iringa to Mbeya I read Naipaul sporadically, wanting to save the Zambia chapter for in-country, and tried to doze off. I awoke, however, at every stop, whose frequency increased the closer we got. So much for the direct bus. A view of the pretty mountain-clasped town, and a good dark rain on our arrival, cheered me up. Suddenly I realized we were in westernmost Tanzania, far from the touristed or any other track I could think of.

With the help of both Mariamu and Hamisi I found a bed at the Moravian Church Youth Hostel, which perched on a small hill next to a radio tower. Not only did they lead me through a maze of dirt roads to find the hostel, but speaking in Swahili they secured a bed even after the receptionist claimed there were none. My shared double for three dollars was perfectly nice: clean and with a window facing west through which the evening sun poured in. After a cold shower I changed clothes for dinner with Mariamu and Hamisi, without whom I would have been lost. They arrived an hour late, whereupon we ducked into the hostel's *mese* for a fortifying meal of *ngombe*, or meat chunks of unknown origin, with loads of rice, broth, and cabbage, costing only a dollar. As the water was uniformly brackish in Mbeya I purified it with my iodine pills (as I had with almost all water since Cairo), making it browner still.

After dinner Hamisi suggested we have a beer. Tired to a fault, I

reluctantly agreed and said I would only have one, which made them laugh. On the way I asked Hamisi if there was a black market for dollars in Mbeya, which launched a grand detour to a friend's house. When Hamisi reemerged the only words I understood were "police" and "a man was shot," by which I took it that currency exchange would be difficult here.

The night was dark and cloudily moonless. As the steep, potholed roads were unlit, I nearly immersed a leg in one oily, foul-smelling bog. When we finally reached the intended hotel, much farther than anticipated, we discovered beer was served at dinner with only cognac and brandy sold separately. Stupefied with fatigue, I declined any booze and asked for the more direct route back to the hostel. When Mariamu motioned that it was downhill I was skeptical as we seemed to have been going downhill ever since leaving. Not surprisingly the "shortcut" took us by another hotel, the Mount Livingstone (even though Dr. Livingstone came nowhere this far southwest), where Hamisi suggested currency exchange was possible. Understandably they would only change at the official rate of ten shillings to the dollar, but at least beer was available at the extortionist rate of forty shillings a bottle. I declined both, figuring I could do better: sleep.

The way back to the hostel was uphill. In my impatience to get to bed I walked ahead and waited for Mariamu and Hamisi at every intersection. Mariamu was particularly slow, as she had worn high heels which further dampened her progress. It started to rain just before we reached the hostel, where Mariamu and Hamisi took some things out of the bags they were leaving with me for safekeeping, which required lengthy debate. After settling on a rendezvous in the morning, at "ten and a half," I fell into bed having just managed to light a mosquito coil before ceasing all motor functions.

Mbeya, it turned out, was nearly the scene of my demise.

Sharp knocks on my door at seven a.m. announced the arrival of my Zambian roommate, Caesar. Evidently a friend had taken him too far out of town for a safe return (a beer run, perhaps); now he was back to

change for work. After throwing on some clothes I learned that Caesar, coincidently, was an employee of the Tanzanian Railways and knew everything there was to know about the Tazara. Mystery solved!

The train line is formally titled the Great Uhuru Railway, as *uhuru* means "freedom" in Swahili. Although Tanzanian, Caesar had worked several years in Zambia and seemed Zambian to most. After we ate a Moravian breakfast consisting of buns, no butter, and milky sweet tea, Caesar offered to show the way to the Mbeya train station, four kilometers distant.

We waited half an hour for the bus, but no matter: I was relieved to learn of its existence as Mbeya already seemed the most complex no-name town ever visited. The night before I had felt disturbingly lost, a rarity for me. The dirt roads have no street signs and Mbeya lacks anything approaching Tourist Information, much less a tourist map. It is so rarely frequented, even by thrill-seekers like myself, that Lonely Planet has next to no information on it – too lonely. I felt as though tramping unchartered territory.

Caesar had brought a newspaper in English, so while we waited I marveled at all the blacked-out, censored blocks and read a few, nearly complete, articles. One, on Prince Charles's impending visit to Dar, claimed he would dedicate a *plague*, instead of a *plaque*. After I showed this to Caesar we both laughed heartily. When the subject drifted to censorship and Tanzania's love affair with socialism, Caesar regretted that he could not express his opposition to either. A pity.

It turned out second- and first-class tickets to Kapiri Mposhi – at the end of the line in Zambia, but still a three hour bus ride from Lusaka, the capital – cost three and four hundred shillings respectively. As I only had two hundred on me I bought third, where the seats were reportedly cushioned. If not too crowded I figured third-class couldn't be much worse than the night and day bus ride to Mbeya. Besides, a cheaper seat would do less to raise the suspicions of the Tanzanian currency police. The train would leave Thursday morning, requiring a further forty-eight hours in confusing, somnolent Mbeya.

* * *

The following days were spent hunting for the elusive and risky parallel currency market, and nursing the inevitable illness that follows too much cheap, sleepless travel. While Mariamu made it to that mid-morning's rendezvous, Hamisi was late as usual for yet another fruitless search for Money Men who, when we did find them, invariably had next to no money on them.

Caesar and I ate dinner at the mese that evening. Afterwards I showed him a *Time* article on "Africa's Woes," which he found enjoyable if slow reading. When I commented I had only seen Eastern European magazines in Dar, he lamented, yes, magazines like *Time* could only be found at the American Embassy or the U.S. Information Service. I hadn't seen so much censorship and media control since East Berlin.

Mariamu came by that evening to pick up her belongings from the closet. When I introduced her to Caesar she burst into a stream of Swahili, realizing that he was the only English-proficient Tanzanian we had met since Moshi. First she went off on a lengthy discourse on all that had befallen us since leaving Moshi, and ended up inviting me, through Caesar, to visit her five children at a primary school the next morning. When I asked what happened to their father she said he had left her for another woman seven years previously, and they were going through a divorce. I hesitated from accepting her invitation as I was tired and already had another appointment to change money at nine a.m., but she appeared so dejected that I reversed myself. We agreed to meet at quarter to eight. Evidently she was catching a ten o'clock bus to a place called Chunya, besides which the school was nearby.

As soon as she left, Caesar burst into his hearty laugh, and explained that Mariamu was on the make and that a visit to her children could only mean several things: betrothal or bed or both. This seemed far-fetched to me, but what did I know about local customs? When Caesar warned how rampant diseases are in these parts I chided him that he must have been up to something his night out. This pleased him, yet out of concern for his wife and children in Dar he assured me he was an infrequent participant and only with "good girls." (*Good girl* seems to be

a fungible concept in the region.)

With a full day of travel coming up soon I tried to go to bed early, but slept poorly that night and woke up with a raw throat, hot nasal passages and forehead, swollen lymph nodes, and a headache. On the plus side I didn't have the trots. I drank as much fluid as possible, the health benefits of my purified water balancing with all of the iodine in it, but couldn't find any fruit or vitamin C in all of Mbeya.

Mariamu arrived forty-five minutes late, dashing all hope that I could make it to my nine o'clock appointment on time. I tried to convey this sense of future conditional lateness through hand signals, but gave up and accompanied her anyway.

My heart sank when we immediately took the sharply downhill route from the hostel and struck out on a rain-gullied, jagged foot path heading farther down. Would I have the energy to climb back up? Our path then crossed a small raging stream over a makeshift bridge, and on we went up and across two fields. Wasn't the school in town? Looking at Mariamu's back I could imagine her ancestors walking in simple *kangas* over the very same footpath; there was a sense of timelessness about the experience. As we departed town we were going back in time, the fever flush in my cheeks.

After about seven turns and twenty minutes I realized I would never make it back to the hostel, on time or in one piece, if I didn't turn around now. One more turn and I would forget the path back. But how to tell Mariamu? I called out for her to stop, but she seemed a great distance ahead. Would she hear me? When she hesitated and then returned I tried to explain that I wasn't feeling well, it was late, and that I had to get back to the hostel. She was disappointed but after a few waves goodbye continued on, as if nothing had changed. I gave her my Swahili-English phrase book, a U.S. dime for one of her children, and said goodbye in Swahili. Retracing my steps, most of them uphill, I met a startled woman coming in the other direction who looked at me as if I were Death itself. Was I that ill? She gave me such a wide-eyed look, both terrified and curious, it made me feel (a common conceit) as if the first white man she had ever seen. After all I hadn't seen another

muzungu since Dar es Salaam. It was an interesting role reversal, like parenting your mother, to be the minority of one. I quickened my pace, afraid that I had unduly frightened her.

Although late and tired I arrived at my money-changing rendezvous only to have to wait – or rest, really – for half an hour. A man speaking better English than the last told me I could find my contact at the Mount Livingstone Hotel, the same rendezvous of my first failed attempt, which had a circular logic to it. Amused by the futility of it all I decided to visit the Livingstone one last time and, if need be, would resort to formally changing twenty dollars at the hotel desk. In the end I managed to change five dollars at fifty shillings a dollar and then, for safety's sake, a ten dollar traveler's check at a local bank where the wait was interminable even without a crowd. Feeling depleted I re-entered the wall of sunlight.

All in all I had spent just over fifty dollars during eight days in Tanzania. Without the black market I would have had to change one hundred and twenty dollars or more, an exorbitant sum. Ever wary of the lurking maliciousness of customs officials, I decided to hide leftover shillings in the lining of a boot.

Ignoring Paul's advice to take care of myself I skipped lunch, unsure where the next currency exchange could transpire. Then sure enough, I came down with a high fever that afternoon. After resting in bed for several sleepless hours I got up somewhat refreshed, only to be set back by a cold shower before dinner. Despite my feebleness I tried a brief walk around the hostel as the sun set and marveled at the surrounding scenery of lush green mountains, greener and more vibrant than any I had seen, sporting small white wigs of snow, perhaps.

Again I turned in for an early sleep and, starting to be concerned, told myself that if I felt worse in the morning I would retreat all the way back to Nairobi, three or more long bus days away. I was feeling the most ill of my trip.

I should never have gotten out of bed the next day. I felt well enough to eat a last Moravian mese meal, pay my bill with recently

changed currency, and drag myself and my mobile home to the stop for the train station bus. I made it with time to spare, dressed as usual in my border-crossing attire, and said goodbye to Caesar in the bright Chinese-functional waiting hall, filled with mothers and their *mtotos*, or tots. A blue party-suited Chinaman strolled by, his hands mated behind his back. The promise of travel was perking me up.

When the Tazara train (at last!) arrived, all hell broke loose. Babies, mothers, and cribs where swept up in a mad rush toward the train well before it stopped. Naturally the maddest of rushes was for third class. Too weak to propel myself I let the crowd carry me to the train and suck me inside. I quickly found a facing set of barely padded seats, six in all, empty save for one woman. I sat across from her and next to the window, as the floor was strewn with garbage and fresh air would be at a premium. The remaining seats quickly filled as more and more people paraded through the car, triggering doubts about going third class for a day and a night.

As if to confirm my fears a small hard-looking older man appeared and, speaking Swahili, tried to impress upon me that I was sitting in his seat. If true, there were no other window seats and I didn't see where to go. In no mood for being conned out of my seat or for an argument, I ignored him. The seat had been clearly empty, the woman hadn't said anything, and I just didn't see how anybody could expect to keep an empty seat by leaving it, without any sign of possession, for an extended period. His jabbering became more forceful and, although there were already three people on the bench-like seat, he motioned for me to move over and let him sit by the air-giving window. When I refused he grabbed my shirt and tie and twisted them for effect, which got little rise out of me. Instead I grasped his wrist and, with my other hand, wagged a finger in warning before his face. For some reason I felt in little physical danger and was reluctant to react, even though adrenaline was already dilating my blood vessels. He let go of my shirt but then tried to climb over me, attempting to wedge his way between my legs and the compartment wall. When I pushed back all the women in the area jumped away in anticipation of a fight. Fortunately a young Tanzanian

interceded by saying something sharply to the *agent provocateur*, whom he managed to make laugh in the span of a few moments. Whatever he said at my expense it worked, for the sinewy old man sat contentedly next to me for the entire journey to the border, as if resigned to a benign, bemused fate.

After this dust-up the atmosphere returned to normal, if four people squashed into three seats can be called normal. I was reminded of Naipaul's description of travel-stoicism:

> I sit absolutely still, trying to work myself into the trancelike state of mind which, I have discovered, is the *sine qua non* of long-distance journeys in this part of the world. It is a state of mind that combines fatalism, self-surrender and a steely determination to maintain one's toehold of possession.

The train skirted mountainous slopes, crossed ravines over bright Chinese bridges, and snaked its way to the plateau flatness of the border. Reluctant to start Shiva's chapter on Zambia I had nothing else to read for four hours, a fate worse than discomfort. Despite the heat, crowded smells, and warmth of the man's sinewy body next to mine, I managed, like Naipaul, to block everything out and think of the commuter train I used to take between Concord and Boston as a child. Never before had I thought so longingly of the old B&M (Boston & Maine), clanking its way from the rushed city to the serene, damp peacefulness of Concord – and my grandfather's nearby ponds.

At Tunduma, the Zambian border town, the train emptied in another mad rush to form a line passing through only one gate: customs, I assumed. The heat was insufferable and I felt positively weak just lugging my mobile home one inch at a time. The crowd lurched forward at one point, causing a policeman to kick out in anger at one of our flanks. Like the women back in the train, the flank dispersed wildly before regrouping. The shadow of violence passing for now, a certain calm returned. When I approached the gatekeeper I handed over my ticket like everyone else, but on the far side was bewildered by what to

do next. All the other third-class passengers appeared to be fanning out into town.

I must have looked lost for an official-looking man came up to me to ask if I needed help. He quickly set me straight by saying all these people were not going to Zambia but getting off at Tunduma, which is why they had surrendered their tickets. He helped me retrieve mine and then led me to immigration on the train, for which I profusely thanked him. By riding third class, it seems, I had missed the normal border crossing procedures. Relieved to be back on the train – which in the confusion of the moment I feared would leave without me – I warmly greeted the customs man who looked as if he were from Zambia. After all that concern about changing money it appeared as though I would not be asked to surrender my currency declaration form – what a relief!

My relief was short-lived. When the customs official asked for my passport I reached for my shoulder bag and noticed the bag was open and my neck wallet gone. I had been rash enough to place it inside my shoulder bag and not around my neck, as usual, for with a shirt and tie it is awkward to access the wallet's contents without half-undressing. I had buttoned the Swiss Army bag closed, but obviously someone in the crush of bodies had slipped the bag open and absconded with my passport, my money, my address book, my credit card, and more. My worst nightmare of losing a wallet and nearly everything important in the middle of nowhere had come true, for without a passport or money how was I to enter Zambia or, if need be, make it all the way back to Nairobi? For the first time in my life I felt totally and ineffably lost, more lost and abandoned than I had ever felt during my childhood.

7 – Zambia

The first passport took four weeks to lose, the second eight months. More so than before I felt re-formed, without identification, wherewithal, family, or friends. For some time, due to both illness and fatigue, I had not been in very good shape to travel. Now I was worse off. Back in Egypt the (temporary) loss of my backpack had seemed devastating, but I had been reassured by the thought of friendly Europeans only a short distance away. Now it seemed as though I had lost, with my passport, my very Americanness; with my cash, traveler's and personal checks, the means by which I maintained myself above the all-pervasive poverty; and with the loss of my last address book, all the family and friend addresses which had largely sustained me. When the immigration man asked for my documents and I realized that my entire wallet was gone, I teetered slightly, such was the shock and blood-rush from peering into the abyss.

"My wallet's gone," I declared.

At first there was no response, as though we were suspended in heavy water. I repeated myself and, babbling by now, explained how I had lost it.

The customs official, actually from Tanzania, duly instructed me to report it to the Tanzanian police and pointed to a few standing outside the train. After much confusion and earnest explanations that only in Lusaka would I be able to replace my traveler's checks, passport, and credit card, the police took me to Zambian customs on the train and asked them to let me through. The only other option was to return to Dar es Salaam with next to no money and hitchhike all the way back to Nairobi. There wasn't an Amex office in all of Tanzania, and I had little

faith in a Tanzanian bank's ability to receive wired funds. While continuing on to Lusaka was the best option, it wasn't risk-free. How, for instance, was I going to pay for the four hour bus ride from the end of the line to the capital?

The Great Uhuru Railway had brought me freedom of a different sort: freeing me from my money, my identity, and my composure.

The Zambian officials were sympathetic, but told me they needed a letter from the Tanzanian police reporting the theft. With great reluctance and still dragging my mobile home around, I headed for the train's exit and thought, with a pang of fear, What if the train left without me?

In the midst of the confusion I heard someone call out my name, somewhat muffled, as if from inside a compartment. Was I starting to imagine things? Unsure, I backtracked for a moment and found an American sitting alone in the first compartment. Not only was he the first white I'd seen since Dar five days ago, he was Iowa Dave of African Queen fame – a friendly face! I quickly explained I had just lost my wallet and had to get a letter to that effect from the police. Would he look after my bag, I asked?

Free of one weight I found the police shack in a few frantic minutes. After explaining my predicament I delivered myself into the hands of a young officer, to whom had been delegated the task of filing a report. Apparently his broken English was better than anyone else's.

With a flourish he produced a blank piece of paper, as forms were non-existent, and with slow, careful handwriting scrawled the name and address of the Tunduma Police Station in the upper right hand corner of the sheet. He then proceeded with the following report, barely decipherable:

> To Whom It May Concern
> *Ben Batchelted*
> Sir
> This person coming from Mbeya when
> he left this station his Passport. ~~and~~ So
> I suggest to help him because he is

proceeding to Lussaka. He reported here
at 14.00.

[his illegible signature]
MKUU WA POLISI
TANZARA TUNDUMA

The last was delivered with the benefit of the police stamp, whereupon he turned the sheet over and wrote with an even greater flourish, "To Immigration Zambiasse."

When I hurried back to the train and presented this to the Zambian customs officials, they were none too pleased with the result but added their own flourish by stamping the artifact with a one month entry permit. I joined Dave in his compartment, where he was still passing customs with a greater calm than I, and asked what class his compartment was. First, he replied.

Seizing the chance to upgrade I decided to stay with Dave and claim I had lost my ticket along with the wallet. I also promised myself to never take a third-class, third world train again – if nothing else, to avoid redundancy.

The list of lost items was extensive:

U.S. Passport D1450195
American Express Card 3710 766863 81006
Massachusetts and International Driver's Licenses
BayBank Card 07849469
$720 in traveler's checks
BayBank personal checks
$82 in cash
50 odd Tanzanian shillings
International Vaccination Certificate
My last address book (2nd of 2)

Not all was hopeless, as I had hidden in my bag one hundred Tanzanian shillings and, in the lining of my boot, ninety-two U.S. dollars, a combination of subterfuges that had been intended to avoid the prying eyes of the Tanzanian Currency police.

Dave's and my first task was to find enough Zambian kwachas to buy dinner and the next day's bus fare to Lusaka. We tried to persuade

the friendly pair of roving Zambian customs officials to exchange my one hundred shillings for ten kwacha, but they were much more interested in Dave's proffered U.S. cash. Even then, when Dave handed over some dollars, the two of them had insufficient kwachas for the exchange and had to rustle up more elsewhere. Only when the transaction was complete did Dave fill out the particulars of his Currency Declaration form which I had, at least, been spared.

The Zambians were noticeably friendlier than the dour, impoverished Tanzanians and were as glad as we were to be putting distance between ourselves and the border. One Zambian train attendant had had his breast pocket, with fifteen kwacha inside, ripped off his shirt by a mad Tanzanian at the border. He wore the denuded and torn shirt to prove it, which was cause for general merriment among his colleagues.

Dave and I caught up over a dinner of chicken, rice, and zucchini served to us in our compartment, where we exchanged travel woes and stories. The ploy to claim the loss of my first-class ticket worked, so no more fighting over the window seat. Dave overall was in much better sorts than he had been in Egypt: clearer, more centered, less tense. Evidently, the farther he got away from North African Arabs, the better.

Later in the evening, two Zambians joined us by taking the two bottom bunks. All through the night curious hands would, by mistake or not, open up our sliding door to peek inside. To lock it would have been counterproductive. At some pre-dawn hour I heard one official insist, with much door rattling and noise, that the locked door to a nearby compartment be opened. As first-class compartments go, these were shabby and uninspiring.

The lack of sleep didn't help my general weakness, bone-tiredness, and disease, which in the rush of the border fiasco I had almost forgotten. As the night passed and the train pushed deep into Zambia I felt as if pulled by a magnetic force into the unknown. Would I get to Lusaka without mishap? Would I be able to replace my lost documents? Would I find any friendly contacts from now on? Why travel?

* * *

In surprisingly good time we arrived by nine o'clock at the end of the rails in Kapiri Mposhi, not far from Zambia's copious copper mines. After passing through the incongruously monumental Chinese-built railway station, in the same overblown and stark style as Mbeya's, we found five buses all charged up to take us to the capital. This was better treatment than Naipaul had received a few years earlier:

> The Chinese, for reasons best known to themselves, had kept *their* railroad separate from the Zambian network. Neither bus nor taxi connected the two systems. Passengers had to haul themselves and their luggage a couple of miles to make the link. Now, at the end of it all, I could think only of the sun burning down on my aching head, the dragging weight of my suitcase, my thirst and the mile or so of red-dirt road that still separated me from shade and rest.

Hawksters yelled at us to take this or that bus, but it didn't really matter; we boarded one in a commensurate state of disrepair with the rest. Gradually it filled to overcapacity, to such a comic extent that whenever we passed the stray policeman along the road, everyone jammed in the aisle had to duck out of sight. In such a manner we departed for Lusaka and numerous points in between, with Dave's kwacha paying the way.

Four hours of heat, sweat, and stench made me more of a mess than the twenty-four on the train. By the end I didn't have the strength to talk to Dave. When Lusaka's several lone skyscrapers came into view we both gasped in relief, as if stumbling into El Dorado.

Dave and I were not overly surprised to find the banks closed for the afternoon. This made legal currency transactions and finding a meal or shelter difficult: we had no more kwacha. Worse, it was Friday, which meant the banks might not open until Monday. Half-heartedly we looked for black market offers but found none.

At this point we split up, with Dave looking into the bus schedule south to Zimbabwe, as he had only been granted a four day in-transit visa, while I went in search of an Amex office. The first branch listed in my booklet was closed, the second had a wrong address. Only the

third and final listing at Eagle Travel appeared current. The office consisted of one small room dominated by one large and welcoming woman named Joyce Mapona, the sole travel agent and representative. I was delighted to see that Mrs. Mapona had recently won an award for Excellence in Service, as I might need to test her mettle.

While I filled out the lost card replacement form she proudly told me of the incident which won her the award, and a trip to New York to receive it at a ceremony. A young American couple had arrived for the Christmas holidays, only to find that Dr. Kaunda (Zambia's fearless leader) had frozen all foreign currency transactions from that day on. The couple had planned to purchase airfare to Nairobi with their card, but were then, abruptly, stuck and kwacha-less. After three days and an interview with the President Himself, Mrs. Mapona had rescued them – just.

My rescue was simpler, if still thorny. I canceled both traveler's checks and credit card, which may have been overkill as I doubt they could have been used for anything within hundreds of miles of Tunduma. The checks might only be replaceable on Monday, when most banks opened. More problematic, the new card would take two weeks to arrive, so I directed it to be mailed to South Africa. When I mentioned I had had almost nothing to eat or drink that day, Joyce offered me water and a Fanta Orange soda. When I told her I didn't have any kwachas, she advanced me fifty.

With that I took a taxi to the distant U.S. Embassy and succeeded in buying a spanking new passport for exactly forty-two dollars. Luckily they accepted my two undersized black-and-white photos and took the police report as proof of my passport's loss. However, since my entry visa was stamped on the police report, they made an official copy and kept the original, which may still be buried in some State Department locker somewhere. The official copy was duly stamped and signed by Richard P. Rogers, Vice Consul of the United States of America, a title grander than most.

Mr. Rogers was kindly sympathetic about the loss, which I tried to make light of. (Later I wrote Mum that at least this passport had gone

to third world relief rather than to Amsterdam drug dealers.) He also commended me on my foresight in stashing away sufficient dollars to pay for a new passport and for carrying a copy of my birth certificate halfway around the world. Without it I would have had to wait for as long as a week. Mr. Rogers himself was short, clean-cut, and with a high and squeaky voice. I found the whole operation orderly, fast, and efficient, for within twenty-four hours I had lost my identity and regained it.

Back at Eagle Travel I had called Don Fluck, my only contact in Zambia and whose address I had fortunately stowed on a separate slip of paper. While I only reached his secretary, she told me he had recently received my letter from Nairobi and would be glad to see me. She suggested we rendezvous at his office at four-thirty, which sent me into paroxysms of pleasure. If there was any time I needed a kind host, it was now! It didn't matter that I barely knew him or that his address had been given to me by a friend of Anne Clemente in Impruneta. In my present state of overwrought nerves and exhaustion, staying in a hostel seemed on par with third-class train travel: I just couldn't do it.

So with added urgency I rushed back to town from the Embassy, late for my four-thirty rendezvous. To my horror, the office was already closed at quarter to five but, miraculously, the secretary was still there tidying things up and gave me Mr. Fluck's home phone. After several attempts I reached him just as he pulled into his driveway. Despite missing an earlier message regretting that I might be delayed at the Embassy, he agreed to pick me up at a hotel on the edge of town within an hour.

When I met up with Dave as arranged at the now closed Tourist Information, I repaid the twelve kwacha I had borrowed and lent him a further ten. Since the YMCA where he was staying was in the direction of my hotel rendezvous, we walked out together. Or rather, since I was so tired, sick, and discouraged, I lagged behind while Dave unsympathetically surged ahead – hurrying to get there before dark. I wondered if this was how he had treated slow or ailing fellow soldiers

in Vietnam.

Dave shared the next morning's bus schedule, and we tentatively arranged to meet at the station should I replace my traveler's checks in time and wish to travel south. I tried calling the YMCA in the morning, to no avail, and never heard from Iowa Dave again.

Mr. Fluck, a lawyer, bachelor, and animal breeder, was a wiry, diminutive man with an air of brisk confidence gone slightly stale. He had been living in Zambia for over twenty-seven years.

Although I wondered if he had missed my afternoon message or just ignored it, when we met up he was all tact and graciousness, immediately offering that I join him for drinks that evening with friends. First we returned to his house, so that I could take a much needed shower and change clothes. His home was just outside Lusaka, in a countryside of endless, level fields. I admired the way Mr. Fluck drove rapidly and dexterously over the last few miles of rugged dirt road. He explained either you have to go very slowly or very quickly, which seemed prophetic.

I obviously needed to slow down after all that had happened these last days and still felt shell-shocked by the robbery and its implications for my trip. So when Mr. Fluck offered in short order that I stay as long as I wished, I didn't wait for him to ask again to accept staying early into the next week. Apparently he would be gone for most of the weekend, on a horse-breeding trip to Harare, Zimbabwe, but his servant Bryson would be at home to look after me.

Our hosts that evening, the Croissants, lived on the other side of town in a more suburban setup of huddled houses and quiet lawns. An English expatriate family, including a son and daughter around my age, they had been in Zambia for several years and were models of English politeness and virtue. Monty, the engineer father, was halfway through a three year contract with the national bus company, a tour of duty arranged by a British aid program. His wife, Nancy, was immediately recognizable as a real frontier woman and attentive mother, whose words were precise, well considered, and in a bass voice slightly drawn out. Daughter Helen, upon learning I would be alone with Bryson for

much of the weekend, kindly suggested they help entertain me, which didn't sound bad at all.

As it was Bryson's night off Mr. Fluck generously took me out to dinner at a local restaurant. I mentioned I had seen a strange occurrence that day in downtown Lusaka, during which what sounded like three firecrackers had gone off down a boulevard, causing pedestrians to flee. Mr. Fluck matter-of-factly informed me it had been a robbery attempt, with both robbers shot and killed and with one pedestrian injured. And I had thought it strange for everyone to overreact to firecrackers!

By the end of the abundant meal I was feeling ill. Whether from the shooting and general excitement or the shock to my system caused by its first meal in a day, I couldn't tell. I could sense my body wearing out.

Despite my first good sleep in days I woke in the morning to the onset of a vengeful diarrhea and the return of a sharp, mucous cough. How fortunate to have the weekend to rest in sparse, but comfortable, surroundings. After Don departed for Harare and a general quiet settled over the house, the full impact of what had happened the past two days hit me and I felt terribly alone.

First of all were the risks of further travel. Without a credit card and only with a limited amount of traveler's checks, I could potentially be denied entry to both Zimbabwe and South Africa for insufficient funds. This would make it difficult to pick up a new card in Johannesburg. Lack of a yellow International Vaccination card could also cause me to be turned away, from South Africa in particular. All of which made me wonder if I was already stranded with no easy means of leaving Zambia, much less Africa, like that trapped American couple. As plane tickets back to Europe were exorbitant I might not have the traveler's checks to pay for one.

Despite a few addresses, such as Don's, kept on random scraps of paper, I found the loss of my address book the most vexing for many entries were irreplaceable (such as Sandra Honey's). A number of Asian contacts were gone, as were the addresses of the Europeans who had given them to me. It was the theft of this last address book which made

me permanently lose track of so many of the Europeans, Canadians, and Americans I had met.

I thought longingly of the stolen passport, full of so many colorful visas and entry stamps. As it contained the most tangible documentary evidence of my various visits to bad-water places, losing it made me feel less real.

Feeling sorrier and sorrier for myself I pulled out my shiny new passport and looked at it pensively, as if holding the key to something important. I had asked for an extra large one with double the usual number of pages, so it already carried more heft in my eyes than the prior one. I also preferred the new photo to the last one, which had been taken during my shaggy, shoulder-length hair college days. The new, smaller-than-regulation portrait was in moody black-and-white and had been shot in one of those old drawn-curtain photo booths in Cairo. What struck me about the picture – which showed me in tinted aviator glasses, with short hair and a look of precocious seriousness – was how much I looked like a spook. An undercover spy on a secret mission to uncover the long hidden meaning of. . .what I wasn't sure. But a sense of adventurousness, even purpose, flushed my cheeks, so on the spot I decided to carry on, no turning back.

With that I germinated a plan: to recover as long as possible in Lusaka and then head south to Zimbabwe, to give the border crossing my best shot as any spy worth the name would.

As promised, Helen Croissant came by late Saturday afternoon and picked me up on the way to Lusaka. There we met her date, her brother David (at the Golf Club, watching the Zambian Open), as well as Monty and Nancy, for a dinner out on the town. The Longhorn Restaurant occupied the elevated area of a converted barn, used only one week a year for the annual Agricultural Show that boasted, for no clear reason, an interactive display of exotic vehicles. Dinner was long in coming as we sat in the upstairs restaurant area, looking over the cars and inhaling their exhaust fumes. When I offered to Monty to pay for my meal he suggested I take care of the liquor bill. So I bought several

rounds of beers, even though it only aggravated my raw throat and persistent hack. Would I ever be completely well again?

True to their word the Croissants sent David to pick me up Sunday morning for the midday meal. When the conversation turned to politics I was questioned about recent events in America as though I had just left. The consensus at the table was that President Reagan was universally belittled which, even if true or deserved, got my dander up. At the receiving end of so much kindness I simply replied that, while no big fan of Reagan, I thought his portrait unfair and that America's role in the world was under-appreciated. To my surprise Mrs. Croissant adamantly replied no, I had misunderstood them: what they most feared was America's inability to come to the defense of a place such as Zambia. From what I never found out, but it was an interesting revelation regardless. They perceived America as the ultimate guarantor of their freedom, but were afraid, after Vietnam, she was too weak to act. Amazing. What a different perspective from what I'd heard ad nauseam in Europe and before.

When Mr. Fluck returned that evening we discussed plans for heading south. Without prompting he offered that I travel to Johannesburg with him in two weeks time (on dog-breeding business), saying that he wouldn't mind the company for the long drive. I thanked him while proposing the following: with the Croissants driving to Harare the next weekend, if I traveled with them, and then visited several contacts in Zimbabwe for as long as a week, I could join up with Don for the onward drive from Harare to Johannesburg. The Croissants were already amenable to the idea, and this way I could increase my chances of getting through customs at each border in the company of a family or a lawyer. Don readily agreed.

Monday morning I caught a ride into Harare with Don. First I mailed letters, including one to Mum asking for a replacement vaccination card and another to Harare contacts giving my tentative arrival date. Then I purchased more traveler's checks, with the help of Mrs. Mapona of Eagle Travel and a spare personal check I had hidden away. As I was too spooked to even consider using the black market,

the fifty kwacha she lent me cost thirty-five dollars at official exchange rates. Changing currency along with issuing new traveler's checks took over two hours at the relaxed branch.

Financially, at least, I nearly felt whole again.

For the week that followed Don and I fell into a comfortable routine. Or rather, since Don's life as a confirmed bachelor was already routinized, I fell in line with his, so much so my presence hardly caused an eddy in the steady stream of his schedule. Out of habit or gratitude I rose each morning by six-thirty to see Don off to work, like a faithful spouse. I would then slip back to bed until re-emerging for breakfast served by Bryson at nine or ten. Generally speaking I read the paperbacks lent to me by the Croissants until a sandwich lunch and then wrote or read some more until Don's evening return. It seemed a luxurious setup, but my needs were simple and clear. I had been traumatized by my passage through Tanzania; so while sleeping and eating well were my bodily medicines, reading was my mental one.

In the evening, if we didn't visit friends before dinner, I would read the paper Don brought back from work. During the meal, served by Bryson at the main table, we often listened to the six-thirty BBC World News report, which provided conversation fodder to last the meal. More reading would follow until bed. During those nourishing but boring dinners, my thoughts wandered as far and wide as home, while ruminating on the leafy branches of my large, gnarled family. Clearly I was still feeling under the weather.

Before-dinner social calls, on the other hand, were entertaining and introduced me to people and issues I would have encountered with difficulty on my own. On one such call we drove farther up Don's dirt road to see his farmer-neighbors over several mugs of instant coffee with homemade cream. The husband, born in Zambia, curled his bare legs in various contortions beneath him, his long limbs culminating in two worn desert boots shed of their laces. Harold's wife of eight years, her second marriage at age fifty, was plump, bespectacled, with her legs also hairy. They explained that their farm was mostly a ranch, with only

several hundred acres of crops.

Our conversation hinged on the usual horror stories, unavoidable along the economic and moral fault lines of countries in transition. A recent spate of robberies had removed four gas-engine water pumps used for irrigation; Harold suggested a patrol group, which Don offered to join. As the local police were ineffective, with insufficient resources in vehicles or fuel, the local citizenry were encouraged to protect themselves. When Harold's wife complained for example about a series of neighborhood home burglaries, the police had suggested she sleep with a gun under her pillow. When she worried she might shoot someone they simply instructed her to dump the body alongside the road. Don mentioned the time he caught a thief breaking into his Peugeot in town and, twisting the man's arm behind his back, marched him a half-mile to the police station. They discovered fifty Peugeot keys on the thief, who complained that if the ignition key had been the same as the door's he would have gotten away, no problem.

They laughed when I told them Zambia seemed like paradise after Tanzania. By their sights, Zambia was only getting worse. When I asked why, Don credited it to wasteful spending: public displays of ostentation with unnecessary buildings; fancy university and training colleges when there were less than two hundred thousand places in the impoverished secondary school system; and conferences of "frontline" African nations for which seventy black Mercedes were rushed up from South Africa, out of which ten were promptly stolen from the government parking lot. The government, meanwhile, blamed the recession on colonialism (nearly two decades after independence), the soft world market for copper, Zambia's main export, and the drought. Whom to believe?

Farmer Harold attributed the economy's bad way to the forced departure of a majority of its European farmers, whose numbers he claimed had fallen to a tenth of their former total. Either politicians would see land they liked and take it, or white farmers faced with no security in ownership would simply leave with much land reverting to bush. I wasn't startled by Harold's bitterness or by such expropriations,

for that day I had read in the *Zambian Times* a paragraph explaining the context of President Kaunda's recent speech:

> At present 80 per cent of the economy was in the public sector while 20 percent was under the private sector. Zambia was moving from Capitalism to Socialism and in the end it would reach the stage of Humanism.

Yet another reason to continue south: so I wouldn't have to stick around to see what Humanism meant.

Inevitably our conversation found its way to race relations, one of the most befuddled subjects around, particularly for an American. Back in the States the question of democratic rule for black majorities in Africa or elsewhere was a clear-cut issue: it was right and the white supremacists were wrong. The problem of course came in the transition, for most of the liberated frontline states were far from democratic and what elections they had were mostly shams.

The closer to southern Africa and the longer I stayed, the more confused I became. If the stories were correct, then minority rights (for whites or Asians) were negligible, and the purpose of the newly-black governments was to hold onto power and abuse it however possible. This was done in the name of democracy or humanism or whatever. Power, rather than some democratic or other mandate, seemed the rule of the game, with all sides gathering and hoarding as much of it as they humanly could.

At least that's what I thought I was learning, but learn is too strong a word. More accurately some ideas were starting to stick while others just fell away. In the Middle East I had managed to avoid getting sucked into the passionate gulf that divides Jews and Arabs, partly because I am neither. But here I was hopelessly white, with no chance of that changing any time soon.

(There was a time, while growing up in Cambridge during the frisky Sixties, when I wanted to be black so I could always have something – e.g. Racism in America – to fight against. At the time I considered

myself a storm trooper for a number of causes, be they anti-war or pro-sex, but already had an inkling that while all causes come and go, skin color is more permanent.)

Rather than generalize, it made more sense to consider specifics. The easiest relation to spy on, of course, was that of Don and Bryson. Both middle-aged they had spent so many years in such close proximity as to be nearly conjugal. The most subtle signs could be read by one or the other. Yet one day the coziness and domestic harmony were broken by Don, who had returned one weekday morning to find Bryson gone. That evening he chastised Bryson in front of me and asked him where he had been, to which Bryson mumbled a reply. Bryson had reared a large family and, naturally, would occasionally steal away to see them. Such unplanned absences, Don told me, were not allowed because he needed Bryson to guard the house when he was out.

While their relation was mostly jocular, even this could be at times oppressive. One time Don joked he didn't know what he would do to Bryson had he forgotten the dinner gravy: a little too cute.

Don was quick to point out that he had put Bryson's half dozen children through good local schools: the role of master had its obligations. Over and over again I was told how many domestic servants refuse to work for other blacks, which was either racist, true, partly true, or a combination thereof. And what if it were true?

That Wednesday Don and I were invited to a comforting dinner of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding at the Croissants', which provided ample opportunity to discuss and observe issues of race. For starters a Zimbabwean woman named Resario was visiting when we arrived. After much cajoling she was persuaded to stay on. During dinner she did more assenting than speaking for herself, which isn't such a bad idea: I wish more of my friends or family were like that. An acquaintance of the Croissants, she was scheduled to leave for India the next day on a grant from a Swiss aid program to study silk worms.

India, interestingly, turned into a hot topic due to the substantial Indian and Pakistani communities in Zambia, who with admirable clarity were called *browns*. Recent letters to the *Zambian Times* had lashed

out against this enterprising minority, which seemed to be envied due to their success, so much so as to be considered a problem. While most third world economies could use a problem as productive as this one, their history was already a sad one, with dictators such as Big Daddy Idi Amin throwing entire populations of Asians out of their adoptive countries. Nancy Croissant as always held a strong view on the subject, which was unsympathetic: she claimed to feel much more comfortable among blacks than browns and could understand the blacks' recurring dislike of them. Shiva Naipaul called it Zambia's "Asian problem," claiming that whites and blacks had found a strange union after independence at the expense of the browns – who obviously had not been the perpetrators of colonialism. Nancy was quick to dismiss all this by pointing out that Naipaul was "Asian" himself. And?

In contrast to Nancy, Resario was loath to add her own view to the hubbub, probably the most sensible position of the evening. Yet I detected a certain paternalism in Nancy's treatment of Resario, an overly effusive giving of advice and comfort with echoes of the relation between Don and Bryson. For Don, come to think of it, treated Bryson like a big, huggable child in need of an occasional scolding.

When Nancy announced triumphantly that whites "mix" with the blacks, while browns don't, I began to wonder if such "mixing" could be an elaborate form of condescension itself, that is helping the help. Maybe it was to the browns' credit that they kept to themselves.

I was confused and worse yet, after borrowing Henry James's *The Bostonians* from the Croissants, sentimental. I was approaching sensory overload and in need of moving on. Going slowly on rough roads, after all, has its pitfalls.

8 – Zimbabwe

In a sprint of homesickness I finished *The Bostonians* in time for our Sunday departure to Harare. The Croissants had agreed to give me a lift, and I was feeling much better after a week of rest. So I said goodbye to Don, and we agreed on where to rendezvous the next week.

The Croissants and I left Lusaka early, arriving at the border by ten a.m. I was nervous about being turned away, a feeling of impending doom only aggravated by the Croissants' tales of young foreigners they knew who had been turned back by Zimbabwe customs on one pretext or another. Leaving Zambia went smoothly enough. The Zambian officials only insisted I give them the copy of the police report, sporting the reproduction of my entry stamp and the U.S. Embassy seal, which I gave up reluctantly as it was a unique work of bureaucratic art.

Zimbabwean customs was trickier. The official pointed out from the official list in his official book that a ticketless American must have no less than one thousand and one hundred dollars upon entering the country. This, officially, was more than sufficient funds for a one-way airfare back to the States. The traveler must also when entering by land leave a deposit at the border, which I could ill-afford. As I carried nine hundred and some in traveler's checks and nothing else, I lied to the official by claiming I had a credit card from which I could draw up to three thousand dollars. Luckily for me, he believed my ruse without asking for proof. I also persuaded him that I couldn't leave a deposit as I planned to depart the country at the other end, into South Africa. Maybe it helped that I was in the company of such a clean-cut family. Or perhaps it was my good old jacket and tie, doing yeoman work after nearly sinking me at the last crossing.

The drive itself, across the Zambezi River at the border and climbing steeply over a lush mountain range, lifted the landscape's primordial beauty to higher plateaus. At last in Zimbabwe I felt less anxious and began to enjoy the ride. Maybe travel wasn't so bad after all! Besides spotting a lone elephant and a troop of baboons from the swiftness of our car, we gaped at the sight of various crashes abandoned along the road. The most gruesome was the head-on collision, now rusted, of a truck and a bus at one of the hairpin and blind mountain turns. It was too old to be the bus to Harare that Iowa Dave took the prior week.

To fill time Nancy related more of her experiences dealing with race, the subject which never goes away in southern Africa. Our conversation made me reconsider my hasty conclusions from the last dinner, as nothing is as it first seems in this part of the world.

Earlier that week I had met their servant and cook named Boniface. Like Bryson he had a large family of his own, but spent most of his days with the Croissants. Similar to Don, Nancy boasted of giving generously to Boniface and his family. When they came into her life she had taken all the children for a doctor visit, to rid them of worms while checking for malaria and malnutrition. She then continued to nurse the family's every ailment for the past year and a half, more recently advising them on family planning and teaching the wife how to sew. She added that Boniface and his family took all of her advice and aid for granted, as a form of *noblesse oblige*.

Wishing to help more, when she realized that Boniface's wife was not the only local woman who knew not how to sew or knit, she organized a seamstress class. Twenty or so women attended, many of whom had children strapped on their backs and couldn't speak a "stitch of English." In no time, they were all busy with borrowed needles.

"I have no patience for any of the American or English wives," she continued, "who complain of boredom or having nothing to do. How ridiculous! When there're thousands of tasks all around just shouting to be done!"

I liked Nancy and began to wonder if my quick judgement that she

condescended to blacks had been too simplistic. Even if impatient and at times paternalistic, she played an integral part in the large dance of life in southern Africa, to the best of her abilities and better than many.

Entering Harare that late afternoon I was impressed by the city's cleanliness and the lines of flowers along the major avenues. It was the most orderly and soothing city since Nairobi. From the Croissants' hotel I tried calling two contacts, to no avail, and then the local youth hostel which had plenty of space. The Croissants, models of generosity, offered to take me out to dinner with Monty's company paying – how did I deserve so many kindnesses? Later when it started to rain, Monty drove me to the youth hostel, where we said our goodbyes. The Croissants were the most cohesive and dutiful family I'd met in years, so unlike my own. I immediately missed their warmth.

The hostel was a rickety, old Victorian home, renovated a decade prior and run for the past two years by an elderly English couple still mourning the death of Rhodesia. When asked they had no recall of Iowa Dave or any money left for me. The hostel's layabouts were friendly and talkative enough. They consisted of a young Swiss, an Australian, three Americans, and one grandfatherly figure who claimed to have been traveling southern Africa for eight years over sixty thousand miles. He said little else and seemed one of those lonely sorts caught in a back eddy of never-ending travel. A glimpse of my future?

In the morning I reached the Duncans, Gilly Dungeon's brother and sister-in-law, at their semi-distant farm, and was immediately invited to come visit for a week – perfect timing! I offered to hitch there that day and was given directions to a certain garage from where I should phone.

My first attempt to hitchhike since Kenya was reassuringly easy. On the long road outside of Harare a wheezing, diminutive car – white and a close relative to the Nunmobile from Impruneta – stopped without prompting and offered a ride. When I told the young driver, Nick, I had come overland from Cairo, he claimed to be the great-grandnephew of General Gordon, the man whom Sandra Honey's ancestor Lord Kitchener had tried to save in Khartoum. Small world, even smaller

when the dimension of history is folded in. Before dropping me off he asked when I would return to Harare. We agreed to meet up at the end of the week.

Rides from a friendly farmer and then an elderly, wizened miner followed. My last ride was from a salesman of school benches who planned to send his four children to Cambridge University someday. When I commented that could be expensive he assured me he and his wife were saving enough. While the miner was disparaging about independence, in contrast to the farmer and salesman who were only enthusiastic, everyone believed the races were getting along much better since. In a charitable way the salesman pointed out that it was the Europeans who had brought the idea of working wives to Africa, which made him quite happy. Beforehand his tribal traditions had forbidden it.

It only took four engaging hours to arrive at Rufaro, the Duncans' sprawling northern tobacco farm.

As the sun's rays fanned out over Rufaro, below the mass of dark clouds threatening rain, I could see why Zimbabwe is considered so scenic. Anchoring the tobacco farm, the lone ranch house was flanked by trees with bright orange creepers draping over them. From its porch, in the near distance, spread an elaborate garden of frangipani, hibiscus, and blooming bougainvillea. In the middle plane lay an expanse of the lightest green fields of tobacco dotted with lone trees and anthills. Then in the distance there towered great outcrops of rock wreathed in the dark green of deciduous bush or tree. Overall the sweeping landscape was brushed by a soft atmospheric density to a delicate haze of mauve, radiant and transparent. The land flamed bright in welcome.

After a day of easy hitching I felt ecstatic to arrive at such a pastoral paradise. The Duncans, Doug and Christine, welcomed me warmly. Well into their thirties, they were still childless and, as if to compensate, quite purposeful. Christine, blue-eyed and with a warm smile, had the same blond, bird-like sharpness of features of an old family friend. Doug was thicker-set, with the jowls of a busy squirrel puckered about crooked front teeth and laughing eyes partly subdued by folds of skin.

He wore fine leather boots sprouting wool socks. His Empire-building shorts and button-down shirt were from the same cut of pale green material on the soft side of canvas. In the brisk mornings, when he drove his motorbike about the waking farm, he wore a shiny brown leather jacket and a rakish, green wool cap.

What a short, enchanted week it was at Rufaro! It took me a day or two to get over the change of countries, during which I read, wrote, slept, and ate. I was still feeling strung out and at odds from my free fall south. The Duncans were anxious to hear of news about Gilly and Patrick, and asked many questions about my trip in between. Although Zimbabwe was a newly Black African nation and, as a result, travel to or through bordering countries was much easier, they were particularly hungry for news of Tanzania and Zambia.

The house was a comfortable, tropical re-creation of an English country cottage, with a high thatched roof topping vine-covered brick. With the ranch house in the shape of a squared "C," my room was in one of the wings. It contained dark hardwood furniture on a dark green polished concrete floor, partly covered by thrown rugs. The thatch underside was visible, supported by straight tree limb vaults: a dark, earthy ceiling perched above white stuccoed walls. It even had the luxury of its own bathroom, where I spent some time reading and getting over the habitual travel-induced intestinal purges. Was all travel now to be followed by bodily revolts?

Within several days I felt well enough to join Doug for his early morning routine, seated on the back of his 'cycle while grasping onto his shiny brown leather jacket. At first we drove to the tool and engine workshop, then on to the impressive tobacco fields of endless, vibrant green. There teams of male and female laborers were busy reaping the new crop. Next we visited the great coal-heated tobacco-drying barns, with row upon row of leaves hanging down like so many dry green bats, and the processing area nearby where dexterous women sorted the dry leaves by quality. The whole tour was dizzyingly educational. I had never seen a tobacco farm before and wondered if such labor-intensive harvesting, done here by over a hundred laborers, was how it had been

in America generations ago before automation.

Only then did we return to the house for a large, hunger-enhanced breakfast with Christine.

In the afternoon it was Christine's turn to take the neophyte back to the grounds, this time on horseback for a tour of the maize and cotton fields. It was my first time on a pummel-less English saddle, which nearly proved my undoing. For the first canter, during which I already found it difficult to hold onto the horse with nothing but the squeezing of my thighs, Christine rounded a sharp bend through the maize with little care for the consequences. When my horse Nimrod gleefully followed I was nearly rocketed into the prickly stalks of corn. Only the extra hard squeezing of my legs and the unceremonious grabbing onto the poor horse's mane for dear life saved me. I lost a rein, which was regrettable at high speed, and had to practically make love to the horse's long neck in order to re-capture the flailing piece of rawhide. Fortunately for me and Nimrod, the path straightened temporarily and he didn't bother to take advantage of my utter loss of control. After so many knocks recently, even the Animal Kingdom was giving me a break.

That evening, when Christine returned from an errand, I was treated to another colorful vignette of Zimbabwean farm life. After driving up to the front porch Christine popped out and, like the farmer-magician she was, pulled a dead rabbit out of the trunk. Evidently it was a fresh road kill. Doug, who had been politely discussing politics with me despite a cold, strode out into the dark to greet his wife and relieve her of her catch. Showing off the limp rabbit in front of the headlamps, he asked:

"Have you ever seen this before, Ben?"

At first I thought he was making fun of me – of course I had seen a dead rabbit before, what did he think I was, an urban bumpkin? – but no. With a quick whistle he summoned their three Alsatians who, upon taking a good sniff, proceeded to pull the rabbit apart. Sounds of cracking bones and tearing skin filled the quiet night.

* * *

The Duncans arrived in Rhodesia around the beginning of the long civil war, when the Ian Smith government was offering low interest loans to attract white farmers. The British had recently pulled out and, while intending to hand power directly to the black majority, were unable to stop Smith's power grab. Doug fought in the civil war that followed and admitted a massacre would have been necessary toward the end. By his estimation, though, a good show of force might have "done the trick." At its peak Doug estimated over a hundred "hardcore terrorists" were killed a day. In the years prior to Mugabe's rise, the parliament had filled with sufficient blacks to bring a native prime minister, named Bishop, to power. Then with both Bishop and Smith overconfident, an open election including the revolutionaries was held. Mugabe, their Marxist leader, won.

Pragmatists above all else, the Duncans told me they weren't bitter, only hopeful. Although whites aren't allowed to vote in presidential elections they elect a certain minority of seats in the parliament, the same way the blacks had years before as second-class citizens. In spite of Mugabe's Marxist/populist leanings Doug now supported him, for fear that a coup by the military and its radicals would purge the country of every last white. Doug reserved most of his bitterness toward the British, who had boycotted Rhodesia during the civil war, and toward both branches of his family, which had avoided visiting out of fear for their own safety – and still hadn't to that day. Toward the black majority he only felt grateful, marveling at how forgiving they were and how few grudges they held.

Explaining the farm's labor-intensiveness Doug commented how many poor Zimbabweans were unemployed. With evident pride he pointed out the workers' housing and children's school that he had built on premises. During the several mornings he included me in his routine, the farm's inner workings engrossed me, from dipping the Hereford, Angus, and Brahmin cattle against disease, to the age-old tobacco harvesting. It was the first farm I ever saw in such beauty and depth. For Africa to become self-sufficient in food it will need more farms such as Rufaro.

The week passed all too quickly. I rested up, while reading Guy de Maupassant's *Selected Short Stories* and back issues of *National Geographic*, and patched together my tattered spirit. It was the most interesting and relaxing extended stay of my travels in Africa. So it was with sadness that I left after Friday lunch, to hitch back to Harare and meet up as planned with Don Fluck the following day.

As refreshing as five days with the Duncans were, trouble lay ahead. Would I be able to leave southern Africa without getting caught in a bureaucratic limbo, a kind of catch-22? Credit card-less and considered an unattractive hobo, would I be unallowed to cross a border even if it was to retrieve one? Next to being robbed, one of the worst feelings for the cheap globetrotter is a sense of powerlessness before petty officials whose sole intent and purpose, it seems, is to make you grovel.

Naipaul concurred when he generalizes that, "In Africa, power, whether exercised by a president for life or a petty bureaucrat, is a raw, untamed force. Men must bow before it or be crushed by it."

Don, true to his word, met me in town at the arranged hour at the Meikles Hotel and, after perfunctory hellos, off we went to visit the pariah state of South Africa. The car ride to Beit Bridge was uneventful, the landscape flat and bland save for a stretch of towering rock faces striped by rain stains and clinging vegetation. After Don and I filled each other in on our respective weeks, the conversation lapsed into silence without the benefit of the "Beeb's" World News.

As feared I was turned away at the border, but for reasons other than I had anticipated. I had arrived under the misconception, fomented by several Yanks back at the Harare Youth Hostel, that a formal visa was not necessary, that Americans could apply for entry on a slip of paper at the border. This was to avoid an indelible South African stamp, likely to bar all subsequent travel to frontline states. As the logistics sounded similar to visiting Israel, the other U.N. pariah state at the time, I mistakenly believed them.

It was my first time denied admission in person to another country, and it made me feel criminal.

The customs officials were nice enough about it and told me that, under normal circumstances, they could telex Pretoria to confirm I was a law-abiding American and just let me in. This being Saturday however, with all of Pretoria closed, made it impossible. But this wasn't my only sin. I was also lacking an airflight out, necessitating a large deposit, and clearly didn't have the means, be it credit card or cash, to buy one. It didn't go over well that all would be saved by the time I got to Johannesburg. Evidently someone had tried that trick before.

We arrived at the crossing by two o'clock. Don of course sailed through and, after ascertaining that my situation was desperate but not life-threatening, drove on after we said our adieus. As Beit Bridge, true to its name, encompassed little other than the bridge itself, I had no choice but to return the seven long hours to Harare where the customs chaps suggested I apply for a visa. With a visa and an airplane ticket from, say, Harare to Nairobi, I could return and be graciously admitted to their fair land – next time.

It being late I quickly looked around for a ride back north. My targets clearly were people just leaving South Africa. The first family I asked which looked both kindly and charitable was only going a short distance, making the ride impractical. It was a pity for when the English-looking Mum asked me what my predicament was, her lovely daughter hurried over to listen with her pretty, concerned face, leaving me with a pang of lonely desire.

In the end an electrician, originally from Wales and touring Zimbabwe on vacation with his family, agreed to take me to Harare. After driving north for four hours we stopped for the night at the Flamboyant Hotel (a misnomer, thank goodness) in the town of Fort Victoria, now called Masvingo, where I shared a room with the young son to trim costs.

Despite such generosity, theirs was not the most enlightened of families, for they insisted on using terms such as *coons* and *boys* when referring to natives. While commenting on how (much more) racist poor Afrikaners are, the father marveled at how polite and friendly the staff at the Flamboyant were in comparison to the presumably surly ones

back home. He wondered if what he had heard about Zimbabwe was mostly propaganda. As if to sum things up, when we drove by four young boys bathing nude in a watering hole to the side of the road, he stopped to take a picture with his Instamatic. Hands covered penises and shouts of glee shot our way in parting. So soon after a civil war, the tableaux appeared disarmingly innocent.

Once back in Harare I contacted Nick Culverhouse, the great-grandnephew of General Gordon, who offered I stay with him and his fiancée Margaret in their Victorian home on Cork Road. They were charmingly socialist and enjoyed arguing politics, in no time pegging me as "a running-dog capitalist." Like the Duncans back in Kenya they seemed more British than the British in accent, mannerisms, and behavior. This included a spot of tea each and every afternoon, which allowed me to tease them about being colonial throwbacks. In reality nothing could have been farther from the truth, exemplified by the time Margaret showed me a professional cartoon she was finishing which depicted blacks pressing for a second revolution from their white oppressors. Post-civil war, did she really believe that?

I copied what seemed like an appropriate paragraph from George Orwell's 1947 essay "Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool" into my journal:

> Creeds like pacifism and anarchism, which seem on the surface to imply a complete renunciation of power, rather encourage this habit of mind. For if you have embraced a creed which appears to be free from the ordinary dirtiness of politics – a creed from which you yourself cannot expect to draw any material advantage – surely that proves you are in the right? And the more you are in the right, the more natural that everyone else should be bullied into thinking likewise.

Orwell evidently had gotten a line on this kind of thinking a long time ago, while I was just getting an inkling.

At the same time I felt smugly above it all and comforted myself with the thought that I would be leaving southern Africa soon enough

– if only I could get out of Zimbabwe. A visa to South Africa would take a week or more, and in order to avoid a stamp in my passport I would have to write a letter to the Consul explaining why. (Simple: Kenya would not let me back in if I had one.) Trains from Harare to Johannesburg were either booked or took four days; the express bus recommended by Nick cost over one hundred Zimbabwean dollars. Proof of the required mobility would likely be a flight out, with Johannesburg to Nairobi costing nearly three hundred dollars. All in all I started to doubt if I ever would visit South Africa.

The problem, financially-speaking, was my new credit card. Without it and now down to seven hundred dollars in traveler's checks, I could be stuck. I cabled Johannesburg to see if it had arrived, which it hadn't, and discovered the possibility of having it couriered to Harare. While expensive it would only take twenty-four hours.

I weighed myself at Nick's that evening for the first time since Europe. To my subdued surprise I was down fifteen pounds to one hundred and fifty, not very much meat on a frame over six foot two. In sympathy with my diminishing mobile home – as I slowly discarded nonessential items, lost others, and failed to replace worn-out or donated clothing – I hadn't realized my body was enjoying a similar transformation ridding itself of excess baggage.

So in keeping with my thinning bag and body I decided to cut my travels short, skip South Africa, and ask for the credit card's re-routing to Harare. I didn't like the idea of giving up or of missing some interesting contacts, but what energy did I have to woo the fair daughters of Jo'burg or anywhere else? Very little. It was time to turn back.

The wait for the credit card took longer than expected as they sent it by registered mail, instead of by courier as requested. In order to pass the time I read copiously (Somerset Maugham, Evelyn Waugh, Conrad Aiken, E.M. Forster – not very indigenous stuff) and became a consumer of local media. Best of all was the telly's one and only channel, state-run, which every night aired a program titled *The Road to Socialism* (whatever happened to Humanism?). It consisted of an

immoderate moderator, a Marxist professor, a businessman, a newspaper editor, and a law lecturer. The subject one evening spun around one viewer's alarm about too much jargon (such as *exploitation, masses, pre-monopoly capitalism*, and so on), but everyone while dutifully calling each other *comrade* argued endlessly about what the subject was or should be. The discussion was so completely daft and confusing I wondered if, at road's end, socialism could inflict that much damage.

Besides *The Road to Confusion*, the nightly lineup included a Shona sitcom, which seemed to glorify polygamy and alcoholism; Ballroom Dancing, an obvious bone to the white minority trying to hold onto the trappings of Western colonialism; and the Evening News, uninformative and poorly articulated. To top it off every day saw the announcement of some conscience-salving Western aid program, which occurred so frequently as to become numbing. It was a relief then to read a letter to the editor complaining that aid programs do more harm than good, by producing products which the donor countries don't bother to buy:

> Is it not the height of cynicism to appear to help people, raise their hopes and aspirations, and then move not one finger to enable them to reap the rewards of their hard work?

It put aid-pushing coupled with protectionism back at the home-front in a new, unflattering light.

My replacement card finally arrived, on the Tuesday afternoon before a five day Easter weekend and nine days after my return to Harare. With goodbyes and profuse thanks to Nick and Margaret I rushed to the airport to go standby on the daily flight to Nairobi. (Regretfully I had overstayed my welcome at Nick's, feeling too stressed and selfish to return to the youth hostel.) As the Johannesburg office had neglected to include my mail in the package, I cabled asking them to forward it to Italy. I also cabled my various Johannesburg hosts-to-be, informing them that I had been turned back at the border and would

not be visiting, with regrets.

Waiting for so long followed by defeat had its effect on my psyche, adding a sense of inadequacy to the relief of my upcoming departure. Couldn't I do anything right?

> It occurred to me my African experience has been somewhat ephemerally on one level: politics. For years politics have not greatly concerned me, so why now? Perhaps because whether Zimbabwe adopts African Socialism, Humanism, etc. will make the greatest difference for her future. Yet I still feel I am gleaning little – why doesn't the history, culture, local fauna, interest me? Why aren't I more inclined to go out and speak to Blacks? Surely I am relying only on Whites.

Two days later I added:

> I feel a hardening of my attitudes and beliefs into a mold more conservative, and historical, than I could have ever before believed. It is likely life has gotten too complex and unseemly for my poor sensibilities to keep pace with; more than lagging behind, they are in full retreat to the comforts of overused, but safe, explanations. . . . This change of heart puzzles me, for not too long ago I felt I could undergo any trial, like Faust, in order to evolve new, important patterns of thought. I was ready to taste the foulest concoctions, if only to digest the greater knowledge. Now I shudder at the thought.

Retreat.

9 – Flights

'Come to Boston to visit, damn you," I barked to Nick as I boarded the airport bus, "and I'll show you what capitalism is really like!"

It was a vain entreaty – for what, after all, did I know about capitalism? But perhaps the sentiment was understood while Nick drove away in his white Nunmobile, relieved to be rid of a running-dog Yankee.

Although my status was as usual standby, the Kenyan Airways flight to Nairobi was far from full so I got on easily. It being Zimbabwe Independence Day and the crew of the well-used Boeing 720 in a good mood, I decided to splurge, spending the remainder of my Zimbabwe dollars on three beers to celebrate my pre-Easter escape.

Customs was kind enough to let me leave Zimbabwe without the benefit of a currency declaration form, for I had left it behind at Beit Bridge along with any hope of meeting the fair daughters of Johannesburg. Even the customs man who patted me down didn't comment on the hard currency I had (I thought) hidden in my breast pocket, so as to avoid questions. Maybe they saw from the crazed look in my eyes that I had had a rough time in southern Africa and thought it better to let me leave without a fight. It was Independence Day after all, so why not let this poor, bedraggled foreigner go?

As the plane rushed down the runway I felt a like-quickening of nostalgic regret, regret for the countries and places half-seen or not seen at all, and wondered if I was really cut out for this sort of business. My confidence, as I flew back over territory I had covered so tortuously by land, waned instead of grew. What had I truly learned from this

unplanned jaunt through southern Africa, other than my grasp on travel and survival were more tenuous than I had thought?

The disconcertingly fast flight stopped briefly in Lilongwe, Malawi, where I had considered a stopover to visit Monika's friend the German Ambassadress, but such was my state of disrepair that I decided against a state visit.

When it came down to it I wanted to arrive in Nairobi on a Wednesday instead of a Friday, when it might be too late to search for cheap tickets to Europe until well after Easter. Such was my rush to get out of Africa that a several day delay was unthinkable.

I called the white hunter Kers on my arrival at the Nairobi Airport and, yes, they would gladly put me up for a few days. From their pool of hospitality I had tapped only one lunch, making them good candidates for more, and had already mentioned returning through Nairobi on my way back. With fond memories of my grandparents' visits they seemed more than happy to receive a slumming grandson. Allen picked me up at the Kenyan Airways Bus Terminal in town and graciously took me straight to a telegram office so I could telegram Monika Lonmon (née von Zitzewitz), warning her of my imminent return to Inarzo and Casa Gonzales.

My several days in equatorial and orderly Nairobi went quickly. On Thursday I shopped around for the cheapest plane ticket to Europe. To my pleasant surprise, Nairobi to Milan would only cost three hundred and twenty dollars one-way, much less than the standard eight hundred dollar fare. The trick – and of course there had to be a trick – was I had to fly on Aeroflot the long way to Italy, via Moscow. Yet how could the Soviets fly you nearly twice the distance for half the price: were the rules of economics so easily suspended in that vast, mysterious land? Indeed the scam – for there had to be a scam – was that Aeroflot, while only charging customers three hundred dollars or so worth of Kenyan shillings, could turn around and using phoney receipts ask the Kenyan central bank for eight hundred dollars in hard currency. If true, they had created a much needed hard currency machine.

Allen and Nora were charming if voluble hosts, and during one evening showed me the same set of animal slides they had projected for my grandparents many years before. I felt strangely tired my entire brief time in Nairobi, which Allen attributed to the rapid change in altitude and longitude while I blamed the month-long shock of southern Africa, walloping me once more no matter how fast I flew from it.

Not able to leave soon enough I reserved the once-a-week flight for that Saturday before hearing back from Monika. She had already invited me, so I considered her reply a mere formality. If she wasn't there when I arrived, then I would just. . .I didn't know what I would do. Fly home? I looked into flights from Nairobi directly to Bombay, but without Aeroflot's help they cost hundreds of dollars more. So it was set: back again to Europe, this time to look after some domesticated animals and my own wilding heart.

Aeroflot flight SU 446 wasn't particularly large or crowded, yet I counted to twenty-five during takeoff before we actually kissed the Nairobi tarmac goodbye. The crew spoke both Russian and English and had the irksome talent of knowing which language to speak just by looking at you. In search of spies I identified three types of probable Soviets: the purebred Russians who looked pale, stoic, and less shifty-eyed than I expected; swarthy Mongolian types with dark, Central Asian features; and far-eastern subjects of the utopic empire with flatter and fairer Korean or Japanese faces. What good could they possibly be up to in Kenya, I wondered, other than bilking the country of Western currency?

I had brought my journal and a copy of International Newsweek on board. While the steward and stewardess eyed them, nothing was confiscated for I was only supposed to stopover in Moscow, not stay. The stewardess, to balance things out, generously offered me a Party Organ in English named *MN Information, 'By air-from Moscow,' April 17-20*. I took an informal tally and, of the twenty-four articles of an international nature, a whopping sixteen concerned American/Soviet confrontations or pernicious American behavior or both. Political

mileage was made from a peace demonstration in New York (front page, main photo) and Washington Post disclosures of CIA activity in Central America (front page, bottom right). I felt flattered by all the attention for the home country.

The mix of passengers was intriguing. Other than the handful of mirthless Soviets, our numbers were swelled by various scruffy backpackers including an expressive Australian crew. In overlanding up the continent, perhaps they had been stymied by civil war in the Sudan. True to type they didn't look discouraged, and in fact treated the overnight flight as one long party. Drinks were ordered and eventually a band of Aussies in boots, shorts, and hairy legs were roaming up and down the aisle, getting boisterous, and of all things telling KGB jokes. This last I found hugely amusing for not one Soviet face betrayed an emotion deeper than mild annoyance. When the party animals tuckered out, the rest of us tried to settle down for some sleep made elusive by the inhumane, user-rude seats. Due to the puniness of the plane, I'm sure, we made interminable hour-long refueling stops in both Cairo and Sevastopol on the Black Sea, which were perfectly timed so as to maximally disturb deep sleep cycles.

> I slept soundly the several hours from the Black Sea stop to the capital; with great difficulty I woke to watch the spectacular red soaked dawn over a frigid, winter landscape. Such was our descent into Moscow, through a blanket of clouds which closed as a roof over us, stretched to a horizon fired red. Below the bare crowns of multitudinous trees rose from dark evergreens; fields of brown were snowless but frozen. I couldn't exactly distinguish the city, guessing it to be a stretch of iron and stone along an s-curved river running quicksilver through it. The buildings, not particularly tall, were in silhouette through a morning haze, unclear and mysterious. Smokestacks belched white plumes in triplet. The plane arched around the metropolis; keeping a constant height we passed over various estates turned, I assume, institute: lone roads passing bleak columns of trees toward self-contained compounds. The lay of the land is flat. At the edge of the airport, a forest of orderly denuded birches, white trunks, gray silver tops. My

immediate impression was of winter at home.

The impression was fleeting. As soon as we disembarked from the plane and entered the airport proper, we were met by a soldier toting a submachine gun – to keep undesirables from running off or on planes no doubt.

Each gate had one of the these gun-wielding customer service representatives, who disappeared as soon as all the morning's incoming and outgoing traffic cleared, which included only one non-Aeroflot plane, an Interflug from East Germany. By nine a.m., the runways, taxiways, and parkingways were disturbingly empty, as if war had been declared and everything ordered airborne.

At immigration I pitied an Israeli who was having difficulties entering. The Soviets wouldn't recognize his country or passport, which meant ipso facto he didn't exist. He looked solid enough to me, but I was too tired and timid to come to his defense with more than a few mumbled words of encouragement. Feeling sheepish I shuffled with the groggy others into the transit lounge, which was one of the fanciest I've seen and certainly better than anything at J.F.K. To my surprise we were served a light breakfast, which was pleasant considering we hadn't eaten anything since dinner the night before. The boiled egg was raw, the coffee decent.

Back in Nairobi I had been disappointed to learn my layover with Aeroflot would last only three hours instead of twenty-four, as daylong stopovers include being put up at the airport hotel and given a bus tour of Moscow. What a clearly welcoming, if propagandistic, practice! But after only one hour in the creepy airport prison I was ready to go. Already wan and feeling tenuous I feared slipping all too easily into non-existence, just like that Israeli.

So when the time came to leave, and I filed past the customer satisfaction enforcer – who, non-smiling, popped up out of nowhere – and onto a much larger flight to Milan, I felt relieved. Like my visits to East Germany nearly a half year before, it had been an odd feeling to be in a country, no matter how briefly, which so efficiently makes you feel

insignificant.

As if the U.S.S.R. wasn't a strange enough re-introduction to Europe, the flight to Milan confounded me. Still in the non-decadent East, the Italians decked out in furs, jewelry, and other fashion accessories were a wonderful sight to behold. While many of them were Italian communists, for sure, and had just finished the pilgrimage to Marxist Mecca, they were clearly Italians first and communists second without the dourness of personal or ideological sacrifice. Several young Soviet sports teams, comprising teenage girls and boys, boarded the flight and ogled the Italians in preparation for the coming, more significant culture shock. One young buck sat next to me and when he displayed interest in the strange, non-Cyrillic lettering of my journal, I tried to tell him it was English, but he only spoke Russian. Only when I pulled out my passport and said "Amerikanski" did he understand, visibly blushing with the party colors. We proceeded to show each other where we each lived on the Aeroflot world map, even though North America was as yet free of any sprouting route lines, which entangled a fair amount of the globe in a fine web. Aeroflot, at the time, was the world's largest airline in terms of miles flown, according to *MN Information, 'By air-from Moscow.'*

I gladly absorbed the general thaw as we entered Italy and made our descent into Milan. While the trees were still bare, the earth looked warmer and frostless. The airport was much louder and busier than Moscow's or Nairobi's. After being away for four months I welcomed Europe as an old and boisterous friend.

Customs was a breeze and, when my mobile home plopped out from the conveyor belt onto the carousel, I nearly wept for joy. Other than a nosebleed over the Black Sea, it looked as though I had escaped from Africa via Moscow in one piece.

While I may have added little to my negligible understanding of capitalism or how it works, one thing I learned these past months was how much I viscerally disliked socialism and communism, no small feat for someone raised on leftism.

10 – Inarzo

Italy, oh Italy! Her charms, after some mild deprivation, were manifest.

Yet when I called Monika and spoke to her daughter Aylie, they didn't seem overjoyed by my arrival. Unlike the last time when Cousin Ubi was sent, no one offered to pick me up in Varese. Instead I took the train to Varese and then found an obscure bus to Inarzo, the smallest village in Christendom. Feeling tired and feeble I got off at Inarzo's main intersection, where the streets are so narrow the bus nearly busted them open, and walked all of one hundred paces to Monika's small villa. Her evergreens looked the tallest in town, her courtyard the largest despite the overall modesty. Her dwelling was the last before the tiny town subsided and the countryside resumed.

Aylie had warned me that, it being Easter Sunday, they had various guests over and not to be intimidated by the crowd. The sun was out and it was unseasonably warm, so when I opened the rusty metal gate I found the informal gathering seated on chairs, surrounding low tables covered with food, on the lawn. I let down my bag and, with a quiet smile hinting at stories to tell, shook hands and nodded my head to all. After a short while in English, the conversation relapsed to German, the consensus language of the day. Soaking up the warm sun and bathing in the senseless sounds of an unknown language, I felt enveloped as if in a warm, scattered embrace.

* * *

My first week in Inarzo. Though warm and sunny all week, it is now, Sunday, cold and damp. In my room I sit before

> the large open windows, a sheep shag rug draped over my reclining torso and crossed legs. My window looks out over three sets of red tile roofs, and lets in a symphony of bird chirps, chicken squawks, and cold. (A Magic Mountain.)

My telegram to Monika had arrived three days before my arrival, but the reply address, given to me by the telegram office, was too cryptic to use. Only after much trouble and consternation could Monika send a reply telegram inviting me to stay for three weeks. It was less time than expected as Monika had found another "friendly madman," a Belgian student, to help around the modest villa of rose-colored stucco. She had waited patiently for my return but had been unable to hold off any longer.

Glad to be useful I chipped in with the chores, such as feeding the chickens, collecting eggs, cleaning out the two-horse stables, and tossing hay bales down from the hay loft. This still left abundant opportunities for rest and sloth, particularly during the weekdays when the house emptied of guests and ambled to its own lazy, unspecified routine.

> Wine, coffee, reading and work. Half-heartedly I am studying Italian (the grammar book is in French), and several hours each day I putter around the garden. My reading has allowed me to finish two half-read books, *Of Human Bondage* and a detective/espionage novel (my first). I've just started Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914*, which promises much.
>
> I feel strangely apathetic about this entry. As with my travels, I prefer giving it a rest. I haven't written a letter since arriving. I should go into Milan to change more money and to yet again replace my card.

Among the cast of characters that first week were Francis, the Belgian, and his girlfriend, Beatrice, on her first visit since Francis's arrival. Francis, an oceanographer, was working on his thesis at a local institute; I found him affable in a Gallic sort of way, that is solicitous while feigning indifference. His face was pale, sharp, and slightly bug-eyed with glasses, but he welcomed me into the house warmly, no doubt

as I would share in the chores.

His girlfriend Bea, though, was another matter. When the week was over and she had finally left I peevishly wrote:

> I will not miss her, her plainness irked me. Her Gallic features included a cleft chin, small mouth, knob-ended nose, and sloping cranium obscured by a non-figurative mop of brown hair, momentarily resurrected by full brown eyes; yet it was her brain I spoke of when I mentioned plainness. Francis is more interesting; I have been speaking French to his English. But Bea speaks primarily French so most table conversations were in French out of courtesy. The two of them together were mildly coarse: they fondled each other – as is the French wont – in my presence, and on an excursion to a local town they purposefully left the outside café without paying for their ice cream floats. Furthermore this was done without panâche but desultorily, guiltily. A bit too eagerly Francis asked me if I was shocked – only then did it strike me exactly what they had just done.

Their eagerness to shock a puritanical American made me laugh, as though film noir, Jean-Luc Godard, and the Sixties were only yesterday. The impulse was short-lived. To expiate guilt by spreading the spoils of their crime, they treated me to a chair lift ride out of Laveno and up the adjacent mountain for a sweeping view of Lake Maggiore. On a chair to myself, rising out of the town's bustle, I was lifted up the quiet mountainside ruffled only by wind and birds. My first ascent since Cheops, it gave pause for thought. The top was chillier and, without buds on the brittle brown twigs, not as spring-advanced as Laveno or the lake-ringed base. With the cold and elevation causing my musings to expand into the thin air, I realized moments of reflective serenity come infrequently and stealthily, ambushing you.

Despite various letters to family with Monika's address and telephone number, mailed from Africa days before leaving, two weeks slipped by without a peep from the outside world. Finally on a Sunday in early May a call came through from dear Brownie. She apologized for

not having called sooner, but had just returned home to pick up mail. She said she was anxious to tell me that all was well with Mum, but there was something in her voice, a certain insistence, which made me doubt it. When pressed she admitted there had been a "lull" nearly a month ago, during which Ricki, once again, had mutinied and left to live with Paul. Now, she claimed, all was truly well and that Mum would tell me so herself.

"You know, Pucko," she continued, "we understand the reasons for your running – which I'm sure you know has contributed greatly to your mother's recovery – so we just want to tell you, to let you know you don't have to run anymore. You can come home anytime, Pucko, and you're welcome to stay with us for as long as you want. We mean that, okay? For as long as you want. We love you and we think you're wonderful. So just remember that, Pucko. Any time."

What would I have done without Brownie? Again and again she had come through for me during the trip, from mending my soft-weave wool jacket in Prato to being the first of my otherwise disengaged family to call, and was now the only one to encourage me home with such welcoming arms. How come this substantial woman, a step-grandmother with whom I shared no blood, was the most warm-hearted and generous of all?

I asked Brownie to ask Mum to give me a call so as to discuss some logistics. Sure enough, half an hour later the stillness of Inarzo was broken again, this time by a call from Mum whose voice I had not heard in over four months.

> There was a slight awkwardness in our talk which I could not conquer; she began by saying something about wanting to call – the difficulty was of course Brownie had called first, taking the initiative, whereas Mummy had not (feelings of embarrassment. . .) Her voice was level and incisively clear: just that morning she had mailed all sorts of things; she was painting vigorously; best of all, Ricki had been accepted into Andover! (He begins next fall.) After a pause, she intoned she had further good news: she had joined Alcoholics Anonymous and persevered for a month.

> (This was the news Brownie had hinted at but could not tell me.) I was as enthusiastic as possible – this, after all, is the best news I could hope for during my entire trip – but I heard a hint of indifference creep into my voice. Why? Perhaps the news of relapse and recovery had been too sudden. Out of communication, not receiving a letter from Mummy since my first arrival in Nairobi nearly three months ago, I had deceived myself into believing all was well since last Christmas and had conveniently pushed the matter out of my mind. It now strikes me during my entire foray into Africa I was successful in this design: forgetfulness.
>
> Perhaps most important, and lasting, of all, I feel a fresh wave of guilt, of shame at my own inadequacy: the battle for my mother's life and sanity raged for at least eight months after my departure, during which time the brunt of responsibility fell upon others, notably upon Ricki.

This was confirmed when a passel of letters were at last forwarded from the Amex office in South Africa. Among them was one from Paul, written nearly two months before.

> Your mother. . .is I'm glad to report sounding *excellent*. She's had me worried to hell, drinking badly out of hand, and Ricki leaning on her hard to really quit once and for all, moving out to live with us unless she does. That's the only persuasion that counts, and she just told me that it has worked, that she is really on the mend, determined to quit, completely in response to Ricki. I have stayed out of it, Dick has made no intrusions, it's really between her and the Deme [Ricki], and I have a sense that she may have really have pulled it off, at a critical moment when a bad slide was going on. She seems to be really determined, and I'm more confident than ever before, thanks to your little brother, of whom we can all be immensely proud. He's carrying on your own good work, Boot, on behalf of your mother, and I'm very glad *you* are halfway around the world, *not* carrying any of that this time.

When I put the letter down I wondered if it was as easy as all that. And besides, why was everyone, including I, leaving the dirty work to

Ricki?

In the coming aid package Mum had forwarded a replacement credit card mailed to Cambridge, so I didn't need to go to Milan to replace the temporary one. With the card's arrival along with some personal checks I would be financially, at least, ready to move on. And that was just what I was thinking of: moving on. For despite Mum's good news and Brownie's loving entreaty to come home I felt oddly determined to carry on, whatever the cost.

While disconcerting the phone calls were a relief of sorts, a relief which deepened when Monika asked me to stay on even though I was already two weeks through the agreed three. Apparently she and her dark, mysterious daughter Aylie were taking a shine to me, for reasons unknown and inexplicable. A new assignment, to update a German guidebook she wrote on Naples and Tuscany, would take her away in the middle of May. Even though Francis would return from a stay in Belgium around then, she needed someone at home during the day as she didn't "like the house empty and the animals alone." She offered that I stay through May or nearly another four weeks. After eight months on the road I needed a rest.

Now that I would be staying a proper European length of time, Monika began to introduce me to her local friends, including Nandi, a lone South African woman intent on discussing revolutionary politics, and Signora Baroldi, a well-off housewife from a nearby village. The Signora was one of Monika's few Italian friends and, unlike the others, wasn't part of the bohemian and literary set which flowed like a river through Casa Gonzales. Instead she was a high-society type.

We met over lunch early one week at her large home high on a hill, which afforded magnificent views of Lago di Varese to the south and the Alps to the west and north, with rolling foothills in between. The Signora spoke English very well, yet out of politeness the two elderly ladies reaffirmed their bonds in Italian. Early on during the informal lunch the Signora inquired if I skied. "Yes," I replied. Only later did she return to the subject and ask me if I wanted to ski for four days with

her in the Alps, as she was leaving for a borrowed ski condo tonight or the next day. In turn I asked Monika if this would be okay, as it would leave the house empty the following day, but she insisted I go. I had never skied on anything but New England mountains before, so I gladly accepted. That same night we drove the three hours to Cervinia, the Italian Matterhorn.

How dashing! To go from equatorial Nairobi to snow-bright Alpine peaks within several weeks seemed positively Ian Fleming to me. Having seen too many Hollywood films on Alpine intrigue I found the condominium plain and the base lodge shabby compared to my celluloid imagination – but who cares? I was skiing in the Alps!

For our first outing, a clear if uncrisp May day, the Signora and I went straight to the top where she unceremoniously dumped me to go skiing with friends. I was glad in retrospect, as it saved me the embarrassment of witnesses when I immediately slipped onto my derrière, such was my lack of practice. I also promptly got lost and skied down Zermatt by accident on the treeless Swiss side, which was a bother because the Swiss were not very understanding. They charged me ten dollars just to take the Swiss lift back to the top from where I could slip and fall back into Italy. And fall I did, when toward the end of a tiring day I had a major wipe out during which a wayward knee almost dislodged a pesky front tooth.

The next day the Signora and I skied down some open bowls above the tree line, floating over trailless and unpacked snow. What a blissful, nearly complete white-out freedom! We did this in the morning before the sun heated up the snow pack and facilitated diving into fissures or tumbling under avalanches. My last run was nearly as eventful, for a Swiss official pulled me over at the top to interrogate me: was I an outlaw or miscreant trying to sneak into Switzerland without passing through immigration? I may have looked like a spy feigning ignorance when I was just a Alpine neophyte. I tried responding to all his questions in my best French, but it didn't help that I had no identification on me.

Depleted by day's end while returning to the base lodge I sped too

quickly through sticky wet snow, flew over an unseen jump, and made a snow-eating flip to my surprise. Afterwards I patted my body all over, glad not to have fractured any bones – or my trip.

We left the next day, earlier than anticipated, but the weather had turned for the worse and, feeling sore and poor, I had begged off from skiing that morning. It was the first and only time I've skied in Europe, where springtime in the Alps is an uplifting, if diplomatically delicate, affair.

It was a pleasure to return to my sanatorium routine in Inarzo where activities such as book-reading and stable-cleaning were less taxing. I had finished Solzhenitsyn's *August 1914* and, moving on chronologically, read Alan Moorehead's *The Russian Revolution*. While cleaning the living room's English bookshelves I was surprised to find quite a collection on World War II, much of it unflattering about the Germans, especially the Prussians. Although, or perhaps because, Mr. Lonmon had married a Prussian, he appeared to have had an inordinate interest in the darker Germanic side and its impact on European history. Accordingly my education continued with William Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, whose lunacies reverberated in my mind with images of the Berlin Wall and other strange manifestations of the Iron Curtain. The tradition of murderous repression had almost seamlessly carried on.

Several days after my Alpine jaunt Monika was called away to Florence for a week, requiring that I drop her off at the tiny local train station. In what would become routine we left late – in this regard, Monika seemed more Italian than German – and rushed through the country lanes, at times racing the imaginary train in the distance. One time we arrived after the railroad crossing gate had already lowered, leaving us no choice but to abandon her car before the gate and dash across with her bags, forgetting her coat in the now cut-off car.

Monika's sudden departure left me alone for a week with the animals-in-residence, whose numbers included one horse, two dogs, and over a dozen egg-laying hens. I was growing fond of Twiggy, the black

Lab, and Charlata, the beautiful black Pug, who followed me around the house like two soft-pedaling shadows. I had never liked small, porcelain dogs before, but Charlata was special. Like all Pugs she had been bred into virtual uselessness, her nearly collapsed esophagus causing her to wheeze constantly, particularly when excited. But what I most loved were the washboard folds of fur around her neck or, more precisely, the distinct smell of rose petals they held.

Aylie and Fabbio came up for a day and a night that weekend, despite Monika's absence, followed by a joyful stillness only broken by Francis's Tuesday homecoming. I liked Francis, but he had an annoying habit when returning from research work around five o'clock of always giving a huge hello no matter what I was doing, and then hanging around so as to frustrate resuming whatever I had been doing before his grand entrance. So with distinct pleasure I accepted a dinner invitation that evening from the Baroldis, who wanted to introduce me to a distinguished friend and guest.

Over the phone Signora Baroldi had not sounded over-enthusiastic about picking me up, so I quickly offered to bicycle even though it had rained on and off all day and would be a mostly uphill climb. I'm glad I did despite the absurd smallness of my transport, for it had its own charms, including delicately small wheels, one speed, and a tinkling bell. My longish, coat-and-tied frame wrapped around the small bicycle must have been an alarming sight, compounded by constant bell-tinkling to arouse dogs along the way. The air smelled scrubbed fresh from the recent rain, even more so when I had to walk up the steep, gravel driveway.

The Signor, a medical scientist, greeted me stiffly and drew me into the fire-warmed study which was wood paneled and lined with books. I bowed when meeting the Signora and raised her hand to within six inches of my protruding lips, as I had seen various young Euro-gallants do. She hurriedly explained Francesco Borghese, of *the Borgheses*, would arrive for dinner at any moment. When I confessed my ignorance she reminded me the grand old family had a piazza named after them, I believe, in Rome. But before I could confirm this, the piazza-man

himself arrived with much clattering of the house bells. As the Signora pleaded more chores, we three men made a tactical retreat into the fire-crackling sanctum of the study, navigating its narrow door along the way. The Signor paused, entreating his honored guests to proceed first. When with a decided pause Signor Borghese did the same for me, I hesitated a moment before unleashing my momentum, gliding through the portal first despite the soft, restraining brush of Signor Baroldi's two fingers. I immediately realized my mistake. One's elders, particularly Old World elders, *always go first*, a rule which I assiduously practiced for the rest of the evening.

Our opening topic was on the acquisition of languages. As the Signora had yet to rejoin us, this allowed Signor Borghese to make several comments with a conspiratorial air.

"No doubt the best mode of learning languages is with a girlfriend of the nationality of the language you're learning," he rumbled on in a pleasantly limp manner.

"Could that explain," our host interjected, "why you speak five language fluently, my dear Francesco?"

While I had heard this old saw before, the friskiness of my elders left me feeling all the more celibate and wanting, unable to speak even one foreign language well for obvious reasons. Saved by the belle, the Signora returned to summon us into the dining room fit for a feast. Despite the astonishing length of the table we found our four places evenly distributed, one to a side, and sat down in fabulously uncomfortable hard wood, straight-back chairs – a welcome puritanical touch.

The meal was tasty and the conversation in Italian, which allowed me a leisurely study of Signor Borghese's aristocratically sleek and weathered features. Despite a high forehead well accentuated by a receding hairline and a paleness of skin reflected in silvery white hair, he appeared youthful, even naughty, due to a fine mouth and bold, bright eyes. Both gentlemen suggested I learn politics by residing in Italy for a while. Then apropos of nothing, Signor Borghese asked to look at my round wire-rim glasses. Could a man who had everything

covet my spectacles? Even though the frames and especially the nose pads were heavily greased with nose oil and had accumulated enough lint to turn, in wide swathes, a brassy green, I had no choice but to hand them over after hiking down to his end of the table.

He seemed not to notice their embarrassing disarray and, leaving me blind for only a short while, returned them with approving words. Although he was the first person, besides girlfriends or children or both, to inspect my glasses up close and personal, I have made an effort to keep them moderately clean since.

The rest of the meal went without mishap. After a brief respite for cordials in the fired-up study we were propelled into the cool, seductive Italian night, well wadded with food and wine. Entering his equally sleek Volvo, Signor Borghese offered to light my path as I pedaled down the treacherous driveway, to which I impertinently replied: "Thank you, but I prefer not to be run over at such a young age!"

Soon after the Roman's departure I hastened my own, tottering down the dark, damp driveway and prying one more laugh out of Signor Baroldi – who kindly invited me back anytime – when I gave several defiant peals of my bell before a final "Buonanotte!" The long descent, soon again on asphalt, was exhilarating. I stopped using the brakes, which weren't of much use anyway, and reveled in the valley of pin-point lights spread as if before my handlebars, and the cool rush of air on my expectant face.

I don't know if it was that night or snuck up before, but some time around then I entered one of the happiest brief periods of my life. There was something so calm, easygoing, and cosmopolitan, something so warm and accepting about Casa Gonzales, that when it rained heavily for what seemed weeks on end, I felt with our plethora of animals and humans, our spiders, mice, and Belgians, that we were a humble little Noah's Ark, slipping down the gentle hill into a valley of bliss.

In reality the terrain tilted too gently for even the soggiest villa to become unmoored. The slope ended a short way down by the intimate swamp I had visited in December, and by the fields from which I had

heard three o'clock strike at four different times from nearby villages, each as absurdly small as Inarzo. While this quartet of bells still played *contrappunto*, following me throughout Casa Gonzales whose windows were slowly opening to the earth's gathering warmth, from the fields they seemed more wistful, more plaintive notes from a bygone era.

I visited the lonely swamp again and again, often in my tattered wool jacket and a pair of high black rubber boots borrowed from the deceased Mr. Lonmon. Twiggy and Charlata usually accompanied me, with Charlata wheezing away on her short legs. But then the May rains came, interrupting our routine and trying our Ark-like patience. Only after ten cloistered days and nights of wet and indoor reading, were we able to venture back to the swamp with more anticipation than usual.

To our delight the previously wintry marsh had been transformed over the past fortnight. The quickest signs of life were the swallows darting over the smooth, gray pond water. In areas clear of lily pads they dipped and swooped toward unseen goals, nearly breaching their winged reflections. Though uniform clouds near the vast soggy earth formed a low, cozy ceiling – from which sprinkled a dusting of anticipatory rain – unobstructed clearness reigned for the first time in weeks. Delightfully this allowed a rare sighting of snow-capped Monte Rosa to the west, which invisible on most sunny or hazy days revealed itself briefly as if the curtain had just gone up, the third act about to begin. Indeed, all around us in the nascent swamp were new green sprouts where shriveled brown had ruled before. I sat a long time, my back to a lone paper birch where the dike gave way to the swelling pond water, and breathed in the damp lushness of renewal: spring in all its possibilities.

It reminded me inevitably of the Great Meadows and Brownie's warm invitation to return home. For home it was over a decade and more where I had grown up, pond-happy and mud-productive, a wild city boy tamed by the rhythms of the seasons which played out, like a practiced orchestra, on the vast, wood instruments of nature. But all that had passed when I rushed off to boarding school and then college to become an infrequent visitor, when the second marriage crumbled

and the house that Paul built was sold. Perhaps it was my beloved grandparents' continued presence there, in their house just a stone's throw away, but all that the Great Meadows meant to me had taken on a greater importance, a kind of stability and source of comfort. For marriages, parents, and disease come and go, but the Great Meadows always remains, a place where I am forever the curious and once-Puckish grandchild of my youth.

On a smaller scale during those precious weeks, Casa Gonzales was undergoing its own transformation. After Monika returned from Florence we resumed the midweek ritual – as predictable as Francis's ceremonious hello – of discussing the coming weekend, which invariably brought beloved daughter Aylie and boyfriend Fabbio up from Milan. Indeed, Monika's weekdays revolved around the weekends, when the house swelled with life and people, creating a palpable anticipation.

As for me the weekdays were both busy and pregnant with expectation. Through Monika I began to meet a widening circle of friends, including Walter and Iren Kley, a pair of lively German scientists who worked at CERN, Europe's particle physics laboratory outside of Geneva, and a pair of American expat teachers who were, as is the fashion in Europe, obediently anti-American.

One day Monika decided to shake things up by mating her black thoroughbred mare Sporty, now in heat, at a nearby stable full of eager stallions. It was quite a production getting Sporty into the borrowed horse van and driving her, like midwifes on the way to the delivery, to the not-so-far stud farm. I had never before seen horses mate.

Monika had agonized for weeks on whether to attempt another birth, upbringing, and inevitable separation with all the heart-wringing that accompanies. She confessed that if only Aylie would have children, then she wouldn't need to go through such agony on Sporty's behalf, which seemed a bracing insight into the female psyche. But then Monika's need and desire to nurture were surprisingly large; so large they encompassed me.

The courtship was more quickly effective than most. After

unloading Sporty from the van, her attendants walked her past a row of young studs, each of whom caught enough scent to snort and quiver in approval. When one choice stallion was at length brought into the main corral for the honors, he reared up on his hind legs in a gallant show of desire. Sporty remained passive until the stallion, tethered by a bridle and reins, tried to mount her, whereupon she delivered a quick kick to his midsection from her hind legs. The stallion was immediately pulled away, the courtship too sudden, but instead of subjecting the male to another love-blow his helpers roped Sporty's hind legs to keep her from kicking. In this way immobilized, Sporty was then remounted by the furious stallion, whose handler kindly removed Sporty's tail at the crucial moment and even helped to guide the stallion's massive organ inside her. Although Monika couldn't watch from the moment of Sporty's bondage, I was fascinated by the aggressive virility of it all, through to the end when the stud came so thunderously his bounteous flow back-flooded out of Sporty's womb.

Not long before my anticipated end-of-May departure, the sun surfaced after weeks of absence and, as if exerting a brighter gravitational pull, made me think of the road again. So when Monika received another assignment, in Florence in early June, and asked me to stay on again, I agreed one final time – for how could I say no to this kindly and wonderful woman? – while making it clear this would be the last. Already in Inarzo for over a month I would either have to leave shortly or stay on indefinitely, resigning myself to a European fate. It had been the wettest spring since the nineteen-thirties, someone said, and Italy would soon blossom with a thousand different intoxicating sights and smells.

In the meantime letters addressed to me at Inarzo began to arrive in waves, and they too exerted a complementary pull, a full moon aligning with the sun. A letter from Dad and Molly alighted first and, like the last one to South Africa, advised me to fly to Asia instead of trekking overland through Iran and Afghanistan. Realizing I might not be able to afford many flights, Dad offered money for the first time should I

need it. What most impressed me was the growing length of his letters, which in the past had been short addendums to Molly's longer discourses. Though taken up with some logistics, such as helping me to replace my driver's license, the one to South Africa had been four pages long. Distance or danger seemed to make his pen flow more freely.

A second package from Mum arrived full of equipment for further travel, including a new neck wallet, a newfangled shin wallet (wrapped with a piece of velcro to the flat of my bony shin), a yellow vaccination certificate filled out by Jock, our family pediatrician, a blank journal and several pens. The accompanying letter was short – sobriety and so many errands, apparently, had reduced her normal verbosity – and repeated somewhat pridefully her success at Alcoholics Anonymous.

Brownie sent a package with an article on crossing India by train (once again, third-class in the third world), and both of my blood-grandmothers sent gossipy letters about life on the home front which made me feel off at war somewhere. Grandma, or Mum's mum, sent an inexpensive aerogramme, which concluded nicely with the following:

> I wonder about you a lot – what a strange set of adventures you must be having. The main thing is you have stayed well – and (fortunately) safe.
>
> Hope this reaches you before you take off for Athens (+ then Bombay?) – Have loved getting a card once in a while –
>
> Much love
> Grandma

Mrs. Macinlay was the only correspondent to voluntarily send not one but two missives to Inarzo. In one she provided the first palpable incentive to return homewards, by inviting me to a holiday house party at the end of December, which although many months away would frame my trip nicely. Might I truly be welcome on my return to the New World?

A second dinner with the Kleys produced two addresses of colleagues and friends: one in Bombay, the other in Penang, Malaysia.

I could feel my inner gyroscope tilting outwards.

Between swamp visits and stable cleanings I carried on with my research, finishing *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and then starting Churchill's massive history of *The Second World War*. Monika and I began to talk about Germany after the war and what it had been like for her. She had grown up in East Prussia, in a small town called Zitzewitz; among the three hundred and fifty von Zitzewitzes her father was the only count. From the long war she fondly remembered the captured Russian soldiers, both exotic and somehow gentle of spirit, who contentedly worked the potato fields in servitude. Toward war's end of course everything changed. When the invading Soviets swept into eastern Germany many of her family were massacred before she and some other civilians escaped, fleeing to what would become West Germany. Of the few remaining mementos of that period in her life she showed me black-and-white photos of the family's manor among sweeping lawns, one of the family's faithful servants, and another of her and her twin brother in frumpy and elaborate Victorian dress, with as many folds as Charlata's neck.

Needing to work for the first time in her life she became a journalist, and a successful one at that, eventually rising to the position of Italian cultural correspondent for *Die Welt*. Despite excelling at her career Monika lived simply and within humble means. Casa Gonzales, for instance, was rented, not owned. Her heart, though, always flowed with generosity, taking pity even on present-day Soviets; her life, overflowing with family, interests, and friends. She astounded me, for she was as open to change as she was knowledgeable in languages. Speaking five fluently she mixed them up, like a smorgasbord, with some frequency.

When we discussed the Second World War, however, her views were more settled, forged by the hardship she experienced as a young working woman in post-war West Germany. She and Aylie, for instance, cited the American bombing of Dresden near the war's close as one of its greatest crimes. When I mentioned that Germany, not America, had started the war, my point was apparently lost on them. (At least I had

the good grace not to quote from *Doctor Faustus*: "Meanwhile we have experienced the destruction of our noble cities from the air, a destruction that would cry to heaven if we who suffer where not ourselves laden with guilt.")

When we discussed German militarism from Bismarck on, she denied vehemently that the Prussians were any more aggressive than anyone else and disagreed that German militarism seeded both world wars. When facts are too painful to accept they are denied – something I and my family all too well understand.

My final days in Inarzo went quickly. Mum called one last time, for fifteen minutes. I thanked her for all the travel gadgets she had sent and told her of my intended itinerary. Monika, as planned, left for one last week, during which a tall, young German cousin named Peter arrived to stay. When I taught him and Francis to play American poker we stayed up three nights in a row gambling for beans while drinking. When Peter's girlfriend, a pretty and graceful young opera singer named Majella Stockhausen arrived, I introduced them to marsh walks with Twig and Charlata. On our first walk Peter nearly broke the swamp spell by asking me what I wanted to be in life. I surprised myself by responding: a novelist, farmer, or spy. True to the age and his generation, Peter haughtily asked if I included Chile and Nicaragua in my career plans – and I thought we were poker buddies!

One morning when the dogs and I went on our daily walk to buy fresh milk from the nearby farm, the daughter of the house motioned for me in that downwards Italian way to come closer. We obediently followed her to the stable full of tethered milk cows, where she proudly motioned to a pregnant cow, lying down and with two shiny legs, already roped, sticking out of her womb. The father pulled intermittently at the rope – a ludicrous and wonderful sight – until the entire glistening calf came plopping out.

He then brushed the newborn with fresh straw and said to me, "Now when you have farm, you already see this."

* * *

During the last week tragedy nearly fell three times on the house, which had protected us for so many weeks and nights. Walter's wife, Iren, who had already been treated for cancer, received instructions to return pronto to the Swiss hospital – as cancerous Death had the upper hand again. Not long after, the owner of Casa Gonzales informed Monika in writing that he would soon have to sell the house. As she couldn't afford it, this sent her into a panic: where would all the animals go? Then finally during our last weekend and on her birthday, Aylie lost a pearl earring while we swam by the lakefront home of the American expat couple. The earring had more than monetary value, for it was one of the few von Zitzewitz heirlooms to have survived the flight from Soviet wrath. All of a sudden our collective grasp on life and family heritage seemed tentative.

Monika and I returned the next day to look for it, but were discouraged by the amount of lawn and lakefront where it could be hiding. Remembering Aylie's birthday-inspired Cossack dance in her bikini over one part of the lawn, I methodically searched on hands and knees until the earth gave up the pearl's small, hard perfection. Monika was so happy she hugged me and gave me a European double-barreled kiss: I was hero for the day.

After seven weeks of creeping recovery and this resolution of sorts I needed to move on, to pay heed to the tilt, but all of a sudden couldn't.

> Tonite's the last night; tomorrow I go.
>
> I took a bath just now in the dark, the window open to the nocturnal buzz and warmth – at last the heat and sun have arrived the last two days. My arms gleamed dimly, their wet reflecting the minimal light. Death was in the air. I hummed slowly and loudly, keeping my ears near the still water to hear the reverberation; this way I felt safe. The habitual gloom of departure settled upon me as did the nightair.

The following day Monika and I had a last lunch together. That

morning I tossed hay one more time and cleaned my room upon packing. After a last minute dash to the station – just like the previous times but with drivers reversed – we said our final, hurried farewells. It was just as well, for if the leave-taking had been drawn out I would have cried.

As I boarded the train with my hesitant mobile home behind me, Monika commented with a broken smile: "You know, Ben, I do hope you will change your mind about Prussians. That would please me very much!"

"Monika," I replied, "I hope I wasn't too impolite in saying all that. . . Maybe I shouldn't have."

"No," she said, "You should always. I just hope you will think of me as representative – all right?"

Monika had a point. Why pay attention to boring, old history when you have a shining, living example right in front of your eyes? Why bother taking your background as determinant?

"Then the Prussians must be a fabulous race!" I yelled gleefully in parting.

11 – Prato

With regrets and a heavy heart I finally left dear Monika, Charlata, Twig, and a pregnant Sporty on a sunny June day, the train pulling me southward away from Lombardy, away from warmth, company, and support.

As before I would descend the length of Italy and cross the Peloponnese to Athens where cheap tickets to the Orient are found. But it was nearly summer now with all of Europe waking to the hedonisms of the Mediterranean high season, so different from the clear December of my last journey to the continent's edge. This time I felt a sense of urgency, a need to carry on before the temptations of summer detained me, maybe forever, with the rowdy crowds of excess. Like the hot-weather, seasonal communities of my Massachusetts youth, on Cape Cod, Martha's Vineyard, or Nantucket, southern Europe would soon swell to monstrous proportions under the weight of sun-worshipping Scandinavians and pleasure-starved Americans. Time to move on.

I knew the territory well and could see few delays but for one place, Florence, and one person, Daniela. I hadn't forgotten Daniela since her rejection of me in Nairobi or my return to Italy on Easter, but rather had succeeded in pushing her to the near recesses of memory and no farther. During my eight weeks in Inarzo I could almost physically feel her presence only a phone call or a day's journey away, but had resisted the urge. Ever since Cairo and that first nearly abrupt end to my wanderings, I knew I would return to Italy sooner or later and would have to figure out what to do about Daniela.

Seven months had passed since our first meeting. During that time I had written nine or ten letters, each more confessional than the last.

So her Nairobi telegram had discouraged me terribly, not just for her inability to travel to India with me but for what she had implied by wishing me Godspeed home – that she didn't want to see me again. And this from the first woman I had opened myself up to! Feeling injured I had only written one or two more letters. The last, in early May from Inarzo, announced that if I got the chance I would like to see her and Cousin Ames on my way through Florence at month's end. No matter that May had come and gone without any further word; if Daniela was out of town when I reached Florence, so be it. Now that I had achieved the barest of momentum, I felt pressed to get to Asia with no time to dally, no matter the summery temptations of Tuscany.

During my spring exile in Lombardy, there were moments when it seemed Daniela was already there. One rainy day while waiting at the Varese station for the bus back to Inarzo, I watched a small car pull up and a young Italian woman get out with umbrella to read the bus schedule. Much like Daniela, she had a direct and fashionable look to her. She wore red Scottish plaid tights, baring her ankles above slim, black shoes just like Daniela's. After her hurried departure I remained staring into the curtain of rain and thought I should congratulate Daniela, if and when I saw her again, for withstanding my siege over the last half year. Her first impression had been right, that I was just latching onto to the first half-receptive and intelligent woman I could find. Moreover, my efforts to separate her from her fiancé with my bare-all letters were pitiful. If I had succeeded, what would I have done then? Like the woman in plaid tights Daniela seemed part of another world, a clean system of support from which if I stole her, with what could I replace it? Nothing. Nothing but an out-of-date itinerary and a small, burdensome mobile home.

So when I arrived in Florence that mild Tuesday afternoon on the cheap train from Milan, instead of calling the Portinaris I phoned Anne Clemente, driver of the original white Nunmobile. Her guest rooms were full, but when I pleaded a paucity of options she offered me the use of her sofa, which I gladly took for anything was better than the youth hostel. After two months in Inarzo I felt more gun-shy of

strangers than usual and would do almost anything for a friendly face.

In the embrace of a warm Tuscan morning, Impruneta was redolent with the tang of ripe olives. Even Anne's house, which in late fall had seemed one with the surrounding decay, looked sprightly and festive in a tangled wreath of grape vines. Much had changed since then, including the seasons and a slightly older me. So with a tinge of wistfulness I telephoned Daniela's private line in Prato. If she didn't answer today or tomorrow, I told myself, I would forge ahead as she had wished with all speed.

The phone rang and rang with the curious pleading, even plaintive sound of telephones on the continent, but no answer. First relieved I then wondered: could this truly be the end? I tried again in the early evening, when the ringing echoes were finally answered by Daniela's familiar, curt "Pronto?" Though surprised she quickly recognized my voice all the same.

"Ben! I'm so glad to hear your voice."

"Yeah, it's great to hear yours too," I replied.

"So how are you? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Fine!"

"When are you coming to Florence?" she asked.

"I'm already here, in Impruneta. . ."

"No, really? But why haven't you called?"

"I just got in yesterday. . ."

When we met in Daniela's clandestine Florence apartment the next morning she was as beautiful as ever, but with an edge of sadness I hadn't seen before – or was I reading too much into her slightly drawn face? After we hugged hello I gave her a red rose which she cut and watered right away. She berated me for neither contacting her earlier nor warning her I would be several weeks late, saying she was afraid I had passed through Tuscany without calling. She looked tired, but then had just finished her first two months of full time work. Could it be that she had worried about me?

At first we were awkward together, which I attributed to all those

damnable letters that would embarrass the heck out of the sturdiest woman. Like cagey animals we kept our distance while stalking around the small apartment. To make matters worse Daniela had piled my letters in a lonely stack at the center of her one table, in mute testament to the most one-sided correspondence in history. Yet when we finally sat down at the table and I recounted some of my African mishaps in detail, she looked directly into my eyes, holding them a long, full while.

When the unavoidable, likely intended, subject of my letters came up, she complained that she didn't like the last several ones as much, so much more direct and business-like than the rest. I avoided the real reason by suggesting my African travels had disoriented me, but then added her telegram and refusal several months back had hurt me. Why urge me to go home so quickly, I asked?

Now that we were getting to the meat of it Daniela sat upright in her chair, her blue eyes wide awake and direct. She admitted feeling guilty about the telegram and had worried it would help me plunge farther south, as it did. Hearing now about my near disasters made her feel anxious and partly responsible – which I denied, while secretly glad she felt that way.

And so it went. That our conversation took a rapid turn toward intimacy both surprised and unsettled me. After her kiss-off telegram I had persuaded myself she didn't care for me anymore and had tried to forget our last meeting in December, when her softness had broadsided me with the endless potential of – what? A different life?

Did my eyes deceive me or was I seeing a like-softening happen all over again? The shedding of pretense to a beating, emotional core?

When we talked about my travel plans I emphasized how quickly I wanted to get going. My funds were starting to run out and, with energy levels minimally recharged, I needed to push eastwards. Then almost out of nowhere, Daniela said she'd still like to travel to India with me if she were able to – that is if I still wanted her. Could it be? My heart lurched backwards a beat.

I moved into Anne's guest room that evening with relief, glad to kiss

the lumpy sofa goodbye. Clearly I was getting particular about my sleeping arrangements, not a good sign. As a welcome distraction Anne had already planned a dinner party with friends that evening, including a Red Italian, a Swede, and two Germans. But the dinner quickly turned into continental farce when the Italian communist got drunk, lashed out at his delicate Swedish wife, and then launched into a drunken tirade against – whom else? – Americans. From his Italian I gathered he equated the Cuban Missile Crisis with the present Pershing one, which was fixing to blow up all of Europe as of yesterday. The Swedish wife and the younger German were typically thick with pacifism, and obsessed with Europe becoming a nuclear playground for the underage superpowers. So they were of little help. All in all it made me heartily tired of Europe and her machinations, wondering if such cringing petulance could teach me anything new.

Daniela came to visit the next day, in the late afternoon, which gave Anne a good chance to give her the once-over. At first I showed Daniela around the house, as if mine. Then we walked and talked outside in the silky, unreal atmosphere of Impruneta. She told me she had a meeting the next day, Friday, with her boss "the professor," and would need to find out his summer plans before flying to India with me. She joked she could be fired, which might or might not free her for travel as she would have to look for other work. She claimed my invitation months back had sorely tempted her. If it hadn't been for the newly minted job and parental disapproval at its loss, who knows? I asked if traveling to India with me would spoil her relation with Leonardo, to which curiously she said no. When pressed she misinterpreted the thrust of my question and reassured me: while we might start out as just traveling companions and friends, that didn't rule out "wonderful" developments! It was just the answer I wanted to hear from the question I didn't ask. And if that wasn't encouraging enough she continued that any falling out with Leonardo would be her and only her responsibility, which let me off the hook – that is if I didn't booby-trap my own happiness first.

When we returned to earth she explained that with prior plans at Leonardo's family seaside retreat that weekend, she wanted to invite me along but suspected I wouldn't care much for his fast-track friends. I equivocated, preferring to learn of the results of the meeting with her professor before deciding.

When after nearly three hours Daniela drove away that early evening, I asked Anne for her opinion. An observer of the Italian scene for many years, she found Daniela gorgeous and on first blush quite impressive. From their brief encounter she had thought, "What a nice, likable girl this is," which made me swell with pride. When asked whether I should accept the weekend invitation with the boyfriend's family, she said may the best man win and encouraged me to go.

This was a moot point by morning when Daniela called to say her business meeting was postponed and that Leonardo, unbeknown to her, had changed their weekend plans to a motorcycle trip with friends to break in his newly acquired BMW. She said she might refuse to go, but instead of encouraging this I told her with bravado that she might as well have one more weekend with Leonardo before joining me in India.

With her weekend plans not yet finalized I suggested as a matter of convenience she only call if things fell through and she wanted to get together over the weekend. But she would not hear of it and insisted on calling that evening regardless – did she feel reluctant to go or simply liked talking to me? Like a fool I had already promised to stay in Florence until her return.

When the confirming phone call came through Anne and I decided on a quiet evening in, for which Anne broke out a bottle of local wine and then another. Halfway through the first she suggested I was being played with, which I could hardly deny, and recommended I play harder to get. How, I wondered?

Explaining that women prefer a challenge she suggested I threaten an immediate departure and stop waiting around for Daniela to make up her mind. I had been talking about getting this woman to travel to India with me six months ago and hadn't progressed very far since. How embarrassing. Though I couldn't tell Anne, the situation was fairly

simple: I was petrified Daniela would flatly say no, dashing all my new hopes. As if for the first time I hungered for the intimacy and love of her all over again.

Anne had started by saying I was more attractive than I knew, as well as too modest – the first time I've been accused of that! Yet the wine and Anne's attentions were making me warm to the subject. After all weren't the love, support, and approval of women – from Mrs. Macinlay to Monika to Daniela – what I most desperately needed and hungered for?

By the end of the second bottle Anne asked me if I could really see myself spending the rest of my life with Daniela. When after a moment I replied no, we both relaxed. Anne finished the conversation by pointing out that Daniela in the end could be more a "Pratoese" than anything else – that is an adorer of money. Which if true meant I was sunk.

So when Daniela called Monday morning and asked me what my plans were, I told her, my spine newly stiffened, that I was leaving that evening on the night train south. She offered to pick me up in Impruneta after midday which I accepted, as I had errands to do in Florence and, packed and ready to go, could use the ride to town.

We had a pleasant time shopping, almost like old times, with Daniela helping me to buy a few remaining travel items, such as shoelaces, stationary, and a small lock. Back in her apartment, things got interesting when I threw the dry, wilting rose I had given her out the window, which displeased her to no end. When she pleaded I stay another day as the meeting with her boss would almost certainly occur on Tuesday, I complained I was already six days in Florence and could not dally any longer. Besides, she had already had eight months to decide so one more day wouldn't matter. Cornered, she finally outlined the criteria under which she could travel. In all likelihood the professor would tell her there was insufficient work for the summer and would let her go on Tuesday; she would then need to look for other work unless promised a position in September; only then was India a possibility.

Money would still be a concern, something her parents might help her with if they approved of her plans particularly in regard to employment. If all worked out, after the professor she would speak to Leonardo, then to her parents, which reminded me of my own steeplechase informing of family: quite a few hurdles. If free to travel she would cable me in Athens.

Sifting through the stack of letters which were now tucked into her appointment book I reread a few of them while Daniela watched, unsure of what I would do next. When I came to the Joyce-inspired piece of erotica, I read it aloud to see her reaction. She blushed. I read on. And that was that. Paralyzed by my own brashness I couldn't go any further. Why does wooing women have to feel so clumsy? Embarrassed by my own desperate directness I returned to copying a letter home, the air thick with desire. The only half-advance I managed was to stroke the hairs along Daniela's long bare arms and the locks to the sides of her graceful neck when she sat down at the table beside me. I couldn't even hold her gaze, such was the nakedness of my needs. Like much else of importance in my life I was incapable of following through on what I had already started: the seduction of Daniela.

In a lazy, roundabout way to the train station we went by the Pucci villa to watch Leonardo and his Apollonian friends play soccer, in the small field hidden in the sloping forest surrounding the estate. It was a poor prior-to-departure plan but I was powerless to suggest another. As the game ended in the enveloping, soft dusk, Daniela returned to the villa to make a phone call, while I waited outside on the sweeping patio overlooking town. With dusk settling, teams of small bats flitted this way and that over the patio's edge, their bodies suspended by nervous, quick-flapping wings. As Brunelleschi's dome receded into the Florentine haze and night I marveled at how the bats never soared, but rather thrust themselves forward, turning erratically for bugish prey.

By the time Daniela returned, the bats had dispersed, the night descended. In a few quiet moments together I pointed out the exact position of the distant Duomo beyond the olive groves and neighboring villas, which Daniela, complaining of poor night vision, couldn't see.

When Leo-Adonis joined us after the soccer frolic he invited me to stay for dinner and an extra day, not once but twice. Reluctantly I agreed. We ate at the Tito Trattoria along the Arno with a host of soccer buddies and bimbos. The food was fine but the bill much too steep – my most expensive meal to date. Before Leonardo left on his ostentatious and shiny black new BMW he showered Daniela with kisses which naturally inclined me to put sugar in his tank. On the drive back to Daniela's apartment I was seized by jealousy and told her I thought it had been a mistake to stay. Why, she asked? I wouldn't answer. Changing subjects I asked if Leonardo had read my letters which had been left out so openly both of my visits. No, she hotly denied.

We stayed up late into the night during which Daniela told me she wanted me more than anything else to continue to write, even if the letters were less passionate, more normal, no matter what happened. The consolation prize. But what else could I offer?

Just before leaving in the morning Daniela woke me from my slumber on the sofa and seemed happier than I'd seen her in ages: strange girl. When she returned from meeting with her professor, she told me she was out of work but would not know if her boss could hire her again in the fall until he had secured more financing from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome – which could take several weeks.

So it was set. I would take the evening train to Rome and, from there, the night train to Brindisi, with Greece and India beyond. Daniela invited me to one last dinner at her parents' in Prato, a farewell of sorts, after so many visits over many months. I most clearly remember, while talking to Cici, feeling the low summer sun against one cheek and Daniela's gaze against the other. Was I crazy or delusional or did this strong, beautiful woman really care for me?

On the drive to the station, alone at last again, Daniela explained in some depth her difficulties with parents and Leonardo and the yoke of high Italian society, a confession of sorts which in the fullness of the night lasted well onto the train platform. Her confidences were touching and had a certain urgency to them, as if she had been waiting to share them for some time. I held her hand during our wait for the train, which

rushed into the station on a pillow of wind, and at one point rested my head on her shoulder. She wished I would spend another night and would have preferred I stay several weeks, she said. Yet I could only weakly counter by claiming that one more night in Florence and I would have to sleep with her. In our final goodbyes she hoped our relation would not falter, and her last words were, "I hope you will write!" – which in the end is all I can do.

I felt sadder than words thinking of all the lost opportunities, but the pull of the road and the train's internal combustion engine kept me moving, moving, moving. Thank goodness it was a long train ride marked as always by diversions and delays, in the everlasting distraction called travel. In Rome while sitting in the second-class waiting room, I noticed a wall plaque commemorating a terrorist attack:

Vittime del Terrorismo Fascista
2 Agosto 1980

There followed over eighty names, a number of them American, Japanese, and Spanish in their early twenties: traveling youth like myself, ambushed by the Italian summer.

When the all-night train to Brindisi arrived, it was blissfully uncrowded, gifting me a compartment to myself in which to stretch out and try to sleep while nurturing the memories that rocked to and fro with the cabin. When morning broke at the train station in Bari, only several hours from Brindisi, as if on cue my compartment filled with no less than five lively girls, three sisters from New Jersey, a Hawaiian, and an Oregonian, all headed for the hedonistic Grecian summer. Though American they were just what the travel doctor ordered. A relative pro at Adriatic Sea crossings I assured them it wasn't complicated. After I helped them book the overnight boat in Brindisi we joined up with two Californian girls and went to the beach for the day, for a picnic and a swim in a veritable orgy of bare, lanky limbs.

I was growing fond of Brindisi with its last-stop-before-Greece

pizzerias, cafés, and provisions-for-the-ferry stores, all served up with an irrepressible Italian humor. The routines I knew all too well: the stocking up on overnight booze, the queuing up for Greek customs on board and, after all the cars and buses had parked and disgorged their well-off passengers, the mad rush of hoofing youth for adequate sleeping space on the upper, open decks. We were following a well trodden path as that day I had noticed the smooth, ancient stones of the Appian Way, which tumble into the Adriatic Sea after the long journey from Rome.

Only at nightfall do the real deck-top festivities begin when young partiers form and divide like so many wolf packs. Yet the mutability of the situation and the company of so many young, upbeat Yanks were nearly forgotten pleasures for one Europe-weary traveler. While a handful of us proceeded to get drunk on shared bottles of wine and beer, sitting together outside in the warm, dark, and briny night, a lone girl from Washington, D.C. took a shine to me and stayed after the others had left. When it came time to settle in for the night only after a rowdy crew of Swiss quieted down around two o'clock, I took out my mummy bag and offered her the use of my space blanket. It must have grown chilly later that night, for though we were protected from the sea wind I woke to the sounds of the space blanket's constant rustling. When I asked if she was cold and she shivered yes, I hesitated but then offered she join me in my narrow sleeping bag. It was a tight fit – even after she removed her shoes and sweater – but we managed to sleep a few more hours embraced by necessity in each other's arms.

12 – Prato Redux

Already the Old Man of Adriatic Sea crossings I showed the fresh crew how to find the necessary conveyances to Athens the following evening and befriended a lone South African woman across the bus aisle, taking her under our protective wing.

After the dark drive across the Peloponnese peninsula and our late arrival in Athens I led our motley crew (the D.C. girl, the South African, and a loner from Delaware interested in her) by the moonlit Acropolis to a familiar cheap hotel, which opened its doors after midnight. To celebrate our good fortune as modern-day journeymen to this frontier post of Europe, the four of us stayed up late drinking ouzo. We then separated by gender to our respective rooms, frustrating the designs of the D.C. girl who indicated she wanted my chaste body.

In the morning, set on leaving Europe as soon as possible and getting on with it, I visited the Indian Embassy in Athens and to my consternation discovered that a visa would take an entire month to process. I was shocked. How could it be? Even in Nairobi, where I had checked, only a day was needed. Could Greece be a much worse place of origin than, say, Kenya?

Feeling as though hit by a body blow I considered abandoning the Asian leg of my trip and returning home. In a month or so, after all, I would be away for an entire year, and what did I need to prove by a complete circumnavigation? Rallying I resolved instead to return to Rome, where an Indian visa must take less time to process. I also uncovered a weekly Athens flight to Bombay on Egypt Air, which cost under two hundred dollars, and reserved a seat for the following Friday. So only a week retreat to Italy, in order to sally forth more quickly.

> Brindisi, night; an hour and a half before my train leaves for Rome. There's a touch of insanity to all of this; returning to places I don't belong, to places I thought permanently left. Yet again the twisted enjoyment of plans thrown asunder – once I decide my evasive action, I resign myself to the inevitable, such as ferry rides jammed with young tourists.

And later:

> I'm practically ill with being back in Europe. Last night was the most tortuous sleep – or lack of it – I remember; the second-class seats were filled the entire way from Brindisi to Rome. From midnight to four sleep was at best fitful, mostly an agony of supreme fatigue coupled with no space in which to move.

Reaching Rome in such a cranky state I readied for combat with the combined Roman-slash-Indian bureaucracy for the integrity of my trip. After leaving my mobile home – which felt more and more like a bag of cement – at the *Bagaglio a Mano*, I hoofed it to the Indian Embassy dressed in my worse-for-wear wool jacket and tie, ideal for heat-retention in the midday sun.

When I finally got to the head of the visa line at the Embassy, an equally harried Mr. Shalma expressed surprise that I had been traveling for nearly eleven months and wondered where all my visas had gone. I explained my old passport's loss in Zambia and pointed to the new passport's issuing stamp from Lusaka, but all of this was highly unusual of course. So being the careful man that he was Mr. Shalma told me he could not issue me a visa, adding parenthetically that I should have applied for one in my last "port of call" in Greece.

Remaining as reasonable as possible under the circumstances, that is without going ballistic, I pointed out that an Indian visa in Athens would take upwards of a month, which seemed to soften up Mr. Shalma a bit. He insisted, however, on telexing Washington, D.C., charging me a "small" fee worth two days of travel, and warned it could take three

or four days. (As it was Monday, my Friday flight from Athens would be tight.) As an afterthought he expressed interest in my old passport's number, causing me to race back to the station in the white heat of late-June, find the number, and rush back to the Embassy before the visa section's habitual noon closing, which I barely made.

As the line was inevitably long and slow I didn't get to see Mr. Shalma again until half-past, when he looked up at me with a weary smile. After I had delivered both my new passport and the old one's number, he suggested I call Wednesday to see if my visa was ready.

"Morning or afternoon?" I asked, trying to be helpful.

As this was a level of specificity to which Mr. Shalma was unaccustomed, he opted to reply on the safe side by adding a whole day.

"Thursday. . .afternoon is best."

"Perfect," I responded with a fixed smile and left. So much for Friday's flight.

It was a mistake, a failing, a weakness, but I just couldn't face four days by myself in a steamy Rome teeming with sweaty tourists. So I called Daniela that afternoon and, when I got through, she encouraged me to return to Florence for the interim. We had unfinished business, I thought, on a more personal level than travel planning.

Boarding yet another train, I would have fallen over from exhaustion but for the thought of seeing familiar faces again.

> My body is so exhausted – so many nights of travel in one week – its perceptions are distorted and momentarily made interesting: I just stuck my head out the window and left it there for several minutes. Through the drudgery and boredom always pokes an intrigue, if only illusory.

With a compartment to myself for the afternoon I tried to stretch out and grab some sleep, only to be interrupted by a young Italian who, upon entering my compartment and spying me in repose, jovially said "Good night!" After some more pleasantries I realized a nap was impossible and engaged him in conversation as his English was better

than most. Several years older, he was about to finish his military service and graduate from a course in economics. He seemed more traveled than most young Italians: a year in Germany, four months in England, some time in France. When I asked him what a typical day in the army was like, he replied with a wry smile that one gets up at six-thirty to the sound of bugles, and does twenty minutes of uncoordinated calisthenics followed by a paltry breakfast of mud-coffee. After so many hours of lessons and drills, a lunch follows, invariably of pasta, steak, and a vegetable, after which – my favorite part – comes a short nap to aid digestion. From time to time they watch old American films on how to dig holes in the event of nuclear explosion, and for all of this they get paid just over a dollar a day.

When we got around to what I was doing on the train, he was more impressed than most by my extended travels and asked how my family had reacted to such preposterous plans. When I told him dining with each of the main actors over one weekend had done the trick, he was astonished.

"Our lives are so different," was his direct response.

He explained that most Italian men well before our age have a girlfriend, a job, a motorcycle, and a clinging family. He had tried to travel to Germany when he was seventeen, but his family had canceled his plans out of fear for him and, of all things, the lack of German sanitation. He wished someday to find work that would let him travel.

As the train descended the Arno valley well before Florence we leaned out of the window together, our elbows touching in a fraternal way. When we parted at the Stazione di Santa Maria Novella, he told me I made him feel international and was sorry I wouldn't be staying in Italy longer.

When I tried to call the usual suspects for potential lodging, several unused contacts didn't answer and to my chagrin Anne Clemente wouldn't offer me a bed or a sofa. Despite doing chores and paying for groceries the last time, apparently I had overstayed my welcome, and she was no longer interested in the continuing saga of Daniela. As Daniela had asked I call her in the morning, I checked into the rundown

youth hostel and crashed on the last available bed.

After several tries the next day I wasn't able to reach Daniela until early afternoon. When the subject of where to stay came up I offered I could sleep at her apartment or in Prato, whichever she preferred. She replied Leonardo might not be keen on my staying in her apartment (did he pay for it?) and that, given the recent arrival of several of her younger brother's Canadian friends, there might not be room at the house either. When she asked what I might do in that case I told her I wasn't sure, but would have a better idea when we got together as planned at five o'clock.

I was floored after hanging up. Despite her warm encouragement to return to Florence I now felt a nuisance, as if here too I had overstayed my welcome. How could it be? Out of work, there was little reason for her to feel overextended; furthermore only a week ago she had wished I stay on for several weeks. What had changed so quickly? Was I blind?

I resigned myself to staying in the hostel and considered returning to a friendless, indifferent Rome, but such self-pity was unnecessary. When I met Daniela at her apartment at five as planned she looked tired in a plain t-shirt and with her hair back in an athletic pony tail; our hellos were subdued. Quickly, for she was in a rush, she told me we were to join her brother Fabbio and his Canadian friends in half an hour for the evening. After spending the night at her parents' I was to join them tomorrow for several days in Bolgheri, their house by the sea, to return to Prato by Thursday. We had ten minutes together, Daniela and I, until she jumped into the shower before the five-thirty rendezvous. A shopping expedition for the Canadians was followed by a trattoria dinner. For the drive back to Prato, Daniela asked me seriously if I wanted to accompany her or join Fabbio and the Canadians for a drive by Piazzale Michelangelo, even though it would mean Daniela picking up my travel sack like the dutiful hostess. Once in the car I asked her if she had really thought I would prefer going with the others, and speculated she no longer cared for my company. Despite her protests I told her she abused my affection – as if I wasn't abusing hers.

* * *

Yet what a blissful night of sleep! A familiar bed, clean soft sheets, and an open window admitting a low murmur of summer sounds; a carafe of water by the reading lamp and a fur rug at bedside, the last softness one's toes touch before departing earth. When a chill stole in before dawn I spread the blanket while half and then fully asleep.

We left, minus Daniela, for a frolic in the Mediterranean sun the next day. On our arrival from the drive we were greeted by a full spread of food, including quiche, prosciutto, melon, mozzarella, tomatoes and basil on a table by the pool. After a long lunch we raced to the beach, I on the moped, Fabbio and his female Canadian friends in the car. The Mediterranean was warm and saltily buoyant at ebb tide, looking more like a retreating lake than an ocean.

Late that evening, after the Canadians had gone to bed, I stayed up with Fabbio and we chatted over several whiskeys. Feeling expansive I told him I loved his sister, which didn't surprise him as he was the closest of Daniela's siblings. While admitting most of the family was aware of my infatuation he politely commented how discreet I had been – which I might have even believed. We discussed Leonardo at some length, with Fabbio suggesting he should have proposed three years into the now six year-long relation. Before calling it a night Fabbio declared his sister should marry an American, predicting she wouldn't be happy here after so many years in North America. Inwardly I rejoiced, even as I felt the potential for a life with Daniela receding with the tide.

When we returned to Prato on Thursday, after dropping the grateful if ditzy Canadian girls off at the Pisa Stazione Centrale, I called the Indian Embassy in Rome only to be told there was no news and to call the next day, on Friday. Gracious as ever the Portinaris welcomed me to stay another night, hoping I would join them for dinner as Cousin Ames, freshly returned from America, would be joining us. When Amsie did arrive Signor Portinari welcomed him effusively (in contrast to my rather limp reception) and opened a good bottle of champagne in our, but really his, honor.

At the dinner table I was seated between Daniela and her mother Cici, with Ames on the other side of Daniela, who barely spoke a full

sentence to me all dinner. We had come a long way since that first enchanting dinner with my grandparents in October. Ames, on the other hand, hadn't changed a bit and at one point leaned over to whisper that I could take my jacket off in the heat, as the rest of the men already had. When in an undertone I asked him who would be the first to take off his shirt, Daniela laughed, a short but good laugh, the first I'd excited from her in days.

Following dessert, just as in October, we retired to the living room for after-dinner drinks and were joined by Leonardo who had the audacity to call me Boomerang Ben. This effrontery was only compounded by Daniela's obnoxious snuggling up against him on the opposite sofa. In response I told him my next absence would be much longer. The theme had begun innocently enough when Cici remarked how nice it was I kept returning – of all places in the world! – to Prato.

When I replied I had left Prato only in body and not in soul, Ames – undeterred from his stampeding tactlessness – interjected, "Yeah, and you left your heart as well!" Later I had the misfortune of sitting next to Cousin Ames on the plush sofa drinking our host's good Scotch, when he launched into an under-the-breath criticism of how spoiled Daniela was, who sat within earshot across the room. One of my least favorite topics with Ames was Daniela, for I suspected him to be envious of her attentions. So when I quietly disagreed, hoping the subject would die a natural death, he caustically remarked how loyal I was. A general lull in the room's conversations forced Ames to clam up; seizing the moment when the hubbub resumed I suggested this was neither the time nor place to criticize our hostess, which didn't impress him.

When Ames finally left for his apartment I noticed a janitor-sized set of keys on the sofa where he had been sitting. The ever-dutiful cousin, I ran out to catch him before he drove off. They were his house keys and by way of thanks Ames assented that it wasn't proper to criticize Daniela in her parents' house, but then guffawed we could discuss her in Bolgheri where we had been invited for the weekend. Nothing could be farther from my hopes, I thought while walking back to the house

and to bed. What a disastrous evening.

I slept poorly that night and consequently overslept until eleven in the morning. When I phoned the Embassy, they said my visa would be ready that afternoon; I could pick it up after four-thirty. I decided to leave immediately as it was a convenient excuse to avoid the weekend in Bolgheri with Ames, and returned to my room to pack.

In a few minutes Daniela came by and knocked, wishing to ask if it was true I was leaving. Yes, I said. But why wouldn't I stay the weekend as it was already Friday, she wondered? I told her I didn't want to spend the weekend with Ames and, besides, I was running low on money and needed to go to Asia, now or never. Unconvinced, she still helped me with the train schedule – a twelve-thirty departure from Prato would get me to Rome by five o'clock – which left us a little over half an hour together, and then offered to make me a sandwich for the trip.

Ever since my conversation with Fabbio I had been thinking about the wretchedness of my position, particularly the obviousness of my infatuation with a woman who was all but engaged to another man. It pained me to realize I had overstayed my welcome with, of all people, Daniela. So overnight I had decided to cut my losses in more than one way.

"Listen, Daniela," I started, alone in the kitchen with her, "there's something which has been on my mind for a while and when I ask, I hope it won't upset you. I have a favor to ask. I want my letters back."

Putting down the knife she asked, "Why?"

"First of all I don't think it's correct – they don't have a place – *I* don't have a place. . ."

"But they do – so what are you trying to say?"

"What I mean is they don't have a place in your relation with Leonardo, your fiancé."

"He's not my fiancé, how many times do I have to say that?"

"Also," I continued, "they're a too sensitive part of me and I honestly don't have the strength to let you keep them. . ."

"Yes you do."

"I'm too unstable. I'm weak."

"You think you're the only one?" she asked, starting to warm up. "Why does everyone assume I am strong? I don't understand it! Why can't they think I too can be weak – why don't they think of me, and not only them. They're too selfish. *You're* too selfish. It's selfish of you to ask for them back. But of course if you really wanted them back, if you really felt that way, I couldn't keep them knowing that – they wouldn't mean the same. But I think it's selfish of you to ask, I don't like it."

"I hurts me to ask," I replied softly.

"I don't believe it."

"I know," I sighed, "but I still feel I have to make this one request."

"But why?" she demanded. "Don't you know how much they mean to me? It makes me angry: people only do things halfway, they can't go all the way. They don't have the courage anymore. They start something, yet they can't leave it like that. They do something, then they regret it. They do things in half-measures. I just don't understand it."

"True," I replied. She was right.

"And what if I were to say no?" she asked, sensing my defeat. "What if I were to say they mean too much to me: I can decide for myself. They belong to me, not to you. It would be perfectly fair for me to say no. Anyway what are you afraid of? That I'm going to show them to people?"

"No, not at all. It's not that," I replied untruthfully.

"What can it be then?" she demanded.

"It's the idea that. . .they wouldn't have a place – when you're married. . ."

"I'm sick and tired of hearing about Leonardo. He has nothing to do with this. It's always Leonardo this, Leonardo that. It really makes me angry when he gets brought into everything. I'm not married. And I probably won't. I can't stand it when he's brought into everything, I can't stand it."

After a pause I relented. Something I had done – in this case, written – meant a lot to the person I loved. So how could I take away the very

best I had already given?

"Daniela, you win. But how about this? When you join your life with another man I want my letters back."

"Okay," she replied, "but I still don't agree."

We were quiet when leaving for the train station. After several attempts in the car to rekindle the conversation, or some intimacy, I found the subject to which Daniela could warm: Leonardo and all the pressures which were "ruining the relationship." She claimed they were more on the verge of separating than marrying and in any case she thought the life of a traditional upper-class Italian housewife would be "boring." So why wouldn't she come to India with me, I wondered to myself, yet knew the answer already: as with the soldier who couldn't travel to Germany at age seventeen, there were just too many barriers. The prior night I had stayed up thinking she was using me to make Leonardo jealous, to spur him on, to make him propose. But perhaps Anne Clemente was right and I doubted myself too much, even though it had been a mistake to return this one last time: Boomerang Ben. This tall, enigmatic woman had been sorely tempted.

On the way to the platform Daniela made clear her disappointment at my not staying the weekend and anger that our parting would be so rushed. Wondering why I had decided to leave so suddenly she thought it might have been something she had done, and granted that we had had few chances to speak privately since my return, and was sorry for that. And sorry that we would part on an off-note.

The train's lone headlight was now visible in the distance, the train that would forever take me away from Daniela, who had been in my thoughts for eight months in twice as many countries.

"You have every right to be angry with me, Daniela," I finally replied. "I just hope that I haven't done too much damage, that I. . ."

"No, you haven't," she quickly added. "Not at all."

As the train approached in a crescendo of steel on steel I leaned closely to Daniela's ear and told her an obvious lie: "I think extremely highly of you." When I kissed her on each cheek, the fleshy corners of

our mouths touched in passing. Finally, while climbing on board, I turned around to look once more into her eyes, those beautiful and searching eyes.

By the time I found a seat and looked out the window, she was gone. At the last moment I wanted to ask her to call Ames and tell him I wouldn't be going to Bolgheri, but it was too late. Thinking back over that horrible, short day, I remembered telling her I wanted us to be friends for a long time, to which she replied she didn't think of us as just friends. Remembering this, while doubting both the former and the latter, I started to cry even before the train had left the station. In a vain attempt to hide my sorrow from the other passengers I turned my face to the window in shame.

When we finally moved, and the promise of new sights and experiences flashed through the glass, I found myself seated backwards, being pulled forward at ever increasing speeds, peering into the receding past.

The connections to Rome for once went smoothly and on time, pulling me into the capital soon after five o'clock as planned. After checking my bag at Bagaglio a Mano I ran to the Indian Embassy, just arriving by its five-thirty closing.

The next days were a familiar tumble into the past, as I struggled through another sleepless night train down the Italian peninsula and one more night under the stars sleeping on the upper deck of the Patras-bound ferry. I had missed the Friday flight to Bombay of course, which left me most of a week to wile away in and around Athens.

Feeling in need of novelty I joined the sparkling flow of young hedonists and took a ferry to Mykonos, where I stayed at the Super Paradise Beach campsite, ogled the topless and sometimes bottomless beauties, and celebrated July 4th with a drunken crew of young Americans in a prolonged exercise in forgetfulness. The only half-memorable part was commandeering a full bottle of cheap champagne at the Apollo Bar when the free bubbly came out at midnight, in some sort of New Year confusion of American holiday rituals, and downing

it among a dancing circle of acquaintances.

When I eventually returned to Athens in anticipation of the next day's flight, I could only find a spot on the floor of the Thisseus Inn, the cheap hotels overfilled for the high season. I took a shower to rinse off five days of sand and sea, and headed out for dinner at Socrates' Prison, my favorite cheap Athenian hangout. For most of the week I hadn't been eating well: mostly water before dinner, the one meal of the day, and then too much booze in the evening. So an inexpensive meal and a quiet evening before Asia were just what I needed.

Mikus, the relaxed owner of the Prison, was glad to see me and offered me a half carafe of Greek wine on the house. I had led so many groups of young, green tourists to my usual haunts around the Plaka, the proprietors were taking notice.

The peacefulness of the scene was interrupted by the arrival of a blond American girl I had met on the last crossing, and her French girlfriend, who both joined me. I had walked Sarah all the way to her out-of-the-way pension a half week before, which had made a good impression. The English of her friend Isabelle was the best I'd heard on French lips, due less to the wonders of French schooling than to twelve years in the States. She also had a harrowing story about escaping the Algerian revolution alone at age seven and then finding her grandfather in Marseilles after a three day search. Only in Europe, I thought.

As Isabelle's history unfolded among others, Mikus plied us with more complimentary wine and beer and joined us whenever he could. When we rolled out of Socrates' Prison around two-thirty we headed for the Plaka only to find everything closed – where was New York when you needed it? Isabelle with foresight had bought a bottle of wine to go, which we ended up drinking at a table in a deserted courtyard. I liked Isabelle, who in taking the seat next to mine allowed my hand to play with her backside. When I joined her around the corner to take an outdoor pee, we kissed first, then peed. (Would Daniela, I wondered, have ever peed like a squatting dog in a public square?)

While walking them back to their room at Tony's Pension I realized

Thisseus Inn had locked their doors at one a.m., or four hours prior. When I wondered what to do next they offered me a spot on their floor. Arm and arm with Isabelle I became so bold as to ask Sarah if she minded if I slept in Isabelle's bed and, possibly, with Isabelle herself. So many months in Europe had taught me a little European directness.

Isabelle and I made love as quietly as possible that night, only a handful of feet from, we assumed, a dozing Sarah. After the morning market burst forth in raucous, bright, and heated activity outside our window ledge, we explored each other's bodies over several hours in the early morning and made love as many times. We whispered in French all the while and in such a manner I ended nearly a year of celibacy, on the verge of a last push into the unknown.

13 – Bombay

I flew into the Indian subcontinent with the most inexplicable and palpable senses of fear I've felt, an anxiety fit of ruinous proportions. Flying usually smooths me out, soaring above storm and wind and human inconsequence. Even the puffs of coldness seeping through porthole windows, that make you wonder when the racing air will punch through and suck you out, usually give me an icy, clean above-it-all sense of freedom without horizons. But no such luck on Egypt Air's "direct" flight from Athens to Bombay via Cairo. For now I was hurtling toward my third and final continent with a far healthier respect for the unknown. Before, I had made leaps into new regions with a kind of blissful ignorance which inoculates you from the dangers that lurk ahead. Now, I knew just how bad things can get and was terrified.

The flight began simply enough with a Mediterranean puddle-hopper, which tossed me out of Europe (at last, again) and deposited me abruptly back into the sinkhole of apocalyptic Cairo at night. There in a kind of transit-hell holding pattern I would stay up all night, waiting for the promised push eastward. Perhaps due to the early morning hours there was much confusion in the ill-equipped transit lounge, with an ornery stew of purgatory passengers and a public address system that due to its inaudibility sounded private.

At four a.m., after a five hour wait, our group of detainees boarded a moderately larger plane for the all-day flight to Bombay. Cloud-bound, I reread the one letter I had picked up in Athens, from a very pleased-with-herself Mum:

> As I mentioned in my note with the package of stuff

> (which I hope arrived safely) I am really proud of myself in my sobriety. I feel wonderful and Nautilus is making me firmer and stronger and I'm happily and fiercely at work in my studio. I was missing so much when I was fuzzy with wine! Aside from making people I love angry and unhappy and worried I was working on only a fraction of my bountiful cylinders.
>
> I really like the people I'm meeting in AA. I told you that a lot of them seem to be artists and writers but whatever they do they are a wonderful fellowship of people. Like me almost every one of them had a terrible preconception of AA as a swarm of seedy men in tan raincoats, brown paper bags and 5 days of stubble. So to walk into a room full of attractive, laughing, articulate people and feel real comradeship with them is a special experience.
>
> I came into the program with what is referred to as a 'high bottom' which means I was physically and emotionally in pretty good shape. As a result I had no distress simply stopping. I just stopped.
>
> I've had a complete physical and am in fine shape, so it all seems to have been a fortuitous time for this to happen, in all regards.

If only I could have no distress simply stopping. . .traveling. She continued with the frequency of her meetings, how Ricki was dealing with her evening absences, and the sea shift which now and then capsized him into anger. To mend bonds the two of them were planning an eighteen day dory trip down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon that summer. And toward the end:

> So, my dearest son, you can see that lots has turned around lately. Your wonderful letter from Monika's came the other day. Thank you for your pride in me and your loving pleasure of my news. I'm longing for you to finally get home again even as I know you have much adventure and experience ahead.

The truth was I didn't want any more experience or especially any

more adventure, while hurtling headlong on the all-day Egypt Air flight to Bombay. I just wanted to be normal and happy, content with what's what, growing up slowly and easily where – somewhere – I had left off. Was that too much to ask? It took no genius to realize I was doing just the opposite: flying into a new continent, unfamiliar territory, and India's cruelest month in the middle of the monsoon season when the average temperature is one hundred degrees Fahrenheit and the average rainfall twenty-four inches.

Darting in and out of wakefulness like a plane through billowy clouds, I remember looking out my porthole onto a red, dry landscape and thinking: So this must be Saudi Arabia. A blue vignette followed – the Arabian Sea? – and then the late afternoon descent to the Asiatic landmass. My heart fluttered despite the grogginess which plagued me all six weeks in India, and only gradually did the outline of my fear fill in with the details of the approaching landscape. My new journal's first words:

> India. Land of ruin. People of extinction. Culture of stones.

India was in fact cloud-shrouded, so that my first clear look came suddenly and violently when we sliced through the cottony damp atmosphere:

> When we did break through there awaited below a strangely lush, dense land – dense with habitation. The one straight blacktop I saw was wet – the reflections of the cars and trucks were blacker still. As we swooped down to touch earth, I was amazed at the shanty-towns we thundered so lowly over, and the loosely-roofed shacks which clustered only several hundred yards to the side of the jet-sized airstrip.

Immediately I had a sense of India's poverty crowding in, crowding the airstrip, crowding my senses. I gasped.

* * *

Leaving the plane I noticed a woman whose blond hair, while stringier than Daniela's, made her stand out in line. From behind, for a beat, I wondered if she could be Daniela herself, or even the image of my young, lost mother. When we met up she turned out to be an American named Susan, traveling alone. As she was without guidebook she asked if I could help her find a bus into town and a place to stay. How could I say no?

Customs was surprisingly friendly, and the bus into town cheap and easy to find. But the moment I stepped outdoors I felt the wettest heat ever, the humidity so thick it took effort to walk through. With the windows open a hot breeze circulated in the undercrowded bus. Yet with the breeze came burning views of lane after muddy lane and entire neighborhoods of ramshackle shacks, many flooded up to their roof groins in monsoon water. The press of people, which was only hinted at by the airport, steadily intensified as we entered the city, mud turning into asphalt and shacks into concrete buildings until we were deposited at the bus station's mass of humanity, much of it impoverished, many of them begging, rags upon rags. A sweet, acrid smell filled my nostrils. A small army of Fagan's beggar children swarmed the bus, some crippled, others deformed, all anxious – like me.

Nearly panicked we sought solace in Lonely Planet prose and started a long, arduous search for cheap yet decent accommodations. A Japanese named Masao joined in, making us an odd trio as we tramped through the busy streets of Bombay. Overwhelmed by simple survival needs I barely remember that first long search, which ended by the harbor at the Seashore Hotel. As if by necessity we had sought out a hotel perched on the edge of an uncluttered sea, to relieve the constant, dull pressure on our temples. While it wasn't cheap – Susan and I agreed to share a double for five dollars each – from our window there was an oblique view of the Gateway of India and the ocean beyond. Masao, better off, paid for a single nearby.

> While searching for a restaurant we were aided by an Indian social worker who, in brushing aside our initial

> thanks, informed us one must always be prepared to help lepers, beggars, and tourists. She was very matter-of-fact and philosophic: in remarking on the disarray of the side street we traversed, she commented "Population leads to Congestion, and Congestion leads to Dirt." As she strode along I was hard pressed to keep abreast of her to catch all that she said. The dinner's curry was a bit hot. We brought some bottled lemonade and limes back to our hotel to mix with the duty-free gin I bought in Athens. The fan swirling overhead, we sat below swilling our alcohol; outside a downpour swept through the street and nearby corniche; from five storeys up we could watch with distance the people finding cover. We all remarked it was hard to believe we were in India.

Susan found it harder than most, for she had neglected to take any shots or bring any preventative pills to one of the most disease-happy countries on earth. She must have had an even worse case of American invincibility than I. So on Monday we braved the Bombay crowds and beggars to locate a clinic listed in my guidebook, to find her a cholera shot and some antimalarial pills, which she took pretty much in stride.

In retrospect we were both in mental, nay clinical, shock those first days, for nothing can prepare you adequately for such eye-popping and brain-numbing poverty. Somehow I thought Cairo slums would inoculate me, but here there was no protection: it was everywhere. Although our hotel was in a better part of town, every evening we navigated as if by spiritual tugboat around countless bodies bedding down on the sidewalk for the night. I had been forewarned. As V.S. Naipaul writes in his second of two Indian tomes, *India: A Wounded Civilization*:

> Bombay shows its overcrowding. It is built on an island, and its development had been haphazard. Outside the. . . southern tip of the island, open spaces are few; cramped living quarters and the heat drive people out into such public areas as exist, usually the streets; so that to be in Bombay is always to be in a crowd. By day the streets are clogged; at night the pavements are full of sleepers.

Begging and beggars were by sheer numbers institutionalized. My policy at first – as some sort of coping strategy was essential – was to only give to the first beggar I met every day, and only a few coins at that. But I soon gave up and stopped giving altogether. The endless tsunami of degradation overwhelmed and made me despair that my few coins were anything but conscience-salvers.

Naipaul, once again, puts it plainly:

> The beggars themselves, forgetting their Hindu function, also pester tourists; and the tourists misinterpret the whole business, seeing in the beggary of the few the beggary of all. The beggars have become a nuisance and a disgrace.

The press of flesh and the heat and the torrential rains conspired to put me into the deepest funk of inactivity possible, made worse by the fact that Bombay was not cheap: I barely kept to ten dollars a day while fearing for my dwindling funds of money and energy.

As a first step out of the rut I called a contact named Dr. P.K. Iyengar, reportedly the father of India's nuclear bomb. Walter Kley from Inarzo days had given me his name and address, and when I mentioned Walter's name, it was sufficient to peak the doctor's interest. When he asked how long I would be in Bombay, I told him I hoped to go south in a few days. He promptly suggested I catch a bus that afternoon to Trombay, the research center which he ran.

Per Dr. Iyengar's instructions I caught the two o'clock bus, my first truly public one in India, whose ride was hot and long. I sat next to an Indian who had spent a year at Brookhaven on Long Island, and we chatted as the bus inched through city traffic over flyovers and by large ghettos entirely flooded by the remorseless rains. An hour and a half later, not all that far from downtown Bombay, we alighted at the main gate to the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, where I was issued an I.D. card and whisked by car and driver to the central complex. Despite their proximity, the contrast between Bombay and Trombay could not have been greater. Trombay was clean and orderly, its relatively few workers

busy and all-efficient, the research center surrounded by lush green hills whose every tree, the driver mentioned, had been hand-planted. I was ushered into the sparse office of Dr. Mohan, a metallurgist and recently appointed coordinator for Dr. Iyengar, the Director. Coffee and sandwiches were offered, while I asked polite questions and Dr. Mohan wondered why I was there.

"What exactly do you do?" he pointedly asked after I had skirted the question long enough.

I tried to explain that my interests were diverse, having concentrated (flittingly) at school in Philosophy, English, Creative Writing, and Filmmaking, though not all at once. When he realized that I was freshly out of college, he asked somewhat relieved if Dr. Iyengar knew my parents in the States.

Though I denied him this clean explanation and had to admit I was just a friend of a friend, he arranged for a tour of the reactor and apologized that other informative tours and sights were not possible due to the late hour. Bundled back into the same car with driver I was escorted by a young guide who enthusiastically detailed the basics of fission, while we drove to the main facility. At forty megawatts, he explained, the reactor was a nice small, research size. When my guide left to find a control-room engineer I waited in the lobby and marvelled at the diversity of faces and skin colors, as wave upon wave of workers left at day's end.

Under the guidance of the control-room engineer I was introduced to my first nuclear reactor, with training wheels as it were yet still large and noisy. It was in the shape of those old steel diving bubbles for the head and much like what you would expect from watching too many Buck Rogers movies. I asked enough half-appropriate questions for the engineer to wonder if I was a physicist, which only attests to my parrot-like ability to mimic. I marveled at such technical sophistication only a few miles from vast cities of the poor and uneducated, a contrast I might have found at home had I ever bothered to look.

With small doses of both radiation and awe I was at last ushered into Dr. Iyengar's office back at the first building, where a wily, quick

man with deep, recessive eyes greeted me. We chatted briefly, and he regretted that we would not have much time. When I mentioned I had just arrived on Saturday he mildly berated me for waiting to call only that day, a Monday.

He graciously invited me back to his home. While he packed his belongings I looked out the window with its impressive view of the sea and the long cooling pipe plunging deep into the roiled waters, looking lighter and somewhat bubbly from atomic frothing.

Though all automobiles in India are indigenous and pretty much look alike (that is stylistically decades-old), Dr. Iyengar's chauffeur-driven car was slightly larger and had Government of India plates. Furthermore his driver was a soldier.

His suburban home, perhaps large by bureaucratic norms, seemed modest for the head of India's nuclear program, but then most everything over the past year had appeared small by American standards. We settled into the living room where we were joined, at tag-team intervals, by his wife, one daughter, and two sons. His wife offered me some excellent, strong Southern Indian coffee served in small plastic cups and a few steamed rice concoctions. When I politely refused a glass of tap water out of fear of raging microbes, my explanations fell on deaf ears, as though the implication that India is not clean enough for Americans grated somewhere.

Our conversation, my first leisurely one with such an accomplished and well-educated Indian, rambled from subject to subject until changing gears when I innocently asked how much influence the Soviets had in India at the time.

Dr. Iyengar immediately replied this was a *misnomer* – instead of a *misconception*, which indicated I had hit a nerve as his English up to that point had been impeccable – and launched into a lengthy discourse on the subject. His salient points were: first, the Soviets had developed into an industrial power over a comparatively short period, a process from which India had much to learn; second, when India had been in need of assistance soon after its independence, the Western nations had shown little interest; and third, from India's growing industrial base, the

Soviets had been the greatest importers. When asked if he considered, as reported in the news, the gathering momentum of communism in South India a threat to the country's democracy, he replied no, and invoked the old adage that even if India were to turn communist Indians would always remain Indians, which sounded breezy.

"Wouldn't the loss of freedoms under communism bother you?" I asked.

"Which freedoms?" he succinctly replied, "The freedom to eat, to live? To be educated?"

When I mischievously asked what if the form of communism turned out to be Afghan, his wife clucked disapprovingly. Sensing I had reached the limit of guest etiquette I blandly asserted that India's democratic institutions were too well grounded to be threatened. After which Dr. Iyengar mentioned, with what seemed to be a hope-filled sigh, that India shares no border with the Soviets.

It was seven o'clock when the daughter (the last of the tag team) walked me to the bus stop and read the Hindi numerals of the oncoming buses for me. Not since Cairo had I felt so neutered by an unfamiliar numeric system. She volunteered that she was studying to be a physicist like her father and had no plans to marry for a long time – not that one precludes the other she added hastily. The double-decker bus ride was long and bumpy during which I read a pamphlet on Bhabha, the word's childish repetitiveness making it sound innocent and reassuring, like Barbar the Elephant. Then for the last half hour I moved up to the British upper deck, where the wind and city sights slowly brushed by. Walking from the bus station to my room by nine I noticed two children in rags on the sidewalk, sleeping embraced in each other's arms under a half-protective arch, without a parent in sight.

According to Naipaul, a real journalist and writer in comparison to slovenly me, "100,000 people sleep on the pavements of Bombay; but this figure seems low."

My jaunt to Trombay's Bhabha may have been more draining or radioactive than imagined, for I couldn't bring myself to venture to the

madhouse train station, buy tickets, and leave Bombay for three entire days. This exhibited even more lethargy than Naipaul who, granted, traveled in comparative style:

> To be in Bombay was to be exhausted. The moist heat sapped energy and will, and some days passed before I decided to recover my bottles. I decided in the morning; I started in the afternoon.

In the meantime I picked up a slew of letters from family and friends, which though most had been written in February were hungrily consumed. Now clearly on the far side of the world, my communication system was falling apart as I gapingly departed from my original schedule and was unable to inform more than a few distant relatives of my mutating and amorphous plans. (I had arrived in Bombay on July 7th, four months later than anticipated.) A number of family members were sensibly duplicating letters and sending them to several destinations, with some of them being returned to senders and others, such as most of the Bombay missives, languishing in strange cities for months. I was losing touch, the vast atmospheric distances interfering with the signals until breakdown. What did get through appeared fainter and fainter, of another time and world, delayed unto impermanence. If I traveled much farther or much longer, would the airwaves with natural entropy simply crackle and die?

Mum for instance had sent a (now outdated) passel of alone-on-the-range letters, whose chirpiness were tempered by the knowledge of her alcoholic binges and battles with Ricki to come. One, though, at last responded to my long-ago Christmas letter on the subject of the family disease.

> Perhaps, in your fear for me, you imagine the worst. I don't want to make a point by point response to your letter, but I'll say a few things.
>
> When I was deeply upset by my mother's drinking, I was as "parental" as you feel. I needed her, even as I was an adult with three children, to be a strong and clear parent as you

> need me to be. I challenged her and hated her fuzziness. It wasn't until years later that I could accept what she was, exactly how she was. We cannot make other people's lives into what we want them to be for us.
>
> I wasn't as direct with her as you are with me, and I'm sorry I wasn't. I have turned, in my time, away from the anesthetic in my life earlier and without the phobic spinoffs that happened with her. I was as sick as she was and what I got was a sooner awareness of how destructive it can be. If you can forgive me for that period in my life (it wasn't for a moment directed against you or caused by you) we can have a lovely reunion. At any time, if you want to bag the circumnavigation of the world and return, for God's sake, do!
>
> I'm proud of you for doing it, but if, as you implied, it is as a result of my drinking and you wanted to get away, then don't push yourself to stay away. You can finish the trip any time in the rest of your life.
>
> You take too much of the world onto your shoulders. I understand how that feels. You are very much like me.

Really? Besides making Atlas-like, if futile, efforts what other similarities did we share? She ended her letter very sweetly:

> Dearest Benja, take heart in your low moments. Thank you for your honesty with me. You aren't alone in your quest. I love you so much.

Among the old letters was also the first in a long while from Mira, who was studying hard back at Harvard.

> *HOW ARE YOU?* Have all your teeth fallen out from scurvy? Are you completely emaciated through dysentery? Is your skin a piece of leather from the sun, and is your hair bleached white? Will I ever recognize that elegant young man in the suit who danced so dashingly at the ceilidh one summer in Scotland? Or will he be changed into a mysterious bearded stranger with a wild look in eyes showing he's been far, far away. . .? Cambridge is dreary

without you.

Although a beard was not possible given my sporadic peach fuzz, I marginally preferred her ascetic tramp image to the dancing guest, not in a suit, but in a soft-weave wool jacket. Was that really nearly a year ago? Did Mira still like me?

The only two recent letters were from my maternal grandmothers. Brownie's was breezy and newsy while Grandma's was unintentionally droll.

> Ricki is in N. Carolina (camp) till mid-July + then Jean + he are flying to Colorado to join a family, with 2 boys Ricki's age – to Raft (?) down the Colorado River for 2 wks. I was stunned – the plan seems superfluous and risky – but what can I say? – then Ricki goes off in early Aug. with Paul to cruise in Greece – *What* a family I have!

Indeed.

A first attempt to research train travel south at Victoria Terminus failed for I was catching a cold and the pulsating crowds were too much for me. On the second attempt, the next day, I succeeded in wending my way through the obstacle course, which included countless queues and numbing numbers of functionaries. At first were the long lines at the dozens upon dozens of ticket windows. After standing in one until I reached the front I was told to go stand in another reserved for foreign tourists. When that line was withstood and its rampart scaled (no minor feat in the undulating hordes), I was informed all second-class seats on the desired train south to Madras were sold out, but that I should visit the Foreign Tourist Guide kiosk in the main concourse for a tourist-quota ticket. This involved yet another line thankfully less stifling hot than the last; yet after succeeding in reserving a seat from the quota I was directed back to the ticket-issuing lines. I had never worked so hard and long over two days for one train ticket. While I had read that among India's colonial inheritance was a British king-sized bureaucracy, I still marveled at the inefficiency and make-work. Most

middle-class Indians apparently hire a flunky to withstand the frustrations.

Although Susan had asked for help to purchase her train ticket south, for the most part she, Masao, and I went our separate ways and only joined up for the occasional meal or errand. Our collective inertia was internally contagious.

So it was with near-superhuman effort that I left Bombay, pulling myself out of a poverty trance and monsoon torpor, and boarded the twenty-eight hour overnight second-class sleeper to Madras with Susan in tow. Using the last days of hotel-wallowing to read my guidebook I hatched a plan to visit Madras on the east coast and then continue south to the Hindu temple towns of Tamil Nadu, before circling back north to Delhi in a large, lazy figure eight.

The train came as a shock though, for the seats which folded out into bunk beds were wooden slats, and the windows, both cramped and barred, were prison-like. I had promised myself to never again take such a cheap train in the third world, but here I was, trying to sleep on my very own bed of nails. Raucous cries of vendors selling various fruits, dried and raw peanuts, soft drinks, potato chips, and rice snacks on banana leaves wafted through the windows at every stop, which were frequent. In case we couldn't hear they stormed the train at every opportunity and invaded the open corridor (there were no compartments) to better exercise their vocal chords. Some of the smallest boys had deep-throated growls, like munchkins. In volume and aggressiveness, however, the food vendors were outgunned by the coffee and tea-wallahs who offered small glass cups (poorly washed) of the whitest and sweetest coffee or tea ever tasted, which they poured from the greatest heights to better froth the milk without spilling a drop. For tea they hollered *chai*, in Hindi the same word, at least phonetically, as in Arabic and Swahili.

At one stop I got out to fill my water bottle from a crowded fountain (adding my trusty, metallic-tasting iodine pill), when I felt a grizzly chin against my back and a simultaneous tap of someone's fingers against my right front pocket. When I turned around

suspiciously, all I found was an old man with a ragged child held in one hand and thought with some annoyance that he had been pressing toward the water like the impatient rest. But when he tapped my arm and handed me my folded yellow handkerchief which had been in my left front trouser pocket, I realized he had been looking for my wallet which was still dangling around my neck. He turned and walked away before I could say anything, impressed by both the ease with which he had removed the handkerchief and his convoluted decency in returning it.

The landscapes even through the claustrophobic window frames were breathtaking. Outside of Bombay we climbed the lush, impressive Western Ghats and, while mounting the Deccan Plateau, passed numerous dark-hole caves. Had the old diesel locomotive not been so loud I might have heard an echo or two, as if emanating from Mrs. Moore's primordial caves, kindness of E.M. Forster. After waking from a fitful sleep I noticed the passing lands had turned arid-red despite pools of soft-brown monsoon water, like so much milky chai. We sat, cramped and uncomfortable, with three uncommunicative women in saris. At every stop beggars begged and, once in a while, a small, untouchable boy would brush away the abundant refuse, on hands and knees, from under our feet. It was a losing battle for the saried women dropped any and all trash without compunction – from paper to uneaten food to banana leaves – suffusing the train with the soft, aromatic perfume of rotting fruit. To top it off an occasional monsoon-burst of rain necessitated shutting the wood-shutters of our paltry windows, eclipsing most light throughout the train and trapping pungent smells in the noon darkness.

Susan did not hold up well during that long night and day, complaining throughout the hot journey. (Would Daniela have fared any better? I suspect so.) The one thing worse than the confining discomfort of an endless train ride is someone else's constant whining about it. Complainers can usually be avoided by moving away, but I felt partly responsible for Susan's health and general well-being. Besides the cholera boosters and malaria pills I had also alerted her to the importance of purifying tap water with pills, not to mention aiding her

escape from Bombay by guiding her through the ticket-buying labyrinth – one must always be prepared to help lepers, beggars, and tourists, after all. And yet I had never met someone so unfettered by manners, so accepting of favors, so reluctant to express gratitude. Add in non-stop bitching and, by journey's end, I had decided to dump Susan in Madras.

14 – South India

Madras as experienced from the train station to the cheap and seedy Malaysia Lodge was a funnel of chaos. Navigating the main thoroughfare, which swarmed and ran with buses, cars, rickshaws, bicycles, carts, and people as though a mighty river with powerful eddies and side-currents, was a challenge in the afternoon's hammer heat. It didn't help that I had my mobile home and Susan to lug along or that I felt, ever sensitive to the internal gyroscope, the ticklings of a cold or worse: warm breath, mucous hack, stomach grumbles, and general wooziness.

On the positive side, Madras was cheaper than Bombay which had relieved me of ten dollar bills with alacrity. Money was becoming a pressing concern. Due to all the dilly-dallying in Europe, with pleasure cruises across the Adriatic every few days, I had drained my resources more than anticipated, leaving little for Asia. Arriving in Bombay I had only eight hundred dollars in traveler's checks to complete my trip – that is Asia in eighty days. In my depleted bank account I still had a cool one thousand but figured my airfare to the homeland, specifically to Skip's in Seattle, would cost at least five hundred, leaving me another five hundred to cross the Wild West and find some work like a new immigrant.

It didn't help that, other than Dr. Iyengar, I was having little or no luck reaching contacts who, besides opening windows to a country's soul, can do wonders for the wallet. I had written well in advance to good Bombay friends of Paul who had visited our house in Concord: silence. I had written to several contacts in Madras, but as in Bombay there were no letters at Amex that Friday late afternoon: silence. One

Madras contact was the Program Director for the U.S. Information Service, a Mrs. Nelim Shetty. Although no one answered the phones I took a bus out to the Consulate anyway, where I found her busy meeting with the Consul General. (I'm a relentless potential guest.) I waited an hour to learn when she deigned to meet me that my letter had never arrived and she was busy for the rest of the weekend. After a brief ten minute conversation she wished me luck in my travels in India, and that was that.

When I hustled back to the Tourist Office for info on Madras and buses south, it had just closed that Saturday for the weekend: thanks for nothing, Mrs. Shetty. Poor contacts alone would have sufficed to sour my mood, but when you mix in bungled connections with treacherous heat you get a powerfully acidic brew. What to do? The proven solution to such annoyances was simple: to flee.

So I showered at the no-nonsense Malaysia Lodge where my room was a windowless closet down several dank, murky corridors, ate a lunch of Bread Peas Masala and Campa Orange nearby, said good riddance to Susan who was staying through Monday, and checked out. Although the bus station was only a short distance away, the midday sun, focused on my heat-attracting backpack, lathered up a good layer of sweat.

The dusty bus station was off the busy main street at the end of a short dirt road lined by urinals. Bombay had not quite prepared me for the non-existent public sanitation which marked my journey farther south. Many Indians, it seems, urinate where and when they please, not caring much for privacy, though there were a few half-private public stalls that I reluctantly frequented. Still, the pungent stench and sight of bus-weary travelers finding relief while leaning over the dirt culvert was nearly – how shall I say? – intoxicating. I had already grown accustomed to the lack of toilet paper or sitting toilets – one squats over a hole in the floor and then, as in parts of East Africa, uses your left hand and nearby tap water to clean up – but the publicness of the makeshift latrine still surprised me. I had recently learned that while eating one has to rest the left (unsanitary) hand in your lap and use only the right,

which was a challenge for a lefty. Never, *never* should you greet someone, or pat a child on the head, with your left hand, which is insulting. In other words, fastidiousness is a by-product of public filth.

I had read diseases are prevalent during the summer monsoon season and could now see why: steady rains tend to overflow outdoor latrines and cesspools which then more easily seep, drip, or run into the water supply.

Naipaul's experience, typically, was on another level of grimness as recorded in *An Area of Darkness*:

> Indians defecate everywhere. They defecate, mostly, beside the railway tracks. But they also defecate on the beaches; they defecate on the hills; they defecate on the river banks; they defecate on the streets; they never look for cover.

It made me realize with a cognitive thud that habitually dissolving iodine pills in my water bottle was practically useless, as it was only a question of time before disease overtook me.

In reality – for which I have a mild if persistent preference – I felt oddly excited about striking southward and leaving behind India's wretched, big-city urban sprawl. All that paralyzed spare time at least was put to some use in Bombay, where I had slowly grown animated from reading my guidebook's offerings for South India. After such large, amorphous cities, I looked forward to the smaller communities of India's lower heartland.

The escape bus was not luxurious, and made less so by my late arrival and inability to find a seat. With little choice I set my mobile home on its side at the front of the bus and used it as a seat next to the large engine bubble, which shortly equaled and then exceeded the heat of the direct summer sun. Our first stop out of the bus station was at a large garage, where the greasiest, most blackened mechanics I have ever seen climbed into the engine and half an hour later emerged triumphantly with wrenches still in hand.

Whatever the grease monkeys did worked, for the two-and-a-half

hour drive to Kanchipuram went without mishap. The driver, naturally, drove like a madman and excelled at playing chicken with oncoming lorries or buses barreling down the narrow split lane. From my hot seat by the engine I had a clear view of our frequent, near-suicidal misses.

Kanchipuram is one of India's seven holy cities and as such is well stocked with urchins, expert guides, and beggars sometimes rolled into one. I panicked and got off the bus early at the edge of town, fearing the bus would shoot straight through. Everyone was speaking Tamil and for some reason I didn't think clear English such as "Is this the center of town?" would get very far, which was a mistake for nearly all half-educated Indians speak some English. The walk to the center was a kilometer or two, giving my glands another opportunity to breath, but I didn't mind. As the dusk settled, the sights in the disappearing light were enchantingly exotic: funny-shaped facades, swathes of pastel colors, everywhere religious icons and crazed pictures of manic gods.

Child packs followed me with relay-team efficiency, practicing their English and asking for foreign coins or stamps for their collections. Clearly they were accustomed to semi-lost tourists getting off early. One boy in particular helped me find the Tourist Bungalow, which was full, and then recommended Rajam Lodge: full up as well. So were the several others I peeked into – due to a large wedding party in town, they averred. As night settled in and took a welcome swipe at the heat I returned to the Rajam for one more try. When I found the massively large manager sitting cross-legged on a mat and explained my predicament, he offered me floor space under the stairs in the entrance hall where I could spread out my sleeping bag.

Giddily relieved I used the communal shower and then explored for food. I found partial success at the Neo Sri Rama Café, which served rice and various oddities on a large banana leaf for an efficient four rupees, or forty cents. Back at the Rajam I settled into the cozy entrance hall, surrounded by various icons including an elephant-headed Ganesh, the god of learning and good fortune, and scribbled by a neon bulb overhead. As the stairs were little used that night, my understep dreams were nearly unperturbed.

I woke up early to rent a bicycle and pedal to the Hindu temples – to beat the crowds if at all possible. My one-speed bike had several distinctive features, including a rectangular kick stand (like a moped's) that, in allowing the bike to stand up straight, conserved hard-to-find space or walls to lean on, and a shiny, loud bell on the right handlebar. Despite the earliness of the hour, the bell came in handy for every single daytime street so far had been congested, with pedestrians spilling into where the bicycles belong and bicycles swerving out where the cars and rickshaws should go. Further complicating matters were the startling numbers of large cows, sacred to the Hindu, who rule the streets because no one dares touch them. Oblivious like everyone else to traffic laws or, more specifically, to the danger of head-on collisions, the holy cows wandered wherever they pleased, creating mini-traffic jams at bow and stern. Where is McDonald's when you need it?

The temples, especially Kailasanathar, were nicely remote, allowing me to pedal through the countryside at dawn and watch the villagers crawl out of their huts to stretch. At the big Ekambareshwara Temple, whose crazily ornate *gopuram* rose all of fifty-nine meters like a large conical hat, I visited its famed mango tree. One worshiper informed me in a whisper that it is nearly four thousand years old.

Due perhaps to the proximity of such powerful seed, a nearby fertility ceremony was underway (as though India, which lacks many things, is low on fertility), in which a coconut husk was set ablaze in front of a young couple by a bare-breasted priest. The young wife wore lengthy, charming braids of flowers and, along with the multitudinous family, looked intently at the burning coconut. Even the boy-musician playing an oboe-like *nagaswaram* for low-key entertainment was all but ignored: when a pack of relatives shuffled by, they trod so closely he had to swing his instrument to the side and then back again. (Things, people, always crowding in.) I was eyed with open curiosity and in a few cases with hostility by the gatherers, so I decided to hightail away on my one-speed steed, ringing my way back to town.

Continuing south to more of Tamil Nadu's Hindu temple towns I

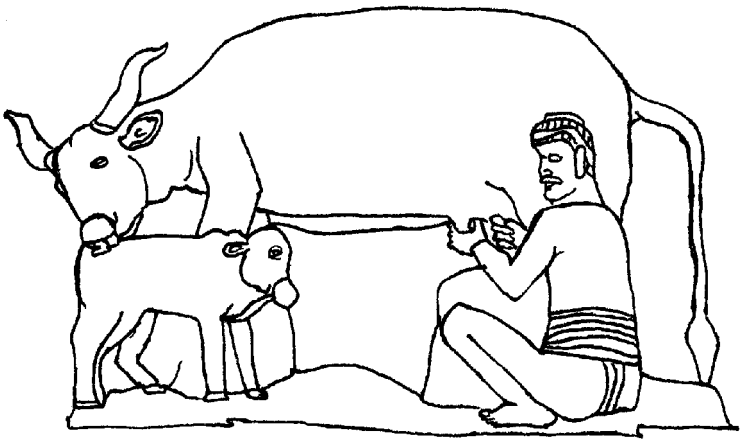
changed buses three times over two hours that Sunday to traverse only one hundred kilometers to Mahabalipuram, my first of several coastal stops. On the last leg an elderly man insisted on giving me his seat before getting off himself. People outside of cities, I found, are friendlier and more welcoming of foreigners.

It didn't really matter that my cheap hotel was a dump and my room even more so, for the whole town of Mahabalipuram faces the Bay of Bengal and is ringed by beaches. After a shower I changed and strolled to the shore for a relaxing swim and read. For a time I had the long, tranquil beach to myself, until a large-set youth approached to beg for money though we shared no common language. He looked able-bodied to me – much too so – so I ignored him while trying to read lying face down. He didn't take the hint and squatted next to me, which I found mildly disturbing. I tried to motion for him to bug off, but he kept on tapping my hand until after the *n*th time I roughly pushed his hand away and he nearly toppled over. After standing idly for several minutes, deciding if I had insulted him or not, he spat and left.

My greatest challenge in southern India, though, was the food. It wasn't so difficult that everything was vegetarian, or that for breakfast, lunch, and dinner the same spin-wheel of cooked vegetable concoctions is served with the unleavened *chapati* bread – itself the only means to pick up and eat the assorted goulashes. What did me in was that everything, except for the watery yogurt, is drowned in curry spices so hot that after the first mouthful I lost any ability to discriminate, feeling only variations in texture for the rest of the meal. So when I found the first cheap and familiar meal that I could actually *taste* – of cold shrimp and mayonnaise, vegetable fried rice, watermelon, and a lime soda – I was in culinary ecstasy. Feeling satisfied for the first time in a week I retreated to my room and stripped naked under the ceiling fan. Whereupon I rinsed clothes soaked in soapy water, wrote a few letters, and nipped some more of my duty-free gin, which tasted deliciously naughty in the prohibition state of Tamil Nadu.

I spent two days in Mahabalipuram – the name itself sounding like an incantation – visiting the various *mandapams* and other stone-hewn

temples, whose religious imagery of elephant-gods and other hybrid animals eventually made way for simpler, clearer images of everyday mortals. As Naipaul laments, "At Mahabalipuram and elsewhere in the South the ruins have a unity. They speak of the continuity and flow of Hindu India, ever shrinking."



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That night I visited the town's small Branch Library and of all things found several John F. Kennedy speeches to read, including his Inaugural and first State of the Union. Although I had seen television clips of it before I had never read the entire "pay any price, shoulder any burden" passage before, which I found wondrously idealistic, even compelling. Would America ever be so open-hearted and outward-looking again? It was oddly appropriate, for here in remote places like Mahabalipuram, where pictures of a youthful J.F.K. are common, it was as though Camelot, like Elvis, had never died. J.F.K. was simply one more god in the Hindu pantheon, adding to the already magnetic pull of America. Over a second edible dinner in a row, this one of cheap lobster, I started Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*. I did so sparingly, less because I already took him for a Prophet of Doom from his later work,

A Wounded Civilization, than because I needed reading material for the long bus and train rides to come. Such an uplifting spell was only broken by returning to my room, which due to a recent downpour was delicately perfumed with the stench of an overflowing cesspool. Opening the door to the damp, musty corridor and turning my ceiling fan up to full whirl eventually improved matters.

In the morning I caught the direct bus to Pondicherry, an even more exotic gem down the coast. Formerly a French colony, Pondicherry is now the proud home of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and its cosmic love-sister Auroville, one of India's favorite hangouts for washed-up Westerners. Wondering why, I couldn't have made my quest more comfortable than by checking into the Park Guest House – owned like much of Pondicherry by the Ashram. While first shown a dark hole of a room, upon request I was given a cheap yet excellent one whose windows were less than thirty feet from the sea. The soft thrush of breaking Bengali waves filled the stuccoed white interior, which included a bed with clean sheets and carved wood posts, a table and desk chair made of woven bamboo and wood, and even a grass mat for the nearby beach. What bliss for only $3 a night!

Even Naipaul enjoyed Pondicherry, whose "numerous,

> well-kept buildings of the [Aurobindo] Society still gave it the feel of a small French town that had been set down on a tropical coast. Walls were shuttered and blank against the light, which was intense above the raging turf. . . . The Society seemed to be the only flourishing thing in Pondicherry.

The Park Guest House turned up just when I needed it. The trots which had started as if in empathy the prior excrement-perfumed night had worsened all day, draining me. While the bus ride had been uneventful, the long search for lodging had taken its toll: I was exhausted. After an hour rest on the beach I took a rented bike into town to mail letters, but felt amazingly weak: could it be dysentery I

wondered? I hadn't eaten all day, and yesterday's main meal, the lobster, had already returned to the sea. Once back in my room I fell into bed and napped for three hours.

For such eventualities I had copied the abundant disease-care pages from my African guidebook and brought it along as my doctor-on-call. For severe diarrhea, it recommended not eating or traveling for two days during which one should only rest and drink fluids, which I obediently followed. I had thought of pushing onto Tanjore after one day in Pondicherry, but the bus ride was six hours or much longer than my likely self-control. I needed to slow down; besides which I could save on transportation and food costs for two entire days! It was dispiriting, however, how empty a day can be without the prospect of a meal or two. Lemon juice mixed with salt, as recommended by my guidebook doctor, was bitter medicine indeed.

That evening my white walls, lit up by a single neon tube, became the congregating grounds for many of the night's light-worshiping bugs. At precisely seven-thirty I treated myself to an exquisite lemon tea and wrote Ricki to the sounds of crashing waves, having already written Mum and Daniela back in Mahabalipuram. On the wall over my desk hung an old portrait of an attractive and youngish woman who must have been The Mother, the Ashram's spiritual leader along with Sri Aurobindo himself, looking down on me beatifically. On other walls were framed quotes or clichés in English, which would have looked at home in any kitsch-filled American motel.

In the morning I felt strong enough to ride ten kilometers out of town on yet another funky single-speed bicycle to visit Auroville, a sister community to the Ashram. After six kilometers on the tarmac way, a sign pointed up a dingy, inclined road – and so did I. After some hard pedaling I started to pass shabby settlements with modest names like Aspiration, Utility, and Fraternity, given rhetorical birth somewhere between John Bunyan and a Victorian virtue tree. My guidebook explained how activities are delegated by community, such that education, health care, and village industry belong to Aspiration; tree planting and agriculture to Utility; and handicrafts and child-rearing to

Fraternity. But I was hard put to see any activity whatsoever – though I did stumble upon a few scraggly, planted trees and several workshops. Then, in Aspiration, there appeared several geometric six-sided huts with funny pyramidal thatched roofs, which looked straight out of Flaubert's Yonville. Yet most of the time I was looking at dirt roads or at my pedaling feet. Indian-style shacks were scattered about, but I couldn't tell if they were for workers or squatters. The land is semi-arid and none too agreeable, so probably the former. It wouldn't be a bad place to squat, however, as Auroville is comparatively roomy at eight or so kilometers across, and there seems to be a constant parade of gullible foreign residents mostly on motorbikes. I took a good hard look as each went by. On the whole they didn't appear a very happy or healthy lot, but then maybe that is why they're visiting. Could this be what Indira Gandhi had called "a universal town," "a city of light & peace," hyperbole aside?

Eventually I arrived at the Spiritual Center, the Matri Mandir, a huge unfinished concrete and steel geodesic dome that looks like a fallen, accident-prone spaceship. In need of a break I stopped at the information room conveniently next door, where I learned the dome – still in progress like all those long-simmering cathedrals in Europe – would be a Place of Silence. This would encompass a white interior, a plush white carpeted floor and, suspended from the dome like a mirrored disco ball, a glass ball onto which a ray of sunlight would always explode, guided from a Pantheon-like hole in the dome's cranium. Wow. Spiral-spiritual staircases were designed to spin upwards to who knows where, to demonstrate no doubt how everything comes and goes in circles. I was beginning to see the crazy logic of it all.

Back in the harsh, white daylight, I saddled up and tooled all the way around this monstrosity-in-progress, but couldn't help admire the pluck and determination of the spiritual flock. When people find something they truly feel is larger than themselves, they really go all out. The information center, like the Park Guest House back in town, had been liberally sprinkled with myriad quaint sayings from either Sri Aurobindo or The Mother, referred to simply as He and She. But my favorite was

the charter, whose overall tone can be discerned from a few sentences:

> . . .to live in Auroville, one
> must be a willing servitor
> of the Divine Consciousness.
>
> . . .Auroville wants to be the bridge
> between the past and the future.
> Taking advantage of all discoveries
> from without and from the within,
> Auroville will boldly spring towards
> future realisations.

Starship Enterprise in India! Yet, sadly, after She's death in 1973, the "experiment in international living where men and women can live in peace and progressive harmony above all creeds, politics, and nationalities" took a beating when the Aurovillians and Aurobindians bickered and fought. This necessitated an infusion of aid from several Western governments to keep the Aurovillians, many of them down-and-out Westerners, from starving. So much for human unity! The small matter of a missing million dollars added to the farce, which would be funnier still if such sums weren't being squandered on rich drifters, as many as five hundred of them in a sea of poverty. As I wrote about the Matri Mandir in my journal:

> Yet the dome epitomizes the whole community in other ways, which can be summed up by saying around a hollow idea will be built up large artifices.

Drained by the trip I took a long nap that afternoon, making it a challenge to fall asleep that evening. Feeling more homesick than usual while tossing in bed I hummed American patriotic tunes, accompanied by the percussion section of breaking waves. It didn't take much these days to make me weak with thoughts of home, made all the more frustrating by my inability to hold onto anything in more than a passing manner: a few lousy, boiled vegetables that evening had incited two retaliatory episodes, suspended over a seatless and bottomless toilet.

It disturbed me that my two days of fasting were apparently a waste – on top of which I could no longer bear the thought of not eating. As I forlornly wrote, "I never realized how much I liked food." That night, accordingly, I plotted a breakfast of a double omelette, bread, butter, jam, and coffee: one of the most eagerly and thoroughly planned meals of my life, down to the last rupee. And in exactly this manner my two day fast and spiritual cleansing ended, which felt strangely appropriate in this loopy, spacey town, whose very name Pondicherry seems a joke – ponder what? Yet where better to practice going hungry than in India?

Continuing my vague, nearly listless tour of the country's lower parts, I struck inland in earnest toward the ancient city of Thanjavur, or Tanjore. At last leaving the arid flora of the center and north we entered the Cauvery River delta, the rice bowl of southern India.

> It was a miserable over eight hour journey by bus from Pondicherry to Tanjore. I had to change once, with an hour and a half wait, never exactly knowing when or where my bus would leave. Moving was no better: it was bumpy and the bus seemed to stop every time it had gotten up speed. At one point we waited ten minutes for a train to pass; another ten minutes was spent in a traffic jam created by a stopped bus in an intersection, stopped for no other reason than half a dozen of its passengers were hotly contesting a few seats. Even after the bus decided to move, the narrow roads had been incredibly congested by hundreds of people coming out of nowhere to witness the event, and extricating ourselves took some time. . . .

Yet despite the earthly perturbations, at times I just accepted my fate and enjoyed the ride.

Somehow, someway, I was beginning to lose myself in the pulsating rhythms of the road again. Even when sandwiched between my dragging physical condition and the long, uncomfortable rides, I began intently looking outwards over the endless landscapes, each more hypnotic than the last. I had resisted the draw of my surroundings back

in Bombay, but now felt more permeable, allowing the sensations to ebb and flow like the sea into an inlet. The borders between India and me were blurring, the emotional drawbridges down.

Ever since my brushes with debilitating illness and material loss in Africa, in letters home I had downplayed health concerns which, after all, are redundant when it comes to cheap, third world travel. Why harp on the obvious, needlessly robbing far-off family of sleep?

Such challenges, I could now see, are just part of the human condition. Accepting as much allowed me to look beyond them to the world's throbbing, scarred heart. I could feel its soft breathing, my ear held closely, even tenderly, to its wide, warm chest.

In an overdue letter to my father I wrote, "Yet only now, after all this time, do I feel I can really appreciate traveling. I've finally got the rhythm."

During the eight hour bus ride my bowels managed a truce, only to do battle the moment I arrived at the Tourist Bungalow. What disappointment! Two days of starvation, it seems, had done little good, only weakening my body thoroughly without ridding it of the offending microbes.

But the fasting had capped another transformation which like many gradual changes came as a gentle surprise. With my shirt off and while looking over the writing table at my ghoulish reflection in the mirror, I realized how noticeably thin I was, so thin as to almost be Indian. If I got any thinner, I laughed while looking at the stranger in my room, I could almost disappear.

15 – Delhi

Tanjore was the southernmost plunge of my Indian loop-the-loop, a turning point in a round city. The city's old fortified walls and moat surround the ornate Brihadeshwara Temple, built by Raja Raja at the repetitive dawn of the second millennium. As a pilgrim of what I wasn't sure I was beginning to feel the transforming magic of nearly two weeks in that mystical subcontinent, a kind of karmic acceptance of whatever India could throw at me.

Although my large, comfortable room in the Tourist Bungalow at over forty rupees or four dollars a night was dear, I was in need of pampering. My own sheets, fan, a clean bathroom (with the usual target practice hole), hot water, and a desk. The walls were so tall they placed a few invariably low-watt bulbs halfway up them, as ceiling ones would be too impossibly distant. To compensate, my room adjoined a soothingly quiet courtyard and protected me in large part from the ear-splitting cacophony of the streets.

Following two days of fasting, food was uppermost in my mind. Deprivation in fact had only sharpened my olfactory senses, such that the normally pungent outdoor smells of marketplace India – a unique mix of rotting fruit, warmed vegetables and spices – nearly overwhelmed me. The generosity of Southerners once again impressed me that day of bus travel, when a fellow passenger treated me to a five rupee vegetarian lunch. In a Tanjore pastry shop, whose fresh baked smells were irresistible, I snacked on guava-filled fried dough with sugar on top like a donut. And that evening I found, for the money, a ridiculously small roast leg of chicken with a miniature potato and a baked cherry tomato, yet I was in need of comforting food no matter its

cost or proportions. I deserved a splurge, for I had saved nearly ten dollars against my daily ten-spot budget over the past spartan week and could conceivably buy a first-class train ticket for the long haul north.

Fortunately for my health and mobility, a truce in the intestinal wars allowed me to continue eating the next day, a Thursday, and explore what Tanjore had to offer. At the main attraction, the Brihadeshwara Temple which rose up in a mad jumble of stone sculpture like a conical wedding cake, I witnessed a devotee relieving himself under a sign which read, "Making a public nuisance is Strictly Forbidden."

Some of the lesser sights were just as intriguing. At the Art Gallery, for instance, the collection of bronze and stone sculptures from the ninth to twelfth centuries were more than just museum pieces; they were living art, for many of the sculptures' stone crevices were stuffed with flowers, with ticklish points such as belly buttons, foreheads, and groins smudged with bright red chalk. Granted, today's art galleries, which in Western terms are altars to secular modernity, don't often display religious statuary, yet the spanning of centuries by the additions of chalk and flower petals had the avant-garde pastiche of interactive art. Many of these bodily pressure points or *chakras* had been touched by human hands over centuries, for the accumulated oils had darkened the stone to a shinier gray. My favorite was the Gala Sahara-Shiva (Slayer of the Demon Elephant), a mid-twelfth century depiction of Shiva doing a jig on the head of an apparently subdued elephant.

Animals are big in India, of course, in both religious statuary and omnipresent life. When I entered the temple an enormous twelve-foot gray elephant lazily walked out, its bells jangling. Inside the innermost courtyard (barefeet only), I met a gargantuan stone Nandi (bull of Shiva, "the destroyer and reproducer"). At six yards long it's the second largest "monolithic sculpture of its kind in the country. It is not known how a single stone of such dimensions was carved out in a region totally free from any kind of rock or rocky formations," according to the Tanjore tourist pamphlet. (A rock-free region – amazing!) Impressive in its Claes Oldenburg dimensions, it depicts a baby bull, with forelegs folded

below, an innocent soft face turned slightly aside, a tongue arched up into one nostril, and a delicately bulging scrotum revealed under the rear end. The stone was copiously oiled, causing foul-looking stains to seep across its base.

Jumbled together with the wandering cows of southern India, this animal parade was a Jungle Book come to life, a mad swirl of creation.

While religious and cultural differences contributed to a constant sense of alienness, that wasn't all. For among all the countries I had visited so far, India showed the fewest signs of being on the same planet: the utter lack of familiar Western brands, from cars to clothes to sodas, for instance, seemed even more ingrained than in East Berlin, where passers-by were savvy to Western materialism. There were distant hints, of course, as in the local colas whose logos used a flowing script deceptively close to the original's. But that was about it. Everything else looked blindingly fresh to my eyes.

Moving on to Tiruchy the next day I was comforted by the prospect of only an hour bus ride and intestinal insurance, for the prior night I had popped my first Lomotil pill, a real corker. Regrettably the prior day's eating binge had led to a middle-of-the-night episode. Thinking enough is enough I resorted to the expired medication which Elise, Paul's wife, had given me. If over the next two days I heard so much as a peep from my intestines, I would make haste to a doctor to battle dreaded dysentery.

The bus started empty and ended overfilled, but I had secured a front seat which by providing a view marginally decreased the claustrophobia. I was developing a travel routine in South India, for which nabbing a front seat was a priority. This way, within minutes, I had a fair sense of each driver's style: to what extent he overused the shrill horn or how brave he was in dodging pedestrians, holy cows, carts, and incoming projectiles in the form of lorries or buses.

The front window seat was best of all as it provided the fullest panoramic view. Mile after mile, with hypnotic effect, I would watch gnarled trees bend and sway in passing, the level and dry countryside

sloping behind them. As in Africa, pedestrians from seemingly nowhere walked the road's rough edge, their faces clouded by dust. The poor, low caste girls to my eyes looked surprisingly handsome, their thick black hair falling in neat, long braids, their features clean and defined, with alluring dark eyes.

A window which opened was best of all, for the air could be stifling without circulation. Indeed, sweat formed on whichever parts of my body were denied a breeze or in contact with anything else. Hence my back against the seat always sweated, as would the skin caught in the crossing of my legs. With the usual overcrowding, any part of me touching someone else sweated – it was part of daily life.

And in such a way Tiruchy and its Rock Fort atop a fairyland outcrop on Friday turned into a drab Coimbatore on Saturday, which transformed into Ooty, or Ootacamund, on Sunday. Slowly I wended my way up to the old colonial hill stations of the Nilgiri mountains, where the Empire Builders escaped the summer heat. Thankfully my bowels continued to behave and my strength returned, as we climbed into cooler climes on the back of the miniature toy train to Ooty.

The train sat only four across in each compartment with no corridor, like one of those old English movie commuter trains whose cabin doors open directly onto the platform. Every half hour or so we stopped to replenish the steam engine's water supply through a snorkel-trunk swung over from a storage tank. With the white plumes of steam were at times mixed great black chimneys of heat and coal smoke, which caused the surrounding greenery to recoil on contact. The four carriages were pushed, not pulled, so on a bend I could look out my window to see the miniature locomotive pushing heroically from behind. During the steepest parts, the cogwheel center track would catch onto our underside like the first uphill climb on a roller coaster and drag us clickety-clack upwards. I met three Polish girls in my compartment, all studying Indiology at a Warsaw university – who knew such a major existed? – their program based in Delhi for a year. There was also a pleasant French couple from several compartments back. During the frequent stops we chatted about sweet nothings while admiring the

locomotive's brass fittings. It was the most engaging train ride of my trip, pleasurably slow, offering vista upon vista as we ascended from the infernal heat. Indeed, it was so refreshingly cool in Ooty I had to pull out and don the charcoal sweater that Daniela had helped me clean in that other world called Prato.

> The flora became a semi-dense tropical rain forest, scaling the sides of the valley. Several colorful birds flew by; cut rocks to the train's side luxuriantly dripped water and were gleaming dark. Density gave way to palms and, as the incline lessened, to the regularity of cultivation. In places steppes were formed.

Ooty was just the sort of colonial retreat into Western charms that I needed. Its wood-structured buildings and cabins nestled among the tall Nilgiri foothills gave the impression of summer camp in New England. In fact my lodging was none other than a YWCA (men too) titled "ANADAGIRI, Dedicated to the Glory of God & the Service of India and all mankind – 8th April 1929," per the bronze plaque. Below, it continued: "The Gift of the Friends in the United States of America to the YOUNG WOMAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION OF INDIA, BURMA AND CEYLON." Then a list of distinguished and dead lady benefactors followed.

It was an odd, musty old building with a turn-of-the-century library of decaying hardcovers, including Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* which elicited some belly laughs. The dining and entertainment room looked as though it had seen one too many Gilbert & Sullivan performances.

I left the next day, for there was really nothing else to see and I had already lasted longer than the French couple, who had arrived and left the same afternoon. The journey on Monday included a scenic six hour bus ride, around hairpin turns and over a road whose large pockmarks made reading impossible. The driver, an unshaven and watery-eyed lout, belied his appearance by pointing out an elephant meandering in the forest of the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and later a browsing herd of spotted deer. Gray monkeys were almost commonplace. Our

destination was the reputedly fragrant Mysore, the famed city of sandalwood. On our arrival in the pouring rain, however, we were greeted instead by the omnipresent stench of urine – unavoidable it seems in most every mid-sized town during the monsoon season.

I was not happy to drop back to the overpopulated urban mayhem of the lower elevations. I was even more upset when after a long, six-stop search for accommodations in a downpour, I settled on an over-priced Ritz Hotel for seven dollars a night. It didn't help that I had returned to the culinary monopoly of curry-this and curry-that, for at least I had been eating better in McColonial land. My continental dinner the prior night had been my fullest, most edible meal in India so far: grilled chicken, pea soup, and vegetables in butter and cream whose delicate aromas had been aided beforehand by polishing off my bottle of gin. No matter that the electricity went out for half an hour during the meal, leading me to clean my plate by candlelight.

In Mysore I bought a miniature, finely crafted sandalwood, rosewood, and ebony chess set for Ricki (I was beginning to purchase gifts for the homefront), and several paperbacks to keep me engaged: Kipling's *Kim* and Naipaul's *India: A Wounded Civilization*, which proved to be like an extended conversation with an intelligent if cranky friend. Yet the damp stench, expensive accommodations, and over-spiced food drove me onwards the next day.

On the early morning train to Bangalore I met a young Indian-American girl from Atlanta visiting her distant relatives. Her Indian cousin sat nearby and looked scandalized by our easy-going contact, which made me feel like a *harijan* or untouchable rather than the Boston Brahmin a few class-conscious Europeans had made me out to be. Once in Bangalore I went straight to the reservation office – always looking firstmost for a way out – and was crestfallen to learn the twice-weekly express to Delhi for which I had accumulated hard-won savings the prior week was fully booked, as was the slower one, both leaving the next day. I could wait most of a week, exploring Bangalore and nearby Hyderabad, or I could take a real bruiser, the equivalent of a

meandering local which would take three days or nearly fifty hours, leaving that afternoon. Mobility at all spiritual costs! With that as my motto I booked, power-visited Bangalore's sights, and boarded the old coal-fueled train at day's end.

It didn't help that my ticket was an unreserved second-class seat with no assurance of a wooden berth, but the patient booking-wallah assured me there were several vacant berths and that I would be able to secure one from the conductor. I was also unenthused at the prospect of heading east toward Madras, changing trains at a tiny switching town called Jolarpettai Junction, and waiting five hours for the connecting train north and back west. Even though I had already broken my oath after the Tanzara fiasco to never again travel so cheaply in the third world with the overnight from Bombay to Madras, this was much longer and in many ways, the wretched heat for one, worse.

The marathon train ride up the nearly entire length of India began stutteringly. The first leg was short, and by early evening I got off at Jolarpettai Junction as ticketed for the five hour connection. The town was the scrubbiest village I had seen, whose only excuse for existence was the juncture of two rail lines, and the hour of remaining daylight was more than enough to explore every dirt lane and musty hut it had to offer.

I was also the sole tourist in town and perhaps the first in a while. All eyes followed me attentively, dark marbles rolling under hooded eyelids. Even a dog barked at my strangeness until a woman lobbed stones at his emaciated hide. While only two children begged at the station, for such a tiny dust bowl even two beggars seemed excessive. They both looked healthy enough, so were possibly fulfilling a spiritual role for passing Hindus who give alms religiously. This was despite signs at the train station discouraging begging, which reminded me of Gandhi's warning about "the race of loafers which is fast overrunning this land." Like the edict prohibiting a public nuisance, both this sign and Gandhi's admonition were largely symbolic, for more than anywhere else begging is an institution in India.

Naipaul notes the same doublespeak, writing:

> An eastern conception of dignity and function, reposing on symbolic action: this the dangerous, decayed pragmatism of caste. Symbolic dress, symbolic food, symbolic worship: India deals in symbols, inaction.

When hunger got the better of me I stepped into the only restaurant in town, with a small sign outside its heavy earthen walls and inside nothing more than a small, dirty hut. With no place to sit and only a few pots simmering over a small fire on the dirt floor, it was the most minimalist restaurant in memory. Using my own boys' camp utensils I picked the thick, indescribable gruel that looked the most appetizing and the closest to a boil – that is the dish least likely to be germ-infested – and ate it reluctantly, without relish.

When the Delhi train arrived late that long night I had no other choice but to be there, waiting for it. As the only person to climb on board I was relieved to quickly find the hide-and-seek conductor.

The first overnight including an easily found wooden top berth for the descent to the Deccan Plateau went surprisingly well, giving me the familiar, giddy rush of anticipatory travel adventure. There's nothing like putting the miles behind you to make those ahead seem more interesting. While the night moderated the blistering heat, the air still pushed through the glassless window and onto my face, as warmly as exhaust from a diesel engine. The compartment once again was on the open plan; that is no doors, no privacy, only one long corridor flanked by sets of seats facing each other with thin walls between them. To secure my mobile home I tossed it up onto a high wood slat berth and tied its shoulder strap around some slats, where it lay safely above my head. Even without cushioning I almost slept soundly, exhausted from so much travel and fasting. In the morning sun, the furnace heat kicked back in and the out-of-window landscape turned hot white. Despite numerous stops I wasn't able to find a decent breakfast, and had to wait for an afternoon pause for a plain and welcome omelette, the only safe (and cooked on demand) train station food around.

Maybe it was the heat or the repetitiveness or the lack of food, but I slept poorly that second night, as the train lumbered across the great mid-section of India and the monsoon moon cast a frightening glow onto the compartment's littered floor. The lack of sleep, however, added to the surreal beauty of the experience. When I watched the cream-puff sun elevate over a wild landscape, whose fleeing darkness hung over it like a rising fog, I thought it was one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen. The halting slowness of our train added to the vividness of the tableaux, providing vignettes such as lone untouchable girls working over a fire or a loom or a well; the blissful cow up to its ears in muddy water, with a young boy squatting and pissing nearby. I knew then that taking mind-altering drugs in India would be redundant, for all one needs is the sleep deprivation of a second-class berth, mixed in with some fasting for the soul, to see to the quick of things.

I met one other foreigner on the Delhi creeper, a young Englishwoman who approached me at a vending cart alongside the habitually stopped train.

"So you've got Gandhi glasses too!" she exclaimed, referring to my circular frames, much like her own.

She told me she had just left a monastery and after six months in India by herself was about to return home. Another lone Western woman: I was impressed. For an eighteen-year old she was charmingly British Empire, referring to the Europeans from a prior visit to Nepal as "Continentals" and to Americans and Australians as "Colonists." When I asked what she considered herself she didn't say. For unknown reasons she thought Australians generally lead a "cardboard existence."

"Have you ever been to Australia?" I asked.

"Touché," she replied with a slight lunge of the chin.

She came back to visit my compartment several times during the long remaining day, but spoke too softly and quickly, making it difficult to catch every syllable; essentially she was a bore. I kept trying to revert to my books, but was only moderately successful in getting her to leave me alone. When she left the train in Delhi without saying so long I realized I must have offended her.

* * *

We arrived late in the third afternoon in Old Delhi, where I switched to a local train for New Delhi. I had been on trains or waiting for trains for well over fifty hours and was a wreck. Now more than ever I needed the soothing hospitality of willing hosts, so in my last attempt in India to reach contacts I phoned some friends and business acquaintances of Paul's named Singh. When I reached them on the phone from Delhi Station, Mrs. Singh, or Mala, immediately invited me to come stay at their apartment. At last: a guest again! I had nearly gone a full month on my own and forgotten what the abundant pleasure of scrounging off others was like.

I arrived more filthy than at any time since crossing the Nubian Desert. After being ushered in by the Singhs I had the most productive shower in history. My hosts invited me to accompany them to a local restaurant, to join a voluminous Sikh friend and culinary critic at a posh new hotel. There, odd-looking men in turbans with handlebar moustaches opened our car doors and directed us inside the cool, marble interior. I was famished and only too happy to accept what turned out to be a large and delicious North Indian meal – in other words, plenty of meat and food not overwhelmed by curry – which was followed by chewing on digestive *pan*, or betel nuts wrapped in leaves. (Betel nuts are the mild addictives which, long favored by India's masses, stain teeth to a ghoulish purple.) I slept like a corpse that night in my library-turned-guest room, with white walls, sturdy windows overlooking a courtyard, a hardwood writing desk, and an extensive selection of books in English. The Singhs appeared well-read.

Despite a sleep so deep as to be blank I woke at five a.m. to find myself reversed on the futon, my head at the bed's foot, which was the first time I could recall such a nocturnal flip during an otherwise athletic life. Dawn broke peacefully outside the window, a New Delhi dawn of waking birds in a lush cloistered landscape. The courtyard, surrounded on three sides by stately white buildings including the Ambassador Hotel, looked onto a tree-lined boulevard which remained amazingly sedate even at midday.

Mala, a delightful and witty woman even over breakfast, offered I stay on despite her leaving the next day, for three days of business in Bombay. Tejbir, her quieter husband, was also planning to leave shortly on a photographic assignment in the Kulu Valley in Himachal Pradesh – to which I was invited, but declined as I needed a rest – which gave me the run of the house until early the next week. It was an unusual arrangement, but when Mala just before departing on Saturday morning insisted I stay until her return on Tuesday, I accepted. She only had to ask twice.

Bliss of all blisses, the Singhs, like most middle-class Indians, had a small army of servants to take care of me in high or low fashion, it didn't matter which. I immediately handed over an extensive bundle of soiled clothing for washing, and wondered at the good fortune which promised simple, yet ample, breakfasts and dinners of rice and curd over the next days.

To Western eyes grown weary of so much heat, poverty, and confusion, New Delhi was a welcome relief. The British designed it at the height of their colonial heyday, which lends the city a slightly unreal and bombastic feel, with its wide avenues, lush parks, and whitewashed classical buildings in sharp contrast to the usual mad swirl and pandemonium of Indian cities. Poverty was less prevalent (concentrated more or less in the ghetto of Old Delhi), and animals – exit the tyranny of the wandering cow – no longer flouted their omnipotence or despotic rule of the road. Indeed, after a day or so I was downright surprised to see a lost cow grazing down the middle of a median strip. Only the heat was the same as elsewhere in India, the kind of heat where beads of sweat form easily unless one is under the steady whirl of a ceiling fan.

Naipaul found its otherness even more jarring:

> But to me it was a city in which I could only escape from one darkened room to another, separate from the reality of out of doors, of dust and light and low-caste women in gorgeous saris – gorgeousness in saris being emblematic of lowness – working on building sites. A city doubly unreal,

rising suddenly out of the plain. . . .

I picked up mail – which disappointingly was an echo of an echo: only the original of a letter which Paul had already copied me in Bombay – and researched plane tickets and visas for onward travel to Thailand. The best news came from a Student Travel Agency, where I learned the flight to Bangkok on Bemen or Bangladesh Air would cost slightly over one hundred dollars. (Since Burma was closed to overland travel, and China and Laos no better, I had to resort to flying.)

Inspired by the unnamed narrator of Ruth Prawer Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*, who writes, "Getting myself a set of Indian clothes was one of the first things I did after settling down," I returned to downtown Delhi on Saturday to buy the white *kurta* and pajamas I had spied previously. Made of baggy cotton, they appeared the perfect antidote to the sweltering heat, the next best thing to going naked. After I proudly displayed it to the servants on my return they suggested it needed a wash and ironing, and would include it in that afternoon's load. When my Indian Independence outfit returned, cleaned and folded, I immediately tried it on and felt transformed, like T.E. Lawrence in flowing Arabian garb. It was as though I had discarded my Western clumsiness and donned an Oriental gracefulness, making me realize I could find much happiness in adopting the clothes of foreign cultures.

To complete the picture of the Westerner-gone-native I borrowed some scissors on Sunday and cut my own hair, which had grown appreciably since Inarzo, successively grabbing a finger-pinch of hair and trimming it to the same rough length. I then shaved the hairy accumulation on the nape of my neck, arriving at a new level of cleanliness and renewal.

With practically a new outlook on life I settled into a routine of reading, constant showering, and infrequently braving the late July heat to visit museums. Supplemented by my newly purchased *chappals* or leather sandals (which elicited such pleasure I wrote home that "India is refreshingly cheap"), my native outfit was as cooling as it gets. It

surprised me, though, that no one seemed to notice it during my museum visits or elsewhere. Despite being a tall and thin sun-bleached blond, in uniform I appeared to blend in easily, walking more uprightly. It was remarkable what the first new change of clothing in a year could do for me.

While the servants were not exactly overjoyed about having someone to look after and were always asking me hopefully if I would be away for the next meal or two, I stayed out of their way most of the time, retiring to my pleasant, cubby-hole of a room. I wondered what they thought of my frequent cooling rinses in the outdoor shower, so frequent that one of the servant's young daughters, without knocking, stumbled upon me naked through an unlockable door.

No less than four newspapers (several in English) arrived that Sunday morning, which allowed me to peruse the local scene after I brewed my own tea and toasted some bread. The news looked depressingly like New York's – that is violence-prone – and included: several fatal car accidents, a bus plowing into a crowd, a Delhi-to-somewhere express train looted by armed bandits, a shooting or two, and assorted acts of religion-inspired violence, Hindu on Muslim or vice versa. Other news, thin as it was, dwelt on the recent sacking of the Jammu & Kashmir minister, who being a Muslim in a Muslim-majority state had been accused of harboring pro-Pakistan sentiments. I liked the story about how a delegation of British MP's, on a human rights' violations fact-finding tour to the Punjab, had been denied entry "on principle." And why not? In my bedroom study I found an interesting pamphlet titled the "White Paper on The Punjab Agitation, A Summary, New Delhi, July 10, 1984," which related some facts with a touch of jingoistic paranoia:

> The Influence of external forces, with deep-rooted interest in the disintegration of India, was becoming evident. In these circumstances the Army was called in to meet the challenge to the security, unity and integrity of the country.

While Pakistan is usually the implied mischief-maker, my hosts who

as Sikhs were highly interested in the Punjab situation told me that the U.S., and specifically the C.I.A., had been much ballyhooed as agitators only a few months prior. Furthermore, Mrs. Gandhi – the same Indira Gandhi I encountered on the Parthenon steps years before – had been a fascist. (She was assassinated months before my arrival.) While such blame-spotting was of little import to me, it did have an impact on my ability to travel through the Punjab or Jammu & Kashmir to get to Ladakh, recently opened to foreigners high on the Tibetan Plateau.

For that Monday's journey into town it took me over an hour to literally catch a bus, for each and every one barrelled by the bus stop, overfilled and sagging at the knees, making it all but impossible to board. After an hour in the direct sun I realized it was more dangerous to wait, risking the repeat of my Kenyan brush with sun stroke, than to run and attach myself to its outer extremities.

Just in time the next bus had enough room for me to squeeze on without provoking undue bodily harm. In town I bought my Calcutta to Bangkok plane ticket, a new supply of malaria pills, and mailed letters. When I bought E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* at a sidewalk bookseller's, the vendor also suggested three different Naipaul tomes, which made me wonder if all Westerners read the same books in India. When I told him I had already read two of them, while buying the third, titled *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*, he feigned polite surprise.

For tourist attractions, New Delhi offered several museums and other sites, which despite the melting heat I ritualistically visited in my sun-deflecting pajamas. The National Museum, India Gate, and the National Gallery of Modern Art were all dutifully seen one slow afternoon. The last had an enticing outdoor sculpture garden, where only three out of thirty works reached above my navel, but I was too well-wadded with my own culture to appreciate the busy, bend-over intricacies of Hindu ornamental art.

With a start the next day I realized the date, July 31st, signified a marker, a signpost in my meandering life, a still point in a turning world, providing a fine excuse to dwell on my mortality:

One year ago tonite I began this modern odyssey, which is hard to encompass or believe. I can suppose good has been done over a year, but it is difficult to list definite accomplishments or lessons, if any. Blustering onwards has become such a habit it will be hard to stop. Most curious is the push and pull of indifference and callousness versus inquisitive eagerness. At times I find myself only saying while I'm here I might as well enjoy myself, making the effort to do so. How wizened and profound of me. The world may be getting more familiar, but I remain to myself an enigma, and usually a disagreeable one.

If I were to die in the night tonite I could, in the last flutter of thought, be proud of this year and more. It's passed like none other. I didn't really believe what I had set out to do was possible. At times, when the months stretched far before me, it felt like a prison, a self-made prison. But then it offered unimaginable joys. It was a challenge and now that a year is up and the end so near, I no longer feel compelled to carry on, I simply wish to.

16 – North India

> India – a hundred Indias – whispered outside beneath an indifferent moon. . .
>
> – E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*

My kind hosts the Singhs returned, and almost out of embarrassment I stepped up the pace of my avuncular activities. It was time to plan the upper whirl of the figure eight, as well as prepare for new trajectories farther east – like an ampersand let loose.

On Tuesday I visited the Thai Embassy in the posh Chanakyapuri diplomatic district, to pay eight dollars for the honor of a Thai tourist visa, and later the Tibet House, by way of introduction to Ladakh. Besides chatting with the Tibetan guide I encountered one arresting monk, brilliantly dressed in an orange t-shirt and scarlet *saree*, whose hair was shorn to a rough stubble and whose smile was no less than angelic.

On the notice board by the main doors, a note may have explained his unearthly joy:

> the next holiday –
> August 1st
> Turning of the Dharma Wheel

On Wednesday I finally made a foray into Old Delhi, visiting souks and the imposing Red Fort, my first heavy dose of Islam in Asia. The famous Diwan-i-Khas, built in the seventeenth century by Shah Jahan, had been robbed of much of its former glory – from silver ceilings to a precious stone throne, from water out of shallow reflecting pools to inlaid stones – but the emperor's private receiving pavilion still offered

a quieting pause from the mad fury of Old Delhi and deserved the famous Persian couplet inscribed on the wall:

> If on earth there be a paradise of bliss
> It is this, it is this, it is this!

After coming down I entered the crowded Chandni Chowk, the city's raucous commercial strip, and poked around until at the end of one blind alley a man imposingly barked, "What are you looking for?" Taken aback I replied "Just looking!" and retreated, realizing I would be allowed to enter the maze only so far. Even in Old Jerusalem's violence-torn Arab Quarter they had been more gracious.

My time in Delhi coming to an end, I shifted my attention farther north where travel proved more challenging than at first blush. Inevitably overland travel to Jammu & Kashmir passes through the Punjab, and to reach Ladakh by land necessarily leads through Jammu & Kashmir. A curfew had just been imposed in Srinagar, the Kashmiri capital, due to the constitutional crisis brought on by the sacking of the Muslim governor, and my host Tejbir told tales of frequent searches at checkpoints on his recent travels, through not only the Punjab but Himachal Pradesh as well. (I didn't say, but Tejbir with his turban and beard looked more like a Sikh terrorist than I did.)

Due to conflicting reports on travel through, or stops in, the Punjab, I sought counsel from various pillars of the Indian bureaucracy. First among equals, the people at the Interstate Bus Terminal in Old Delhi had no compunctions about selling me a bus ticket to anywhere. The Tourist Office had told me the prior week that foreign visitors could travel unrestricted. Now I was informed foreigners could pass through but not stop in the Punjab, including Chandigarh, the relatively new capital designed by Le Corbusier which I wished to see. The travel agents at American Express at first told me to find routes around Punjab, but then changed their minds and said travel throughout and throughin was possible. Yet another set of possibilities was given at the

Foreigners' Registration Office (Indian bureaucracy, if nothing else, cannot be accused of lack of choice). Even though the Tourist Office repeatedly said permits were not needed to pass through Punjab, at Foreigners' Registration one could secure a permit between the hours of three and four p.m. for transport through Punjab, without stopover exclusive of Chandigarh, which was Union Territory and as such not ruled by regulations pertaining to Punjab. Which certainly cleared things up.

As this last information had been imparted not in person, but over the phone, I stopped by the next day between the suggested hours and learned that the only correct information given was the office hours. Its name, for instance, was really the Reception Office of the Ministry of Home Affairs. On arrival I was handed an official-looking visitor's pass, which I mistakenly thought was the sought-after permit. Only after I had left and started to read it carefully did I realize it was no such thing. Returning to the Deception Office I was informed that I would now be allowed to see a Mr. Khalkha, title or position unknown.

Following a remarkably short wait I was ushered into a spartan office from which the prior supplicant was about to depart. He appeared to be a Nordic man and was petitioning for not two but three days to cross the Punjab to Amritsar. The outcome of his appeal was unclear, for Mr. Khalkha was not giving a whiff of his sentiments on the matter.

When my turn came after being seated I made my appeal and was surprised to hear permits were needed but not being issued to foreigners at this time. I regretted this and, complaining as good-naturedly as possible that I had been misled over the phone the prior day, told him I had already gone out and bought a ticket for the Punjab passage – which was a lie. Mr. Khalkha sympathized and, seeing that I would not be so easily deterred, continued that while they could not issue a permit, neither could they stop travelers from entering the Punjab. Lamentably if one were detained by local or regional authorities, they, the Ministry of Home Affairs, could not take responsibility. I thanked Mr. Khalkha for his bracing support and left.

That evening Mala recommended I go, permit or no permit. So early

the next day I bought a train ticket straight to Jammu, with no stops in Punjab, and left that Friday afternoon on the Shalimar Express. The Singhs had encouraged me to visit just-opened Ladakh for several reasons – some colleagues were shooting a film there, so there would be people to meet, on top of which an annual festival was about to begin – and I was intrigued by the thought of spending my twenty-fourth birthday high up in the Himalayas. So despite the prospect of four or more days of uncertain travel, I decided to just go.

It was among the worst overnight train trips I took in India: sticky, hot, and nearly sleepless. Our compartment, by grace of the tourist quota, was filled with foreigners, a German, two French, and two Englishmen, yet this was only evident after nine p.m. when all the Indians cleared out. One local man rather aggressively tried to move me from my seat, saying it was his berth for the night, but when I sent him to settle the dispute with the conductor, he relented. Indians, it seems, will push hard for something until deterred by a firm, fate-like obstacle, then simply give up.

In the morning we arrived in Jammu and, making our way to the bus station, caught the eleven hour bus to Srinagar. The journey despite relatively low elevations was dramatic, weaving precariously around corners and turns threaded a thousand feet above the valley. No less than three overturned buses and trucks were visible during the ride. While the cliff-hugging didn't make me queasy, I couldn't stomach the grimy bus stop food and had to content myself with biscuits and hot black tea all day. Always trodding along the precipice between health and illness, by journey's end I felt feverish from lack of good food or sleep and was looking forward to finding reasonable accommodations on a lake near Srinagar.

But it wasn't, and couldn't be, as easy as that. When the bus arrived, disgorging us into Srinagar's soft early evening, we were surrounded by countless urchins pressing upon us their services and the names of their preferred kickback houseboats. Noticeably exhausted from the long, dizzy journey we succumbed to one urchin, more enterprising and

persistent than the others, who promised us paradise in the form of an inexpensive houseboat on Dal Lake.

For a similar arrival in Srinagar, Naipaul lends his own gimlet eye:

> Among the shouters were the owners of houseboats or the servants of owners. It seemed scarcely conceivable that they owned anything or had anything worthwhile to offer.

Since the train ride we had coalesced into a small crew of post-adolescent adventurers, including a recent Eton graduate from England named Jamie and a bearded German medical student called Bernward. Already in India for six months Jamie demonstrated a good, quick wit – which made the bus ride fly even faster than the driver's foot allowed – and relied heavily on his good family name of Coats, as distant relatives had built up textile factories still in wide distribution under the Coats brand name. During the bus trip Jamie showed me a business card he had made up, simply displaying his full name and London address. It had already worked wonders with various factory directors, who were marvelously generous even after he explained his family currently owned no stock. At last I had met an even more enterprising guest than I.

Bernward, the Kraut, sang English songs on the overnight train ride and had a plaintive, self-deprecating wit, with more heart and soul than Jamie's dryness.

While Jamie spun off to some more commodious abode, Bernward and I shared the *shikara*, a lost cousin of the canoe, powered by a deaf old man who paddled us down one of Dal Lake lengthy inlets. When we arrived at Raja's Garden, the urchin clambered off board and we were shown around the diminutive houseboat. A little cheaper and more cramped than what I desired, I complained to Bernward that we were surrounded by Germanic types who were lounging on the forward decks of the cheek-by-jowl houseboats, and asked the old man if he knew of other, slightly larger houseboats nearby. As we paddled on Bernward called out that one neighbor was Austrian, not German, and might feel slighted. Gliding away over the dusk-becalmed surface I

retorted "Sprechen Sie Deutsche?" with a laugh.

Not wanting this fish to get away the urchin climbed on board and chattered on about various houseboats and prices, most of which were too high. When he natteringly and unnecessarily asked if I wanted an expensive houseboat, and I firmly replied "No!," he jumped onto the bow of a shikara passing in the other direction, abandoning us. The old man hardly spoke any English and understood even less when delivered with decibels, yet we glided on as the sun set and dark descended over Dal Lake and her various jeweled fingers.

It was an impressive sight. The houseboats, as Naipaul notes, "lay on the lake in a white row against floating green islands, answering the snow on the surrounding mountains. At intervals concrete steps led down from the lake boulevard to the crystal water. On the steps men sat and squatted and smoked hookahs. . . ."

Nearly too exhausted to decide I was pleasantly surprised when we approached the two-story Savoy, whose ornate, crenelated second balcony looked out of New Orleans' French Quarter. The price was reasonable and included a large, simple Western meal, much appreciated after a day and a half of bad road food. But first I had to haggle with the white capped and whiskered Muslim proprietor, who solicitously showed me all around the half-grounded hotel and tried to get me to sign the guest register right away. Despite liking what I saw, I threatened to tour the nearby Sundowna Hotel until the proprietor brought the price down from sixty to forty-five rupees. (Later I found another guest paying forty.) The meal was surprisingly good and plentiful; best of all the bucket of water for my private shower was hot.

I woke the next morning to the knock of the hotel boy, bearing a fresh bucket of hot water for my bath and shave. It was six-thirty and I wanted to get to town early in the hope of reserving a seat on the bus to Ladakh. A shikara was waiting for me by seven, so after a quick breakfast I went with a friend of the proprietor who generously offered to help me find a seat. Even with his help, neither first nor second-class seats were available for four days, due to the start of the festival in Leh, the main town. After loitering around the buses for nearly an hour I

decided to splurge on the next day's "Super Deluxe" bus, which naturally was only deluxe in price: sixteen dollars.

Returning after lunch to buy the ticket I bumped into Jamie Coats, who had just bought a seat on the same bus. To kill time together we climbed up to inspect a small, ancient fort overlooking town, a family of kestrels floating in the rising winds, but on the way back down I felt faint, my bowels grumbling. During the shikara ride back to the Savoy several swimming brats took the opportunity to splash us, as though my system required any more dirty water. It didn't.

All in all it was a good setup. While my houseboat didn't look over the expanse of Dal Lake, it was economical. (Those that did, I was told, cost fifty rupees a night without food.) The more sumptuous shikaras carry tourists in vessels under sail with names like *Water of Love*, the more utilitarian ones a variety of supermarket goods, while the most rustic cart away load upon load of duckweed, used to create floating gardens. The morning's muezzin call to prayer – one of the world's most picturesque sounds – had woken me at four-thirty and, as if on Allah's cue, was followed by a torrential downpour, a symphony of drops on leaves and rain on water. Ducks of unknown origin paddled by while a shiny black kingfisher attacked the water's still surface now and then. (As the lake abounded in fish, my proprietor caught one in the morning and, after asking if I ate fish, cooked it up for dinner that night.) Even the poor daughter, forced to swab the decks of the houseboat across the way on her knees, looked enchanting, an Indian Cinderella. Back in the highlands the magic of India was gathering in the cooler air.

Jamie and I boarded our Super Deluxe, express, direct, non-stop, luxury bus to Leh the following morning, and were treated to one of the most incredible bus rides of my life, climbing ever upwards as we scaled the Himalayas.

> The bus journey was dusty, precipitous and always dramatic. Crossing the Zoji La Pass we left Kashmir and

> entered stark, barren Ladakh. Our driver was talented; we had to maneuver around convoys of army trucks coming and going on the unsurfaced raw mountain-gouged road. Various overturned trucks at the road's side were sobering – the best was somehow 100 yards into the middle of the adjacent Indus River.

Midway through our two day "non-stop" journey we stayed at Kargil, itself at the intersection of Islam and Buddhism, where most of the Sunni Muslims looked scruffy and the Tibetan-like Ladakhis clean and friendly. In a joint room shared with Jamie, two other Brits, and an Aussie, our cots only cost four rupees a night or less than a half dollar. When a hotel boy came to pick up the tray of tea I offered the group he paused to gawk out the window and across the street at uncovered young women on the opposite roof. Women, I realized, were never seen in the streets.

The second day, another seven hour bus ride, went much the same as the first, as we climbed to over thirteen thousand feet, up and down the slithering snakes of endless switchbacks. Similar, save for a thing or two:

> [Today's] journey was far more debilitating than the day's before. The incessant heat & dryness at high altitude, coupled with a rocky ride swerving 180 degrees and back, detracted from the view, quickly monotonous. The subtle shades of sun-burnt rock and scree reminded me of Arizona – a high altitude desert. Glimpses of snow-topped distant peaks for moments refreshed, and Buddhist shrines and *gompas* dotted the inhumane landscape, crazily sitting high on towering rocks, life among omnipotent death. Tibetans walked slowly over mountain goat paths, seemingly coming from and going nowhere. A headache and soreness accompanied – a birthday among the Himalayas.

It was the most remote birthday in memory, but then most of my midsummer birthdays had been so unexceptional it was difficult to recall even one from my first two decades.

* * *

We rolled into Leh around eight o'clock, three hours late. I discovered that my film contacts, according to their hotel, had decamped to Bombay for eight days during the tourist festival, a sensible thing to do. So I checked into Palace View (Kidar) Hotel with several of the English blokes. I managed to keep my birthday a secret, an old habit of mine. But then dinner seemed especially dull, with the local beer, *chang*, tasting like yeasty water.

When flies woke me before dawn I got up to hike to the nearby Leh Palace and Gompa in the mountain's long morning shadow. Both buildings were decrepit, like abandoned space stations on a sun-swept moonscape, but the view across the Indus River to the white-frosted Zanskar Range was worth the climb. At over two miles high, Ladakh is too elevated for clouds to overcome the Himalayan barrier.

> The town of Leh itself is dry, dusty, and, among the stone walls and houses, garbage strewn. One can't be sure if this is indigenous or imported by the Indians. That the Indian restaurants are filthy in comparison to the Tibetan/Chinese ones may reveal the truth.

I was impressed by the eternally cheerful faces and traditional garb of the Ladakhis; so cheerful they looked like simpletons. The women dressed in heavy, dark clothing, in peasant outfits straight out of 19th century Corot paintings. They wore long black hair, twined in waist-length ponytails, under black stove pipe hats accessorized by upturned wings. All of this was punctuated by small black shoes. The men, in contrast, were more colorful birds, particularly the religious among them who wore burgundy and orange sheets wrapped around lanky, weathered bodies.

The highpoint of the festival was Archery and Traditional Dance, which are aptly combined. After a big ceremonial tea, under tents whose wildly multicolored patterns barely competed with the archers' psychedelic outfits, the archers finally swaggered out to the archery range. There with ceremonial bow and arrow, they more thrust than aimed the arrows toward nearby bullseyes, invariably missing them in

the most nonchalant way. It was more a ritualistic dance than a competition, after what must have been a most powerful tea. The swarms of overweight, mostly German and French, tourists were better shots, their cameras clicking in rapid succession with the purr of a White House news conference. The archers obviously enjoyed themselves and so did we.

Those whose amusement seemed non-stop were the dancers, male and female. Despite the midday sun they wore the most elaborate costumes, with some of the men wearing floral arrangements on top of their stiff hats. Others, upon entering the central area on horseback to much fanfare, placed brass decanters on their heads and pranced around for some time. Most every jig returned to one motif: a line of dancers moving ever so slowly with the undulations of a snake, each dancer pivoting in place, not in unison but consecutively, always flowing forward. It was a spectacle, touristic yet unique. I imagined myself being the first Westerner witnessing such a performance, alone, centuries ago.

> That evening was the once a week Leh does without electricity. With little to do after dark I struck up conversation with the Ladakhi daughter of the proprietress and was invited into the kerosene-lit warmth of the marvelous kitchen: carpets and short tables for sitting cross-legged, facing a wall of pewter pots among dark wood shelves. The family were scattered about, the farmer father, the ill proprietress mother, the daughter's husband, and their three girls, plus others. I sat and watched mostly – they were disappointed I was leaving so soon and impressed I had exchanged addresses with the daughter – and left after the youngest child threw a tantrum. Instead of wishing her clothes put on she preferred to roll naked on the floor due to bedbug bites.

* * *

With another hallucinogenic two day bus ride I returned to the Savoy for one more uneventful night in Srinagar; which was a blessing considering the city was still under curfew and the Muslims looked

mutinous. I felt ill after dinner and promptly crawled into bed.

In rapid succession, there followed the daylong bus ride to Jammu and the return train to Delhi.

> Another English girl sat next to me; I discovered she'd been teaching English in Srinagar for 4 months, has been traveling for two years (at the age of twenty now), and intends to circumnavigate the world, by working, in five or six years. She put me in my place. She was a queer, aloof character though; when she complained of Istanbul as too Westernized I had to say she was already too world-weary if she so easily dismissed that incredible city. She scoffed at my Forster book as obligatory reading for travelers like ourselves; I could only reply I thought it very good. My responses, and my prevailing silence, I believe enamored me to her, but not vice versa. We shared a train ride to Delhi as well, she letting her head slip occasionally onto my shoulder; when we parted I gave her my address for when and if she finds Massachusetts in so many years.

Such are the brief and random encounters of cheap travel: I never saw her again. In Jammu we had to run to catch the overnight train to Dehli.

> Though an hour or more late we were fortunate to find a train leaving at 8:30, ten minutes after our arrival at the station. By 10:30 the others (including a Dane and [an] Englishman) had settled into the wood berths. I was considering sipping the small bottle of Danzig schnapps Monika had given me, when I realized I had left my sweater on the bus from Kargil to Srinagar. This caused a wave of sadness – it was the sweater Mummy sent to Italy and the one Daniela and I cleaned together, a very smart looking sweater – so I downed the schnapps while gazing and humming out the window of steel bars onto the moving landscape bathed in the fullest moon. It was the Punjab passing by.

I had shed possessions before, but this one held more significance. Recalling the time Daniela cleaned it, in a submissive gesture that packed erotic punch, I realized what an impossibly distant memory it

was, floating like a chimera over the blurred scenery out the train's window. Would I ever tempt such a beautiful and strong-willed woman again? I doubted it and wondered if I was destined to always adventure solo, making only fleeting contact with lonely creatures in odd places such as third world trains. I thought back to a dinner in southern India with two middle-aged Poles, one a writer, the other an actor, and how one mentioned that if you disappeared in India no one would notice. Alone at night, my compartment-mates asleep on a sturdy train through the moonlit Punjab, I realized how true and facile this was.

After resting a bit at the Singhs' in Delhi I decided to travel to Agra by train to must-see the Taj Mahal, that over-the-top expression of matrimonial devotion. As it was late morning by the time I found my second-class compartment, the car not only quickly overfilled but began to bake in the over one hundred degree heat. Temperatures rose even further when a native, with a somewhat large box, tried to close the door on me in order to stow his box in the corner. I refused his ill-tempered demands, made in the rudest tones, for I had won my door-jam seat fairly and had even been congratulated by an old man on the passing vistas my seat would afford. I realized the petitioner was from a low order indeed when he started to berate me in Hindi. We entered into a shoving match, the goal of which was to propel me out onto the parallel tracks with human excrement in between. When he grasped my t-shirt and crunched it further than the cotton would comfortably stretch, I glared at him more menacingly and considered tossing his bag of bones out the open door.

It was a kind of matrimonial hate-embrace, like hugging boxers in the later rounds or my parents in staggering late-night fights, but it was just too hot to get that close. Luckily, when the over-heated Indian realized that my position in the doorway was Fate, he gave up and calmly walked away. As my adrenaline pump slowly drained and the delay at the station dragged on and on, I realized I had forgotten a book to read. Deflated, I decided to give up. Taj Mahal, that monument to a marital bliss so foreign to me, was not in the cards this trip – or ever.

The next day in Delhi was the 37th Anniversary of Indian Independence from the British marauders. On my second encounter with Tejbir that morning I told him I had forgotten to say Happy Independence Day, which made him laugh. When he claimed the partitioning of Indian and Pakistan to be the greatest planned genocide in history, I wondered if he had heard of the Holocaust but was too guest-polite to ask.

I was feeling ill anyway, from another Indian meal the night before, and swore to myself I would never again visit an Indian restaurant in my life: yet another premature oath. Confirmation of my plane to Bangkok came through the day before, so after five weeks in India only five days remained before flying from Calcutta. I packed my mobile home for the thousandth time and, after bidding my adieus to the kind and generous Singhs, left on the overnight train to Varanasi that evening. Mala had even offered to hand deliver my sealed box of presents, for which I had paid the grand sum of three hundred rupees (or three days of travel), to Paul on her upcoming visit to the U.S. Thank goodness, as I didn't have the energy, despite my steadily emptying mobile home, to carry them.

On the train I found a second-class compartment to myself, which meant I could shut and lock the door, turn out the light, dry my sweaty shirt out the window, and watch outer Delhi slip by in peace: going east again. The Upper India Express would take over seventeen hours and many stops at cow path or other junctures, before it deposited me in Varanasi for the habitual lodging scrum.

> My midday arrival in Varanasi was aggravating. I was accosted by numerous haggling rickshaw drivers, one of whom would not leave me, chattering confusion loudly into my ear. The map of town and what I saw of it outside did not reconcile, but the driver, shadowing me, refused to give a straight answer as where to find it [the Tourist Bungalow]. He elicited the aid of other idiots to further muddy the brackish waters in the full white sun, all the time offering to bike me there for a rupee. My replies were surprisingly

> calm, ominously so. When found, the Tourist Bungalow was ridiculously close. The boy receptionist claimed the dorm was full, then that two beds were broken, and then nothing when he looked at the dorm as I insisted: it was half empty. Did he want me to pay 20 rupees for a single instead of 10 rupees for a bed that much? A mystery.

I woke before five a.m. for the five hour bus and boat tour of death city. It didn't help at such an expectant hour that the bus broke down due to brake failure and, later, that a thunderstorm leaked through the roof onto my lap. When we arrived, the guide warned those with cameras against photographing dead animals, beggars, or burning corpses. I knew then the tour would be fun.

The Ganges River was wider than imagined and made of the milky-brownest of water. This didn't bother the various bathing Hindus or Brahmins, who gave blessings under umbrellas for a price. Everything had a somber, tired look, even the dead dog that floated unheeded downstream, no more than ten feet from the bathers.

Our tour group dispersed onto three boats for a paddle upstream, unleashing such a crescendo of clicking camera shutters it sounded like a pack of long-nailed dogs on Formica. We passed along the shore many old men, naked save for beads and loincloths. On occasion one would tumble into the holy broth for a spirit-cleansing dip. (The Ganges is said to wash away sins.) Fearful murals in psychedelic colors graced bare walls. In one a blue woman with red tongue was decapitating the faithful. In another a somewhat calmer Shiva glared forth, while a spout of water rose from his head and joined, or originated, the source of the Ganges in the darkest Himalayas.

The really good stuff began at the Manikarnika burning ghat, where three funeral pyres by water's edge crackled at various stages of conflagration. Behind rose an eerie three-story building whose window sockets were empty save for flapping white sheets.

Naipaul's take was, for once, jollier than my own:

> Wood was piled high on the *ghats*. Brightly shrouded bodies lay on flower-strewn litters at the water's edge,

> unimportantly awaiting the pyres; and above occasional blazes, oddly casual and not too visible in the reflected glare of the Ganges, family groups smiled and chattered. The steep ghats, platformed and stepped, their names marked in large letters, were as thronged as a holiday beach.

Our guide explained how the *chandala* outcasts sprinkled holy Ganges water on the half-burned corpses five times, once for each of the elements. This was to be administered on the forehead of the deceased, which we presently witnessed when a soot-darkened man prodded a blackened corpse upright from its bed of flames in order to deliver the purifying spray. The long stick plunged into the tender chest, as though into an overcooked chicken, and when pulled back held onto the rib cage, causing the sorry corpse to sit upright in a vampirish lampoon of waking. Such was my state of mind I saw the toasted corpse as Mum's, rising from yet another bout with drink, after a thousand such deaths, to take another sip. A little farther down a fresh corpse wrapped in red robes was placed on a pyre of stacked wood, while nearby another looked half-charred, the air perfumed with burning hair and flesh. As in Naipaul's word-picture, a group of brightly dressed and merry relatives watched.

Afterwards I wrote:

> This sight of purgatory and death held powerful attraction for me: I felt drawn and wished to get much closer. How different must have been my sentiments and those of the rejoicing relatives, witnessing their dear one, finally freed from the cycles of reincarnation, entering an eternal rest.*
>
> Moments later we plunged into the narrow lanes of the old vivacious city – a child a stone's throw from cindering dead, animal excrement at her feet; a man perched on a sill, white with leprosy – visited the Golden Temple, and left.
>
> An odd city, this most holy of holy cities to the Hindu.

* A misreading on my part, as reincarnation is, in practice, endless.

I fled Varanasi that evening to rejoin the Howrah Kalka Mail, or Upper India Express, to Calcutta. The local connector train pulled out of the station three hours late, yet still in time for an obscured sunset, an orange smudge against a wash of steel gray. When the Calcutta express arrived, a corpse was just getting off: a tourist with a surer destination.

The second-class compartment was the newest and snazziest I'd encountered in India, with operable glass windows and padded berths and seats. Some confusion about my reservation and seat existed, as the reservation list, a piece of paper, was attached to the outside of the train. There, unsurprisingly, recent winds and rains (it was monsoon-season after all) had succeeded in smearing the ink and tearing the paper.

When bedtime arrived amid a general commotion, as people stood so the middle berths could be folded down, a strange man insisted on staying seated at the foot of my bed and berth. Even after I had unrolled my threadbare hostel sleeping sack and climbed inside, he stubbornly remained long after the rest of the cabin had settled in. When I lay down completely, my feet stretched well down the berth and gently into his side.

"Excuse me," I said, "I wish to go to sleep."

No answer.

I explained it was my berth, my legs were long, and suggested he go find his own berth.

No answer.

"Where do you come from?" I asked. "Calcutta?"

"What?"

I repeated.

"No, Delhi," he replied.

"So you learned your manners in Delhi?"

"Ah: I don't know much about manners."

"I know."

I considered pushing him away with my feet, but so many people on one jumbled subcontinent makes violence all too plausible. Instead,

with a spirit the Mahatma himself would have admired, we amiably agreed on a short union between my berth and his rear end, when I offered he could leave after finishing his cigarette – which he did. A second brush with India's bonfire violence had passed.

The night slipped by as relentlessly as the West Bengali landscape. By dawn's twilight I saw monsoon-flooded rice fields reflecting the gathering light far into the distance. As revealed at curves, the train floated above the earth, gliding over the stillwater surfaces. Approaching the end of my Indian train trek I tallied over two thousand miles on rails.

Calcutta's approach was heralded by the sprawling metropolis surrounding it, as if protectively. After finding hotel and breakfast, I walked to Dalhousie Square to check for mail (none) and stumbled on the American Library, whose crisp, air-conditioned interior seemed from another planet, as I read a John Updike article on Emerson. Walking in tropical Calcutta is different than elsewhere. Not only are the crowds thicker, but many people wear the traditional white kurta and pajamas which is the Indian intellectual, and communist, uniform – so many bobbing dark faces, engulfed by bleached white. The heat and sameness and claustrophobia had a hypnotic effect: I felt a somnambulist in familiar territory. Naipaul is charmingly dour on the subject: "Calcutta, even to Indians, was a word of terror, conveying crowds, cholera and corruption."

The morning of my final day in India I went out for a hot-trot tour of the city, which only succeed in fraying my nerves.

> As I turned up Chowringhee, entering the sidewalk throng and fray, I thought how much I dislike being touched by beggars (inverse intouchability), how if I scampered down a dark side alley I might never return, and how when walking, eyes forward and above the immediate obstacles in the form of human beings, what a misanthrope I've become. Poverty doesn't sadden me, it angers me, but the line is thin between contempt and indignant righteousness. Has India brought out better or worse characteristics?

Naipaul, as usual, anticipated my quandary:

> India is the poorest country in the world. Therefore, to see its poverty is to make an observation of no value; a thousand newcomers to the country before you have seen and said as you. And not only newcomers. Our own sons and daughters, when they return from Europe and America, have spoken in your very words. Do not think that your anger and contempt are marks of your sensitivity.

During my last museum visits that Sunday afternoon, my white kurta and pajamas no longer camouflaged my foreignness. Beggars asked, "Where are you coming from, sir?," meaning from what country did I hail, and one eager stranger in the Indian Museum asked, "How are you, friend? Do you like Calcutta?" Yes, yes.

Appropriately, my last touristic stop was the Maidan, one of Calcutta's poorest neighborhoods.

> Following a visit to a St. Paul's Cathedral (I could see Sahibs and Memsahibs pulling up on carriages) and the Academy of Fine Arts (nice miniatures: Late Mughal, Rajasthan, Persian, but hardly an Academy), I returned along Chowringhee, the sun dissipating, the overhead clouds gradually dwindling in grandness. The Maidan alongside the road is appallingly unsightly: industrial husks, shoddy concrete towers, torn open and neglected earth, piles of trash and stone and brick and, across one wild looking pond, a shanty-town. I walked around and visited. Protected by a barbed-wire fence, the community was small, the hovels minuscule, barely chest high. Narrow dirt lanes wound around the shacks, whose roofs of every imaginable piece of refuse were most noticeable. I was too embarrassed to stoop down and get a good look inside one. Damp drab saris were hanging out to dry. A man whose mouth was macabrely betel-red greeted me with a big hello and handshake. Others were friendly as well. Seeing enough, I went.

The poverty of my own soul.

17 – Bangkok

After India, Bangkok was paradise. Though roughly on the same latitude as Madras, Bangkok was lusher, more tropical, with more greenery and water throughout, the Venice of the East. Modern conveniences as simple as sidewalks delighted me. The first time I took a bath in my air-conditioned (!) hotel, I noticed how odd it was my feet, after a day of walking, weren't blackened with dirt as they had been ever since buying chappals in New Delhi. Not only were the sidewalks relatively clean they were filled with vendors, some of them offering sweet slices of tropical fruit whose wet colors spilled into the air. After six weeks in India I had had my fill – of dirt, poverty, and heat; of monsoons, alienness, and disappointments – and had left just in time.

For as Jhabvala's protagonist points out: "India always changes people, and I have been no exception." I wasn't sure if my transformation had been helpful or not, while suspecting the latter, and had little notion of the change carried within me.

Leaving, like entering, India required effort. Bangladesh's official airline, Biman Airways, aborted its first attempt to become airborne for the short jog from Calcutta's Dum Dum Airport to Dhaka, the Bangladesh capital. Technical failure we were told after the brakes were violently applied halfway down the runway, sending up great puffs of rubber smoke behind us. With mischievous intent I cracked macabre jokes with the sturdy-looking Australian sitting next to me who, contrary to the rough-and-ready stereotype, was petrified of flying. (But why then tempt fate with Biman Air?) Uplifted on our second attempt to defy gravity, the fleet-footed crew made good use of the twenty-six minutes to Dhaka, serving us juice, a snack, and water in succession. As

if that wasn't enough, they also offered us embarkation cards and an opportunity to buy duty-free liquor. It didn't bother me greatly that my knees were jammed against the (upright) seat in front of me, until two near misses roared past us the size of a crow at forty feet. Belatedly I realized I had nowhere to duck my head in case of an unplanned descent. In all likelihood the pilot preferred sighting oncoming aircraft along the Calcutta-Dhaka corridor, rather than rely on questionable radar, but I've never seen an Aussie look so wan when I pointed out the second bird whizzing by. Given the circumstances I tried not to notice how far away the earth looked, but did anyway, amazed by the monsoon-swollen lakes which sprawled every which way like multiplying bacteria, brown with sediment around blotchy islands of trees or houses.

Landing presumably with radar at Dhaka was less involving. After disgorging a few hardy souls and changing planes, we started to take on some monsoon refugees, including – of all people – Bombay Susan, who boarded for the next leg. She proceeded with little prompting to relate her nearly disastrous travels around India and Bangladesh since we had parted ways in Madras. To my relief she didn't look ill or deathly pale, so perhaps my timely medical interventions had worked.

Lucky for my knees we switched to a larger Boeing 727 for the longer leg to Rangoon, Burma. One of the most backward fairy kingdoms in the world, it is a country where apparently nothing works. Likewise with Bangladesh, I could have arranged a brief visit for a few laughs (up to one week, as Susan had), but was running out of money and patience. After Susan got off the plane at Rangoon, however, it was Burma that had the last laugh when the power cut off during our half hour wait on the boiling tarmac, whopping us with a dose of Burmese heat. As a result you could smell the fear during our Bangkok descent in the dark at seven p.m.

Customs was painless despite my dwindling bank account – thankfully they didn't ask for a bank statement – so I decided to risk the local bus into town as recommended by the Planet people, which was

a mistake. Thailand is one of the countries least touched by colonial histrionics in all three worlds, so not only were there few English-speakers but its indecipherable language is everywhere, making it difficult for the odd foreigner to get around. I chose what seemed to be the correct bus, yet nearly an hour later was still seeing too much of outer Bangkok at night. When I tried to communicate my problem to the bus driver or to anyone else who would understand me, I was given vague instructions to get out at the next stop and wait for some mystery bus going in the other direction. So I got out. Feeling more and more exasperated I waited half an hour, until several students came to the rescue by indicating the correct bus and, as they were going into town themselves, by telling me where to get off.

For name's sake I looked for a bed at the Boston Inn, where there were none, and then tramped over to Hotel Malaysia, a Vietnam-era mecca for American soldiers on leave. By ten o'clock I'd found a single bed in the air-conditioned dormitory. I immediately took a dip in the American hotel-style pool before embarking on a foraging mission for food. This introduced me to the wonders of cheap, spicy, and filling street-vendor Thai fare, such as *khow pat kai* or two dollar chicken fried rice which would be a staple of my diet for weeks to come. With such good and satisfying food in my stomach I immediately liked Thailand, despite the fact it had been largely visited through the wandering frame of a bus window.

Some tourists find the cacophonous, sticky traffic of Bangkok streets among the worst in Asia, and are put off by such an in-your-face industrial, business, and cultural center in Southeast Asia – but not me. Maybe it was my New York background or more likely my time in India, but I found Bangkok enchanting and its bustling activity, both in construction and congestion, a healthy sign of growth. After socialist and backward India, Thailand's pump-it-up capitalism was a welcome tonic.

It was during my first day, for instance, that I rediscovered the delights of sidewalks and street vendor fruit. During a visit to the

Buddhist temple Wat Saket on Golden Mount I was enthralled by the fanciful wooden Wat architecture, whose gold trim roofs give pause, each corner turned up in a graceful wiggle like the bow of a Venetian gondola. The colors are stark and primary: a brilliant red next to a cool, clear blue, edged by sparkling gold. Everything seemed sharper and brighter in Bangkok after the dusty, disintegrating stonework of frenzied Hindu temples. Although the heat in late August was every bit as intense as Calcutta's, cooler visuals along with lusher vegetation felt like the caress of storm-freshened air.

The view from Golden Mount proved as intriguing, a vast panorama of cosmopolitan Bangkok punctuated by boxy hotels and sprightly colorful temple rooftops. I exulted at the strangeness of it all, a more open and welcoming strangeness. Bereft of colonial influence over the centuries, Thailand developed a unique otherworldliness, calming and playful at the same time.

My errands included picking up mail – only a single letter from Mum, the former stream of communication down to a trickle – and searching for cheap airfares to America. My strategy was to traverse the Malaysian peninsula as far as Singapore and, depending on the cost of stopovers, touch down in as many Asian hot spots as time and money allowed. From research back in Delhi I already knew that flights to Australia and New Zealand, due to the near-monopoly of the Aussie state airline Qantas, were beyond my means even though I had accumulated more than twenty contacts in Australia alone.

Bangkok is renowned for the inexpensive package deals one can find to anywhere, less Down Under. And an island-hopping package deal was just what I needed, given that Cambodia, Vietnam, and China where all but impassable. I was anxious to book the series of flights home for fear of the potentially crippling cost. Was homecoming within reach, financially? With only a thousand dollars in the bank and far less in traveler's checks, I suspected an expensive ticket could severely limit my wanderlust days. So with immense relief I found a Bangkok-Hong Kong-Tokyo-Seattle fare for only $570 at a travel shop downtown, even though I would have preferred departing from Singapore. The

knowledge that the old home country was in reach cheered me immeasurably, which surprised me. My body and soul apparently were hankering after more familiar territory, a return to formerly known things.

On the way back to the Malaysian Hotel I checked, I thought needlessly, at several more unassuming bucket shops. At the second I was offered the deal of all deals: Kuala Lumpur-Hong Kong-Tokyo-Honolulu-Seattle for $517. Jackpot! I felt relieved as if from a heavy burden, for I had found the ultimate exit strategy: a ticket home at reasonable cost. The only catch, and of course there had to be one, was that I needed to leave a one hundred dollar deposit in Bangkok and actually pick the ticket up in Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital, where it would be issued.

Visions of the Cairo scam floated before me: could I afford getting scammed a second time in the third world, especially now that every dollar was so precious? But the travel agency seemed reputable, if running on a shoestring. I told them I would sleep on it.

My contacts in Thailand included only two names, one of them a distant cousin named Pra Attepemo Bhikkhu. From his natal name, John P. Stevens IV, one can see why he went Buddhist monk and had gone native. So native I couldn't find his telephone number and didn't receive a response to my letter sent from India. I had also written to a college classmate of Paul, a Henry Holmes, who worked at the U.S. Embassy. When reached by phone he promptly offered to pick me up at six-thirty from my hotel. He was a tall, thin, and slightly wizened man, just what you'd expect for a Yankee who had spent most of his life in developing countries. On the way back to the posh residential district to meet his Thai wife we stopped to pick up another visitor, an American buddy from Laos during an early 1960's aid program. The plush, expatriate neighborhood named Sukhumvit was amazingly quiet and serene after the mayhem of downtown Bangkok.

We ate out at a nice Thai restaurant where Henry gave me a brief and welcome education in Thai cuisine. His weather-beaten friend

strongly urged me to visit Cambodian refugee camps in eastern Thailand, to get a truer picture of the region. For a while I felt sorely tempted by the prospect of roughing it to the edge of a war-torn area, southern Sudan all over again. Heck, if I was staying in a Vietnam-era hotel why not get a better feel for the war's chaotic consequences? But concerns about my budget prevailed, making me realize in a niggardly way why I shouldn't spend an entire week getting to and from such an untouristed area, which was untouristed for good reason: it was dangerous. Several months ago I might have jumped at such an opportunity, but not now.

When Henry dropped me off at a convenient taxi stand for the ride back to Hotel Malaysia, I regretted he hadn't invited me to stay in the charming Thai bungalow in back of his graceful home. Diplomatic to a tee, he encouraged me to call for any advice or if I got into trouble.

With the prospect of an affordable plane ticket in hand, my thoughts flew homeward that late evening. Alone in the dorm room, which was so orderly it felt like a military barrack, I reread the one letter from Mum describing her two week trip with Ricki down the Colorado River. I was jealous.

> Most important was that Ricki and I had a really special time together. He hasn't really known how to deal with me without the fear that I'd be drinking, and I haven't known how to deal with an off-balance and sometimes very pissy kid. The two of us were real cronies on the river – a new experience we were sharing. We giggled so much and bantered so rudely that we rather startled some of our fellow travelers. At the end of the trip one of the boatman said to him "Take care of your Mother. You've done a good job bringing her up so far!"

Their adventure also encouraged Mum to discuss her relation with her phobic mother, Grandma, whose two decades of heavy drinking had scorched parts of her abundant brain (her last job was Admissions Director at Radcliffe College).

> So I'm home. The house is fine. The garden looks pretty and lush. We're in a muggy heat wave. Chloe is thrilled to be home from the kennel. Grandma seems surprised that we survived it. She can't help being disapproving of my unconventional life-style and choices. I WILL NEVER EVER BE LIKE THAT! It's a living death and sours my insides to hear her fussy judgmental comments. But there's no changing that style and attitude. In fact, there's a perverse streak in me that says "if she disapproves, it's got to be something good I'm doing." Living!

And lastly:

> I'd love a clearer sense about when you are actually going to be back in the US of A. Everyone is asking. It's been so long!
>
> Dearest love always,
> Mummy

Yes, it had been.

The next day was all business. Early on I purchased the return ticket by leaving the one hundred dollar deposit at Silver Travel. By confirming each leg I finally set an end date for my trip on the first of October, or forty days hence. I bought sufficient traveler's checks to pay for the ticket's balance in Kuala Lumpur, but when I reread Mum's letter I discovered that the total from my latest bank statement was two hundred dollars less than expected. With under five hundred left in the bank, intended for crossing the States and finding a job, I had only three hundred dollars for forty travel days or just seven dollars a day. What a downer! The thought of having to scrimp and save for the rest of the trip took the edge off my pleasure. Given the best solution was to stay with as many contacts as possible, I promptly wrote ten aerogrammes and posted them the next morning.

With my itinerary now set I succeeded in calling Mum collect from the General Post Office. I woke her up near midnight as she had encouraged me to do and gave her my arrival date in Seattle, where Skip lives. I asked her to share the news with Brownie, Dad, Skip, and Paul,

but could hardly believe it myself: fourteen months after my departure, could it really be true? A perpetual motion machine for so long, could I actually stop? Among other things I had no idea what to do after it was over.

Next I looked into travel south to Kuala Lumpur, from where my first flight left in nine days. Overnight buses appeared to be the most economical but I had no luck getting through to the number, which I later learned to be out of order.

Hot under the collar I took a dunking in the Malaysia Hotel's pool in the glow of the late afternoon. The pool like everything else about the hotel was crumbling and seedy, with decrepit pool furniture and a two meter-high diving board, high enough for pilots to do aerial flips. I met a young Englishman who was taking the waters while bunking at some nearby hotel. I liked Rod's cheekiness, and we chatted enough to decide to forage for dinner together. When I expressed an interest in visiting Patpong, Bangkok's conveniently close red light district, Rod offered to introduce me. Bangkok I had recently read is world renowned for its sex-for-hire, loose culture, and sex shops. I had already noticed several racy and unaccompanied Thai women hanging around the hotel lobby, so when a porter offered me a girl for thirty dollars it made sense. Many are poor and young, and after escaping rural poverty, find prostitution the easiest and possibly deadliest buck. Would it be like Zeedijk district in Amsterdam, but only steamier?

After a cheap but filling roadside khow pat kai we screwed up our courage by drinking *mekong*, a Thai whiskey which begs to be mixed, and ambled over to the infamous district.

> The walk was unattractive, but we were rewarded by the wonderful sleaze to follow. The flashing signs were tame, but the girls standing outside doors were not. They quoted a price for beer as they sidled up and encouraged one to take a look inside. One woman reached for the bulge in my pants and, zeroing in, gave a yip. We were early, Patpong was just getting going. The bars were virtually free of clients but full of bikinied girls warming up for the hustle. Upon entering one is accosted by a self-chosen candidate

> who strokes and offers – as unobtrusively as a muse. Rod and I climbed up to one den in particular where his seductress was attractive. Hesitating we sat down and stayed – for a beer. A small one had meanwhile greatly reduced the distance between the two of us on the seats; absent-mindedly I caressed her with an over-shoulder arm while she made small talk and Felix big.

Rod was already in the early stages of tactile negotiation with his more attractive girl. Both were petting each other's forearms and looking deeply into the other's eyes while cooing: the opening gambit of a financial deal. In French I commented while his was nice, mine was not. Replying similarly he informed me she was asking for two hundred baht or twenty dollars for the bar, and another two hundred for her for three hours. I commented I thought it excessive. The hustler/managers, sensing flight, quickly brought us the bill, including thirty-five baht for each beer, which we had anticipated, and another forty, which we had not, for what it was unclear. It could have been for the girl's cola or it could have been a cover of some sort (really that same thing), but we had been promised outside that there would be no cover. I counseled we not pay for the cola and Rod agreed: we were both novices. On the way to the bar to pay for the beers Rod whispered to me to be ready to run.

It was a tactical error, of course. Rod left the seventy baht and we hurried down the stairs and out. The chase was on. Though yells were made, no bouncing pimp blocked our departure. When Rod peeled off the wrong way I yelled after him that our hotels were in the other direction, but he was already gone – perhaps he knew better. My chappals weren't the best vehicles for escape, so after several blocks and turning a particularly busy corner I slowed to a more dignified walk, overestimating my ability to blend.

To my surprise a Thai policeman appeared and beckoned me back. Without any fuss or inclination to flee I followed him. Though his English was unintelligible, his fingers poking in my back were not.

Rod's girl, the accuser, looked insufferably smug, with the establishment's hefty bouncer in tow. The four of us soon reached a makeshift police tent at one end of Patpong, where I went up to the most authoritative policeman I could find and asked if he spoke any English. Somewhat.

I tried to explain that we had paid seventy baht for two beers and had been incorrectly charged another forty for cover, but the call girl kept interrupting, her flow of Thai a natural advantage. At the end of her tirade the policeman told me she said we owed another forty baht for her cola – at four dollars, quite an expensive soda pop. I calmly explained my position again and this time told the call girl to be quiet whenever she interrupted. We had been misled I maintained, it wasn't clear we would have to pay for her drink, and tourists shouldn't be hassled. I didn't mention that if the soda drink was fairly charged it was Rod who owed it, or that I didn't have one more baht or dollar on me, a foolhardy state to be in.

So when the Thai girl recommenced her harangue I decided to leave. Bowing slightly to the officer with my thanks I brushed off the bouncer's half-hearted attempts to detain me and walked away without looking back.

I had escaped a sticky situation with a little more sang-froid than I knew I had and marveled at my own gumption. Yet another near miss.

When I returned to my dorm room, which was happily without roommates for a second night, I decided to celebrate my fleeting freedom by having a little fun with all the orderly cots lined up in a row. So with barefoot glee I ran up and down the hopscotch of beds, bouncing from one to the next, mussing up their military deportment. It was such a delightful release I didn't feel too poorly when the maids expressed their displeasure in the morning. Carefree moments like these had been hard to come by for a long, long time.

I lost myself in errands the next day, buying a bus ticket south to the pleasure island of Ko Samui and exchanging sufficient baht for my seven budgeted dollars a day. I sighted the sights, including Wat Pho,

home of the Reclining Buddha, and caught a glimpse of the Temple of Dawn across the Chao Phraya River. The Reclining Buddha, like the Shiva bull I visited in India, was so large he nearly bust out of his building/cage. Whereas Shiva could claim it was entirely made of stone from a stoneless area, the Buddha boasted a pair of mother-of-pearl feet.

What really impressed me was Wat Pho itself, the oldest and largest temple in Bangkok. The monastery's columns were ringed by more vivid blues, reds, and golds than I had seen elsewhere in town, and silhouetted against the deep blue sky were the most crazy and uplifting spiral roof ornaments. Exploring the atrium of a cloister brought a sudden epiphany, induced by neither drugs nor sleep deprivation:

> For the fleetingest moments I saw, in a statue against a curve of roof, a perfect order which shot waves of serenity through my eyes to my other senses. And I understood how some come to stay.

Could I ever go as native as my cousin Pra Attepemo Bikkhu?

18 – Malaysian Peninsula

My overland days overseas were now limited, to a week or so down the Malaysian peninsula. So it was somewhat wistfully that I took the all night bus to a southern port not far from Surat Thani, the mainland's departure point for Ko Samui.

The bus ride was an experience: air-conditioned, with snacks, a soft drink, and a midnight rice dinner included. Due to my late booking I found my reservation at the very back of the bus in a fixed seat which couldn't recline in the least. This didn't keep any in front of me from reclining the night away, which pulverized the already insufficient leg room and denied me many winks. At least the t.v. monitor, showing Kung Fu movies all night long, was next to the driver. Yet, once again, it was in such periods of tortured sleeplessness bordering on suspended animation that I was visited by haunting flashes of beauty, more often than not spectral. Tonight it was as simple as the outer world's lights passing across my dark window like sparks of memory, each followed to the point of vanishing.

Only later south did I learn that these overnight buses are prime setups for separating backpackers from their money belts, neck wallets, and cash. The scam involves seating unsuspecting foreigners in the last row and spiking their soft drink with a sleeping potion. Then when most of the passengers are asleep, lifting the stash from the doped victim, who wakes groggily as the bus pulls into its destination. I could have used the sleep potion, if not the rest of it.

In the all too bright and rude morning I boarded the two and a half hour ferry to Ko Samui, braving the pirate-infested Gulf of Thailand, whose far shores include Cambodia and Vietnam. The thought of

Vietnam hovering over the horizon intrigued me. Indeed, I was reminded my entire stay in Thailand by the proximity of Vietnam, that scar on America's psyche. Climatically, geographically, and perhaps culturally, Thailand would be the closest I'd come to it, and I felt a strange sort of sympathy, across the waves and years, for all the young Americans who had perished there, their lives suspended in a bewildering region and time.

While every family has their own unique relation to that era and conflict, ours was belligerent and pacific at the same time, fairly typical for Massachusetts beatniks. Skip, four years older and closer to the sacrifice, decided to flee to Canada if ever drafted, an escape already condoned by all four parents. I recall campaigning as a family for the quixotic George McGovern, distributing buttons on a street corner in stodgy Concord, and being firmly against what appeared to a near-sighted twelve-year old as a war of aggression.

But now, nearly a decade after the war's tragic end, I had already learned that the world was a much more complex and dangerous place than I could have imagined from the safety of an American childhood, and my heart had opened wide enough to encompass the grief and disillusionment which so many young Americans – not to mention Vietnamese – must have experienced, dwarfing my own. Like many of them I had come to Thailand in search of – what? – release?

Despite the wild rumors no pirates boarded or scuttled our little ferry, which nestled peacefully into the welcoming folds of Ko Samui's coastal inlets. Having read about southern Thailand's two famous island retreats, this and Phuket (pronounced foo-két), I chose the less developed one.

It was either a wise or lucky choice, for Ko Samui turned out to be the most serene and inexpensive beach frolic of my journey. Quite a few wannabe hosts met our small ferry and, quickly surrounding the foreign targets, plied us with offers of free rides and inexpensive, paradisiacal lodging. One easygoing girl from the Holiday Huts was persuasive without being pushy, so I climbed into her makeshift van and enjoyed

the bumpy ride to the appropriately named Mai Nam beach. Whose 'Nam?

I didn't see any beach until the vehicle careened off the paved but potholed road, down an unpromising dirt lane through scrub brush. Only at road's end did we see the Mother Hut overlooking the inclined beach and her brood, a collection of Holiday Huts on stilts, perched over the shore like so many bony-legged kingfishers. Beyond was a calm, clear sea. When I learned it was only thirty baht or three bucks a night, I accepted.

> The Holiday Huts, where I am staying, consists of six bungalows facing the beach over a long patch of purple flowers, which open in the morning. My bungalow, with a palm frond thatched roof and woven mats around a skeleton of rickety weathered wood, is number 7. Inside, a raised section takes up two-thirds and serves as the bed; on the floor, my bag; facing the sea, the door and a mat window which jams open with a two by four of wood. I washed my clothes yesterday, swam, drank a tall beer by the same table facing the sea I am now writing on. Ko Phangan juts out of the turquoise sea to the north; the Buddha Head Beach stretches to my right. A sudden, surprise storm cut off the relentless sun an hour ago which was dramatic and good; I've burned from too much ultraviolet this morning.

There wasn't much to do besides eating and sleeping, writing postcards, and reading Joseph Conrad in preparation for Malaysia. As Naipaul in his *Among the Believers* elucidates:

> The stories of Joseph Conrad give an impression of the remoter places of the Malay Archipelago a hundred years ago: European coasting vessels, occasionally in competition with Arabs, men of the pure faith; European trading or administrative settlements on the edge of the sea or the river, with the forest at their backs; Chinese peasants and labourers taking root wherever they can; Malay sultans and rajas, warriors with their courts; and, in the background, simpler Malays, people of the river and forest, half Muslim, half animist.

In contrast Holiday Huts hosted the usual polyglot crowd of disheveled, lost, and bored Westerners, mostly European. I knew things had gone from bad to worse when after the first day the consensus was I was German. In need of a verbal rest I had spoken English only intermittently, using French with a Frog and impressing a Brit with a little German when we talked about Berlin. Apparently I had become so faceless I could choose my nationality at will, like a con artist or a spy.

Tired from the all-night bus I hit the sack early that first evening, by nine o'clock, while the rest of the motley crew partied on. I loved my hut. A little house all of my own, with a firm bed and cleanly swept floor under my bare feet. The soft, hypnotic noise of gentle waves rolling over me. I dreamt of the inviting whores of Patpong, so much more forward than any lovers I had known.

> I woke before dawn when the cheerful, hefty Thai girl who persuaded me to come to these Huts invited herself into my room and onto my bed. My sleep's lingering eroticism and the day's waking countenance encouraged me – the girl needed none. She wanted to be entered quickly and the fabulous movements of her pelvis – like none I've felt before – begged for quickness. I came accordingly and she went. The sea beckoned and upheld my waking body.

I was perplexed by my good fortune, wondering what I had done to receive such an unexpected gift. And a welcome gift it was for throughout Asia I felt starved for intimacy, physical or not. Her name was Dang. As if by mutual consent we hardly spoke that day, which was just fine given my tattered veil of silence.

Dang didn't return the following night or morning, which disappointed me, but I didn't seek her out either. It would have seemed like pushing my luck, not to mention my desire. So after one more full, lazy day by the beach I left the Sunday sea to catch the nine p.m. overnight ferry to the mainland. I would have rested longer, but I had places to go and departure dates to meet.

Dang, it turned out, was planning to take the same boat (the

cheapest available) to attend to some business in Bangkok. So when boarding together, we naturally found a sleeping space large enough for the two of us and claimed it by laying out our luggage. The night ferry was different from the day one, in that there were three open, but low, levels filled with plain mattresses, and that was that. Worse than low, the levels were all but collapsed, without room even for the Thais to stand and hardly any room to crouch. Clearly the overnight boat was designed for sleeping only.

While waiting to board, Dang had sweetly treated me to several beers, as I only had enough baht to leave the country. Getting tipsy together we laid plans for her next vacation, to America no less, following her soon-to-start two year contract in Kuwait. Although she hadn't been thrilled by her last four year contract working at a bank in Bahrain, the money had been so good she bought a Guest House in Bangkok, along with a laundromat she outfitted with American washers and dryers. Making money in the Middle East seemed a lonely life (in Bahrain, for instance, one can be deported for accepting an Arab's invitation to date), but she boasted of an English boyfriend for a time and looked forward to the bars and discotheques of the less puritanical Kuwait.

A Thai man, who appeared to be a laborer from the girth of his arms, then treated us to more beer and an appetizer of fried shrimp. He spoke no English but was very friendly, especially to Dang. All I could give him in return were a few leftover American coins. The atmosphere at departure time was festive in a show of natural Asian cheerfulness, and our local friend drove his pickup to the end of the pier to honk goodbye as we waved in parting.

Well juiced, then, for the start of our South China Sea journey, Dang and I snuggled together on the raised floor in a sea of sleeping Thai bodies. She wondered why I hadn't visited her hut the night before, for she had been expecting me. I couldn't admit the truth that I had simply been too thick to know what to do next. Maybe it was the beer or threat of slow death at the hands of Cambodian pirates, but in the middle of the night we made love quietly under Dang's sheets to the rhythmic

rolls of our little ferry as it chugged and sputtered along the mainland's black coast.

With only a slice of sleep we arrived safely in Dan Dom around three a.m., stunned into wakefulness. When it came time to say goodbye I didn't give Dang the parents' address in the States; I hadn't used contraceptives and didn't want to know the potential consequences, though this hadn't been a concern with Isabelle. After our last warm hugs, across the gulf of different worlds and my pinched lack of trust, I found the bus terminal in the pitch dark and caught an open-air bus to Hat Yai, on the railroad route south. I nodded on and off as the dawn mustered its forces to the east, showing the way home. Early that afternoon I boarded the Bangkok to Singapore train, which transported me away from Thailand and such temporary release.

It was an uncomfortably long journey to Butterworth, on the coast near Penang. With an hour stop at the border for Malaysian customs and another hour-long delay, it took a slow nine hours to the Butterworth terminus. Without air-conditioning our second-class carriage was open to the elements, which transformed from a scruffier dryness in Thailand to a sub-tropical lushness in Malaysia:

> Thick forests were interspersed with cultivated fields and paddies; rubber and palm trees surrounded lone cottages on stilts. Nearby and on the horizon, non sequitur hills and rocks sprang up now and then, reminding me of Zimbabwe. The sunset was glorious, riveting me to my window (what inner thoughts do sunsets express that so fascinate us?). A disc of smelted iron sank slowly behind a darkening earth, whose details, though fading, could still be made out in spires of smoke and in the fish-bone palm fronds of large tropical trees weeping like willows. I shuddered at the rough mystery of the land, turning to black.

A lone American traversing the Malaysian peninsula, I wondered what it would have been like to be a soldier, sweating it out on this far side of the world. Would it have been as lonely? I had to wonder: if

such an innocent and happy-go-lucky people as the Thais were invaded by a marauding neighbor, would I fight to protect them and their imperfect liberties? For what are we willing to make sacrifices? Perhaps these weren't such strange thoughts after traveling over half a year in nine third world countries.

Malaysia was of low interest at first, pressed as I was to pick up my ticket and begin the series of flights which would return me to once-upon-a-time in America. Yet travel transforms, when possible, even young and world-weary Yankees.

On the way to Kuala Lumpur I stopped several days in Penang, the tiny, former Portuguese colony off the west coast of northern Malaysia. Other than drawn to its post-colonial quirkiness I had several interesting contacts there, including another nuclear physicist to look up kindness of my German friend Walter Kley.

From Butterworth I took the short ferry to George Town, Penang, where I found a dorm bed overlooking the cacophonous Lebuh Chulia Street. Outside, before falling comatose into bed, I bought fried noodles and a Guinness stout from the same street vendor.

By phone back in Butterworth I had reached Dr. Anu Ghose, who had promptly offered to pick me up in the morning for a driving tour. He arrived punctually at ten forty-five, with both a car and driver, and off we went for a madcap tour of Penang Island.

Dr. Ghose, a Calcutta Indian, told me he had been teaching at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (the University of Science) for six years and would return to Calcutta the next. Dressed in the Indian academic uniform of shirt and trousers of the same rough, light gray material, he appeared short and squat even when seated in the back seat of the modest car. His first question, gleaned from some reference in Walter's introductory letter, was whether or not I truly was a Boston Brahmin. Coming from a potentially religious Indian, this was a delicate question to answer. Turning pedantic he then launched into long discourses on the evils of development, the perils for the environment, the overabundance of cars, motorcycles, and trucks, while bemoaning the

lack of public transport – all without interruption. When he eventually took a breath and permitted me to speak, he pooh-poohed my attempts to see in this a healthy and by and large positive industrialization. No matter. While disparaging Penang's "filthy" northern coast he showed me its Botanical Gardens and Arboretum, both scruffily Portuguese and happily incongruous.

On our return to George Town, Dr. Ghose generously treated me to a lunch at the Merlin Hotel of a watermelon drink, Chicken Curry Kapitan, and tea, which cheered me immeasurably. After skating briefly over American-Pakistan relations, always a tender topic for Indians, we found a subject to which Dr. Ghose greatly warmed: his Malaysian students, whom he said would do anything for him as for a father.

That afternoon, while Dr. Ghose attended to some work, I explored the Penang Museum which included a special exhibit on Islam's manifold contributions to world development. Among various exhibits titled ISLAM'S CONTRIBUTION TO ASTRONOMY, ISLAM'S CONTRIBUTION TO MATHEMATICS and ISLAM'S CONTRIBUTION TO NAVIGATION, was a most peculiar one on Science & Technology, a interesting brew of pride and envy:

> It was during the golden age of Islam that some scientific traditions became the chief factor in inspiring the creation of modern science in Europe. . . . This clearly indicates that science in Islam does not segregate inspired/revelation knowledge from intellectual knowledge created by man . . . . The Muslim scientist therefore has no need to look for solutions to some of the questions about the cosmos system as the answers to these are already in the Quran. This again brings Islamic research to maintain the fact of the oneness of Allah s.w.t. who is the creator of everything. In other words Islamic Science is based on the Unity of Allah. Without such foundation, civilization of man would face devastation.

In keeping with the tropical lushness, Islam in Malaysia felt different than in the Middle East, softer, gentler, more accepting. It took Naipaul to explain why:

> Islam went to Southeast Asia as another religion of India. There was no Arab invasion, as in Sind; no systematic slaughter of the local warrior class, no planting of Arab military colonies; no sharing out of loot, no sending back of treasure and slaves to the caliph in Iraq or Syria; no tribute, no taxes on unbelievers. There was no calamity, no overnight abrogation of a settled world order. Islam spread as an idea – a Prophet, a divine revelation, heaven and hell, a divinely sanctioned code – and mingled with older ideas.

So the Penang Museum, like so many before, was just what I needed after my brainless and sensual days on Ko Samui. For here I felt the cool, perking influences of higher learning prodding me as if out of a shell.

That evening I had dinner in the home of a Malaysian doctor-in-training, whom I had met all the way back in Aswan on another continent and during another life. She had invited me in Egypt to visit and didn't seem the least surprised by my call. Her Malay mother spoke no English, but constantly worried that the food would be too spicy for my tender taste buds: while hot, the curry, giant prawns, salad, and cabbage with shrimp were a delectable feast. Her father, enraged at Jewish power in America, thoughtfully asked if he had been impolite, while walking me to the bus stop at evening's end. With some exaggeration I answered no, which made him encourage me to visit again anytime. Despite the modesty of their middle-class home, with low ceilings and a Formica floor for which I removed my shoes, it was a remarkable, hard-working family: all three of his daughters were studying to become doctors and spoke impeccable English.

When one of the daughters mentioned the day after next would be Malaysian Independence Day, I jumped out of fear the agency office in Kuala Lumpur would not be open or able to give me my ticket for travel the same night. So during my last day in George Town I visited Silver Travel's main office, which to my relief was able to issue it for the balance of the fare. My return ticket at last! I could hardly believe it was true. The ticket home, more or less.

Dr. Ghose, ever the unfailing host, picked me up before midday with a young British colleague. After a raging political spat (in which the Brit argued with reason that America had lost its will power in Vietnam), he took us to Kek Lok Si Temple, a pagoda omelette of three different styles, namely Malaysian, Burmese, and Chinese. The Doctor treated us to lunch at a supermarket coffee house where we exchanged addresses in the ritual leave-taking of third world encounters, including his permanent address in Calcutta. Despite his fuzzy enviro-socialism I admired Dr. Ghose's sincerity and beliefs. In a telling story he explained that while he had been educated by Calcutta communists, he fell out with them when, as head of a scientific project, he refused to accept the trade unionists' demands that he employ Marxist doctrine. When they threatened to attack him in his lab, he countered he would lock the door from the inside and allow only one person to leave.

A perceptive observer of youth, Dr. Ghose cautioned me to remain open to new ideas and to not believe I had seen everything during my world trip. How true. In such a manner Dr. Ghose joined a long list of teachers I encountered during the year, which I came to call my graduate school. If he ever came to Boston I offered to show him the beautiful countryside (which had grown more sublime with distance), and several museums he might like.

That long last night I took the air-conditioned bus (that was not) and got stuck once again with a back row seat. While carefully eyeing the pouring of the soft drinks I comforted myself with the thought this would be one of my last, if not the very last, overland overnights of my incessant journey. It was hard to believe. From Kuala Lumpur on I would teleport myself by plane, ending nearly thirteen months of close-to-the-earth travel. I had been promised a seat that reclined, and so was actually refunded two out of the expensive fifteen dollar fare, which I spent on a midnight meal of greasy fried noodles.

The upper half of Malaysia slipped by with little notice during the interminable ride; four a.m. and our arrival in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur couldn't come quickly enough. Startled by the bright lights, like

a child out of a slumber, I gazed at the brilliantly lit Masjid Jamek Mosque at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak Rivers as we glided through the city streets. Everything was seen fleetingly, as if in a veiled Arabic dream.

Silver Travel had promised me a free bed no matter the hour, kindness of Mr. Tan, their local representative. Exhausted after a long walk and feeling no shame, I woke Mr. Tan up at five a.m. and slept on one of the office's cots until ten. Mr. Tan not only accepted this duty graciously but also treated me and another wayfarer to a last street-side lunch, in Kuala Lumpur's Chinatown. He proudly showed us an album of photographs and mementoes sent by grateful travelers, and was so persistent in plugging us for biographic details I wondered if he wasn't a spy. He seemed both lonely and needy, but what did it matter? His generosity stayed with me.

Still sleep-deprived I spent the day as if in an impenetrable fog. The massive, white, and Arabic-latticed General Post Office tower appeared as the bow of a gargantuan cruise ship slipping out to sea, at risk of drifting out the port and leaving me behind if I didn't hurry. Everywhere the people were so unfailingly friendly, looking into faces and smiling, I wondered if they were experiencing the same kind of sleep-deprivation as I. When, after all, had I seen so many friendly faces and skyscrapers in such close proximity before? Never.

So that was it. With Mr. Tan's good directions I found the airport bus and easily caught that evening's flight to Hong Kong. One minute I was there and the next I was gone, never to return again: a decided departure.

19 – Hong Kong

The last leg of my journey from Hong Kong to China to Japan began well, for flying into Hong Kong was a rush. For starters the flight on a hefty Cathay Pacific TriStar L10-11 included American muzak, earphones, smiling Hong Kong stewardesses, and no close encounters – a far cry from two take-off, two near-miss Biman Air. When the captain introduced himself over the PA system with a well-clipped American accent, he intoned our elevation at thirty-three thousand feet, our speed over five hundred m.p.h., and our distance only one hundred and fifty miles from Ho Chi Minh City, "formerly Saigon." Every fact seemed a marvel in and of itself, as I drank Malaysian beer and soothed to my first classical music in months. My spirits soared to the sprightly cadenzas of dead Europeans, oblivious to the seeds of destruction carried within.

Unaware, we floated above a thick cloud cover which obscured everything, including the brooding hulk of Red China below. When our plane swooped earthward and punctured the dense cloud blanket, the narrow runway, jutting far into the harbor, jumped up to greet us with our landing nearly rippling wakes to each side. My first glimpse of the city-state appeared unreal, an endless line of tall apartment buildings caught between the roiled harbor and mist-shrouded, pre-historic peaks. The touch down on the slick pavement, our wings bobbing left and then right with the grace of a landing goose, went surprisingly well, the meeting of two heavy constructs. Having only now crossed the Eurasian landmass after thirteen months to the day, I felt as if perched on the edge of the world, expectant.

On the way to pick up my faithful mobile home I thought I heard

my name called over the loudspeakers, instructing the person (if indeed it was me) to pick up a message at the customer service counter. While I had written from Thailand to a host of contacts, giving them the precise dates of my tickets, I doubted the mail could have preceded my speedy arrival in Hong Kong. Who could it be, then? When I discovered that the note from friends of Brownie and Dick's named Fung invited me to stay as their guest at a fancy hotel in town for two nights, I could barely contain my pleasure: what a windfall! Maybe re-entry into the over-developed and frenetic urban centers of the world would not be so unsettling after all.

Brushed by euphoria, and for lack of a cheaper alternative, I shared a slick Mercedes taxi into town with two well-fed New Zealand businessmen and gawked at the glitz of it all. To describe my hotel, the newly minted Prince Hotel Kowloon, as luxurious would be an understatement. My room, a penthouse single, commanded a view of the harbor between two other monoliths, my hotel the first towering edifice I had scaled since Cheops near Asia's far corner.

The first order of business, naturally, mandated a long, foamy bath in my glistening clean bathtub. So clean and orderly and bright was my bathroom, I almost regretted setting up camp by washing most of my dirt-hardened clothes and hanging them up to dry. While the room's amenities included a king-sized bed, desk, television, and bar, I avoided adding any movies or booze to the room's tab. Instead I listened to the freebie of the BBC's World Report on the radio's clear and strong signal. What a vast and fascinating world it seemed as I listened in on the world's wandering news, captured from the stratosphere by Hong Kong's tall and sticky fingers.

The Fungs themselves never met my grandparents, but Mrs. Fung's younger brother had stayed with them long ago for an entire school year when accepted late into the Middlesex School for boys in Concord. (The name Middlesex is amusingly precise for adolescent boys.) My grandparents were like that: they would just as soon take in stray grandchildren, as they did when Mum moved to the Virgin Islands for

the winter to more quickly divorce Dad, as homeless Filipino boys in need of a roof. When I reached Mrs. Fung by phone she explained she and her husband were busy the next several nights and away on Sunday, so rather than make me sit out at their house they thought staying in the thick of things for several days could be preferable. I thanked her profusely and told her I would be delighted to meet her and Mr. Fung, to thank them in person whenever it might be convenient. Given their generosity, an attack of politeness seemed in order.

With that done I went out to forage for an exotic if late lunch, which turned out to be a Big Mac. It took some searching as my hotel was at the end of a line of Kowloon's deluxe hotels and swank restaurants, each connected to the other by a string of shopping arcades and moving sidewalks, collectively called Harbour City. Only with regret did I pull myself away from the people-mover sidewalk (another step up in sidewalk technology, from India's dirt to Bangkok's concrete to Hong Kong's factory line) and condescend to using my legs. As it was Saturday afternoon I was but one in a sea of determined, shopping bodies, pulled this way and that like a school of fish.

Kowloon of course is but a pimple on the behind of the Chinese mainland. So by going to where the ferries depart I gained an expansive view of Hong Kong Island itself: a gallery of towering offices and hotels dwarfed by the cotton band of clouds above and looming mountains behind, a wine-dark sea lapping at its feet. What a muscle city, I thought, pumping with commerce.

The next day I walked up a Nathan Road lined by heavy, gnarled trees and turned onto Bowring, where a street fair filled the avenue. Every square foot of territory was so densely packed and used, even the sky above was cluttered by a thick web of brightly colored Chinese characters and by signs hung by ropes from the flanking buildings. Many a store sported a barber shop's red spiral stripe, twirling madly for the attention of the Sunday crowd. While smooth commerce is in, deft walking is out: I found the Hong Kongese the worst pedestrians in the world, surpassing even the Cairenese. They step directly into your path and rarely move aside or angle their bodies as you try to pass, resulting

in frequent mid-crowd collisions.

Undeterred by all the body blocking I razzle-dazzled into the Tourist Office and then Time Line Travel at Chungking Mansions, to research the possibility of a Red China solo tourist visa. Outside of package tours, individual visas were only recently being issued. Since my ticket called for ten days in Hong Kong, why not try a jaunt into Big Red itself? Things were getting just a little too civilized for my tastes.

Nellie Fung called that evening to ask if I had found other accommodations and would I join them for dinner on Monday night at the Peak on Hong Kong Island? I had found a suitably cheap fleabag, the Traveller's Lodge on the sixteenth floor of Chungking Mansions, but was quietly disappointed that I wouldn't be able to stay in the lap of their luxury. I didn't say it, but I already felt the onset of a weariness I couldn't explain.

The contrast seemed all the greater after a fine evening at the Fungs that Monday night. The outing began with the funicular ride up the Peak, as instructed, to its ballyhooed lookout. Touristy or not, the view thrilled to the core. My eyes wandered over the glittering gold, silver, white, and yellow lights, speckled by neon signs and tucked between mountain and inky sea like a necklace of precious gems. Driving a sleek Mercedes, Mr. Fung met me in the vista's parking lot and drove me the short ride to a waiting Nellie and family.

After so much American fast food (the only consistently cheap and dependable fare around), I ate so many helpings of the servant-delivered meal I must have appeared gluttonous. Nellie, an attractive and gracious Filipino, spoke the best English, while her children, including a pretty daughter, spoke with the least accent – to my ear, with an American correctness. For a few hours I felt surrounded by a cozy prime-time family. Mr. Fung and I sang the scales of politics, where accents are less noticeable. Interestingly he commented that most Europeans in Hong Kong are jealous of American power and money, while the native Chinese are not. No wonder the colony had grown so quickly.

When the conversation turned redundant I said I hoped I wasn't keeping them up, though it was only ten-thirty. I could tell entertaining

was more duty than pleasure; no late night talks here with curious European doctors on the state of the world. So without delay Mr. Fung drove me back the scenic route, along the spine of the Chinese dragon, where we bid our adieus before my delirious nighttime descent.

Chungking Mansions, despite the overtone of childhood frozen t.v. dinners, was unappetizing. The only reasonable accommodations I could find, its atmosphere was sordid, as confirmed by a police bust one morning which swept through the sixteenth floor looking for drug addicts and pushers. My bottom bunk in a long line of dorm room bunks looked onto a bumpy, opaque glass window, which was sufficiently large and porous to let in a diffuse, almost clinical, white light and much traffic noise from so many floors below. I slept horribly that night, more for psychological than physical reasons for I had weathered many a worse sleeping setup. With the end in sight I just couldn't take any more travel squalor, the contrast with the spotless luxury of the Prince Hotel too great.

So quick and precipitous was my decline that it took several days to extricate myself. On the first, my eyelids weighted by unreleased sleep, I performed visa formalities for Japan and China, choosing a rush visa for the latter, costing twice as much to take one less day. It didn't help that Amex had just returned a passel of letters that had passed the one month waiting period, for among them I was hoping to receive a letter from my godmother, Blanche, who had lived in Hong Kong for years, with possible contacts. At Amex I did pick up a telephone message from one such contact, but when I reached Mrs. Monteiro she too asked where I was staying and only offered to have lunch on Thursday, when I would be in China. Feeling blue and unloved I called Blanche in California, as Mrs. Monteiro had suggested, and chatted with as much enthusiasm as I could muster.

I hadn't spoken to anyone in the States for ages, yet Blanche sounded tantalizingly close, the Pacific Ocean a mere whisper between us. She told me Mum was doing well and regretted I hadn't given them several week's notice when I would be in Hong Kong, as they had

thought of meeting me here. How extravagant! When I asked if she had any other contacts she gave me one more name, but was not encouraging about the prospects of finding a bed. It was strange: throughout Asia, from India to Thailand, from Penang to Hong Kong, I had much less luck finding guest beds than in Europe or Africa.

When I confessed to Blanche I was exhausted from so much traveling, she suggested it could be because I was nearing the end of my trip, which rang true. One's energy fills the allotted time for travel and, often, no more. The same goes for homesickness: the surge tide of travel largely crowds it out until the end, when it flows back in unimpeded. I tried to be enthusiastic about visiting her in Bakersfield before hanging up, but a distant mirage of familiarity and support wasn't helping the here and now.

Matters didn't improve when I calculated I was spending ten dollars a day, despite the cheapness of the Mansions and the poverty of only two daily McBurger meals, period. If I wasn't careful my downdraft exhaustion could become a self-perpetuating cycle. That afternoon, showering and walking took inordinately long periods of time. I was slowing down and felt no desire whatsoever to visit one more backward, much less communist, country.

When I reached one last contact by phone, an American businessman friend of Blanche's, he abruptly cut to the point after the opening pleasantries by asking what could he do for me? In the silence that followed I considered blurting "Nothing!" but didn't. Filling the void he offered we all have lunch together as he worked in the same law firm as Mr. Monteiro. Maybe I had been spoiled by overly generous hosts, but it surprised me that contacts with so much more money could be so much less friendly. I could only hope Americans in America would be warmer.

In the end it was imperial China that pulled me out of my funk, which shouldn't have startled me as I already knew the solution to most ills is moving on, and quickly. So early Thursday morning I walked to Hung Hom Station with a Frenchman, also from Chungking, and

boarded the slickest second-class train in all of Asia: air-conditioning, sliding compartment doors, and pleasurably soft seats made in the U.K. After gliding for forty-five minutes over the rapidly developing New Territories we arrived at the border where foreigners are easily singled out, for Health and Currency Declaration forms, from a sea of bobbing black-haired heads. Considering the large numbers – more than I expected for a crossing between the free and unfree worlds – the border formalities were efficient. Even the purchasing of onward tickets to Canton was straightforward despite signs only in Chinese. After an hour wait we boarded a nearly as comfortable carriage for the three- hour ride, across lush landscapes of rice paddies nourished by the alluvial soil of the Pearl River Delta. Rolling hills were uniformly cut with regular steppes, looking like the topographical variations of an architect's miniature model blown up large, while the intermittent fires of the rural poor smoked the views. Besides the numerous thin lollipop trees, the only other vertical constructs were surprisingly tall and modern apartment buildings near the border, built perhaps for guest workers to capitalism.

The farther we traveled from the border, the more primitive the countryside became, with Guangzhou, or Canton to Western ears, no exception. Its outskirts were nearly as impoverished as those outside Indian cities, and the city itself looked drab and dirty from my train window. At the decidedly unmodern train station, Frenchie and I hooked up with several Swiss girls also looking for accommodations, but were all equally lost in a sea of Chinese characters. After twenty minutes of fruitless search in the area we decided to head toward a place called Fisherman's Hotel, a short hike from the station. Luckily the Swiss girls had the hotel name in Chinese scrawl. Every person we stopped on the wide, dusty boulevard waved us farther and farther out of town. Are all foreigners sent the same way? The Swiss had gotten the place's name and spelling from visitors recently returned. Since the border was so newly opened to individual tourists, we were without the benefit of guidebooks or tourist information.

When we finally found the very reasonable and clean Fisherman's

Hotel through gates leading to a compound, it began three days of surrealistic adventure, which while of a subdued sort perked me up tolerably. As in India everything appeared alien in the China I saw those few days, a China emerging from a long, repressive sleep, and somehow unchanged save for a few new and glitzy tourist hotels. After the jarring dose of ultramodern Hong Kong, a distant and ineffable culture was just what I needed.

The one staffer who spoke Pidgin English showed us our rooms after the preliminary negotiations and giggled sweetly whenever she understood my pleasantries. I shared a double with Frenchie, the room nicely equipped with a fan, mosquito nets, hardwood furniture (including a desk!), slippers, matting (or traditional Chinese bedding) over the mattresses, and a thermos of hot water. As the Swiss misses had brought tea bags we sat down for afternoon tea.

During the first full day, a Friday, I walked. I walked to the Canton Orchid Garden, a beautiful, secluded Chinese fantasy where an artificial lushness is populated by stepping-stone paths, by quaint bridges over dark canals, and by rock fountains and tea houses next to small ponds. With the price of admission came a chit for a free pot of colonial tea, which I drank next to an outbreak of lily pads while planning my day. From there I walked to Yuexiu Park, a vast, hilly enclave, sporting a Beixiu Lake with couples lazing in rowboats; the Zhenhai Tower or Five-Storied Pagoda, which squats contentedly like a layered red birthday cake on a hill; and the Sculpture of the Five Rams, the city's symbol, topped by a particularly large and elongated ram's head. Marching hither and thither I found my way to the Guangxiao Temple, which deftly combines sculptured Buddhas with the skeleton of a Tyrannosaurs Rex, and to the nine-storied Temple of the Six Banyan Trees with fine views overlooking the low-lying city of five million souls. At the Huaisheng Mosque, white-capped Chinese prostrated themselves toward Mecca, now west instead of east. I thought I had seen it all until I stumbled on the remains of recently slaughtered cattle, fresh chunks of meat and deflated skin, in the courtyard leading up to the mosque. Relieved there weren't any Hindus around I fled after

noticing a steady stream of still-red blood.

The lack of sanitation shouldn't have surprised me. During the long hike back to Pearl River I crossed neighborhoods all but crumbling before my eyes. The rare sidewalks, interspersed with so much exposed dirt as to look like a countryside backwater, were filthy and littered. The stone and stucco buildings were dusty and dilapidated, without facelifts in forty or more years. I hadn't expected so much poverty and neglect in a communist country, but then had only seen the display case of East Berlin and the prison grounds of Moscow's airport, all prettied up for the gullible Western day-tripper.

During the bus ride back north I met a young English-speaking native named Jin-shi, who welcomed the opportunity to practice this strange tongue. After he helped me buy my train ticket back to Shenzhen at the border, I offered to treat Jin-shi to a walk and pot of tea in the Orchid Garden, which were beyond his modest student means. In fact he had never been inside the delightful gardens. I tried not to embarrass Jin-shi with too many questions on what life is like in such a closed society. Instead I felt content telling him about the U.S. and other horizons beyond Canton. The stuff of outlandish travel, it was ironic that four decades of communism had created an unintended dialectic, with the forces of opening and closing raging in open view. We exchanged addresses, including his in a careful Chinese script, but never communicated again. That night I wrote:

> China and its people are not as I expected. Many of the women, in utilitarian double braids, look admirably productive and country fresh – as anticipated from photographs of no-nonsense female comrades; but equally many are attractive and coy in a free enterprise way. There are very few signs of communist rule, such as the red banners and nationalist flags in abundance in East Berlin; much more common are t-shirts with English words – no doubt a spreading virus from Hong Kong. But overwhelmingly the people are open-faced, cheerful and curious.

I had been warned of "Western pollution" infiltrating the

unsuspecting Cantonese, but instead felt the Hong Kong influences only added spark to an otherwise gray existence. It amazed me how just two generations could drain so much color out of the picture, like an old photograph left in the sun.

China was the last country in which I would play the currency game, with some unintended results. The thought of finding weaknesses in a rigged system never bothered me, as it usually means battling wits with bureaucrats trying to, among other things, prop up play money. Not that I had any idea what makes a hard currency hard, but softness was glaring.

China's currency distortions were worse than most, even to my untutored eyes, with its government all but xenophobic. Dollars, for instance, could not be traded officially for any amount of local currency, called yuan, as the border controls were strict in China. Yuan, on the other hand, were practically worthless outside of the country, so the clever bureaucrats had invented funny money called Foreign Exchange Certificates, or FEC's, for use by tourists and mad dog foreigners, and opened a few stores with imported goods where only FEC's were honored. While officially valued at yuan parity, FEC's were in fact worth twice as much on the black market.

So when Jin-shi offered to help me buy my ticket to Shenzhen I asked him to buy it with my (for me) illegal yuan, as it would be much cheaper. Though assenting to the plan he was rebuffed at the ticket office for not having a passport, which most Cantonese are denied. I joked that the crafty bureaucrats had thought of everything and thanked him for trying, yet he seemed concerned that our mission had failed, even after helping me buy my ticket with FEC's. I was hard pressed to persuade him otherwise and treated him to the Orchid Garden's pot of tea, to assure him of my gratitude and of the mission's success.

Then, finally, when checking out of Fisherman's Hotel the next day, I tried to pay with yuan, but the same young, giggling girl who had shown us the rooms asked for the official FEC's, as expected. I lied, saying I only had yuan left as everywhere I had gone people took my

FEC's and gave change in yuan, which was partly true. She cheerfully accepted this deception, allowing me to save a few precious travel dollars, but I felt scoundrelish when the two Swiss girls as well as Frenchie used the same reason in order to pay with yuan – which stretched credulity particularly when our Swiss friends paid with a large yuan note and received FEC's in return, shaving their costs to a quarter. While finagling a corrupt system we had also taken advantage of our naively friendly hostess. In leaving I thanked her profusely and complimented her English, precipitating a fresh set of giggles.

For punishment, the "air conditioned" train to Shenzhen was incredibly hot, slow, and bursting with loud passengers, but I savored it nevertheless as a last nostalgic tramping in second class. It was hard to believe that all such spontaneous detours were coming to an end, for thereon only tightly scheduled stopovers by plane followed. Yet totalitarian countries are just that, totalitarian and disturbing, so when we finally reached the border I felt relieved enough to actually look forward to Chungking Mansions. Nothing like Red China to make slumming in Hong Kong a relief.

That Sunday the Fungs invited me and several nuclear families to join them on a daylong excursion of island-hopping, a pleasure romp which did wonders for my feelings of neglect. In their own mammoth powerboat we motored east, until the water cleared to a pleasant emerald and turquoise, and set anchor in a hidden cove. As the day was lovely and warm we swam and ate a large, varied lunch on the motor boat's aft, while chatting in the quiet of a protected sea. One of the couples, a Chinaman named Lo and his Scot wife, caught my attention in particular. While discussing his surname, Lo, it came up that a vineyard and chateau in France sported his name, perhaps as *L'eau*. When I suggested he buy a case of their wine he replied he might buy the chateau instead. (My, my – I hadn't been around the ostentatious rich for a while.) His wife for some reason couldn't take her eyes off my groin and Israeli swim suit, which I found odd given how thin I had become after over two months in Asia: I must have looked fresh off an

ashram. For the remainder of the day I attempted to hide my midsection from Mrs. Lo by placing obstacles in the way, such as railings and towels, but this did little good. Undeterred she invited me to the family's dinner party the next night, my last in Hong Kong, to celebrate the Mid-Autumn Moon Festival. I accepted.

Nellie Fung, hospitable to the end of her fine fingertips, looked after me all day long, making sure I got nearly as much to eat as I had at their house. When the subject came up of what I planned to do with my life when, or if, I ever finished traveling, she soothingly suggested I come back to work in Hong Kong. What a novel thought! I didn't comment at the time, but an hour or so later found a discreet moment to tell her I was intrigued by the idea and to ask how I could go about it. Taking my question with charming gravity she promised to put me in touch with a Boston representative of her husband's company on my return. Imagine that: from an artistic family that looked down on any form of commerce, what a lark me in business would be! Rather than clarifying what my next career should be, my year and more of wanderings had only confused things further.

I had one more lunch the next day, with Blanche's friends the Monteiros who as British expats provided a paler image of what life in the colony could be. With a permanently cheerful countenance, wife Carol had that recognizably convivial English facade, while husband John, balding and pudgy, had a hearty if critical demeanor. Within five minutes of our meeting he dismissed all American newspapers (save, generously, the *New York Times*) as hopelessly provincial, while touting the quaint local rag, the *South China Morning Post*, as the height of sophistication. I should have ignored the absurdity, remembering Mr. Fung's observation that local Brits are just plain jealous, but instead rose to the bait. Having read the *South China Post* that morning I asked why an article on the Dalai Lama mentioned his departure from Tibet in 1959 with eighty thousand followers, without mentioning the cause, that is China's invasion? How great a threat, I asked, was China's proximity to a straight and accurate reporting of history? The Monteiros immediately looked uncomfortable, their cotton shirts over-starched.

Denials followed forthwith, but my rude mentioning of the colony's precariousness caused a chill to settle over our soups from which we never recovered. Fed up with America-bashing, even if there was some truth to his observation, I was losing the good graces of a polite guest.

On his return from work Monday evening, Mr. *Chateau Lo* picked me up in his white 620i BMW for the ride home to Repulse Bay, the whiteness of his clean machine only matched by the ripe blankness of the full moon. We zipped around the gleefully twisting roads with views I would have savored if my gyroscope hadn't been spinning from the car's slalom. A sense of imbalance pervaded the entire party – much more an event than a dinner party – for I drank too much and stayed too late, gawking at all the soft paper lanterns strung from tree to tree like large drops of lit milk. I tried to bow out around eleven o'clock, but Mrs. Lo said don't be silly, I should wait. For what I never found out. Eventually Mr. Lo's younger brother drove me to the Star Ferry for my return to Kowloon and Chungking Mansions, but it was too late, the ferry already moored for the night. He offered to drive me back by tunnel but had forgotten his wallet at the party to pay for the toll. When I offered to pay the several dollars myself he insisted on returning to his apartment and switching to his Mercedes, which had spare change. I thanked him for his unwarranted kindness, but ended up with a splitting headache when I slipped between the well used and familiar nylon sides of my sleeping sack and zonked out at the dingy Travellers' Lodge one last time.

20 – Orient

I surprised myself by waking at seven o'clock and feeling much better, relatively fit for travel. Today I would fly to Japan, my last foreign redoubt before more familiar territory.

During the flight to Tokyo, the thought of the impending language barrier and sky-high costs of Japan began to unnerve me, enough so that I caught a chill from the jet's air conditioning and wrapped myself in a flight blanket. It had been a while since a cotton ball of acrid fear lodged in my stomach, and I wondered how the developed world could make me so nervous. We touched down in Taipei, Taiwan, for a brief layover. With a sense of triumph endemic to the endless excursion traveler I counted a grand total of thirty-one countries visited when including such painless airport stopovers. Surrounded by the busy efficiency of airborne businessmen I felt a surreptitious apartness, an uppity detachment, with a touch of the melancholy that terminates most trips. How many of them, after all, could have conceived of such a strange adventure?

Narita International Airport was efficient, more modern than modern to my weary eyes, and bursting with energetic Japanese. I had written several contacts, but alas there were no messages over the public address system, no warm words of welcome. For my last foreign arrival I was on my own.

When the autopilot of survival kicked in I gleaned the Tourist kiosk for information on how to cheaply and safely span the fifty-five miles to downtown Tokyo. I had been warned that the country's public transport systems, like China's, only use the squiggles of Chinese characters, as indecipherable to me as finger painting.

I tried calling one contact, an English friend of friends of my grandparents, whom I had written. While the business number was old, Christopher's home phone number worked. A female voice answered the phone and said, Sure, if I could find my way to their neighborhood subway stop, someone would pick me up, great. Evidently a dinner party was planned that evening and one more mouth to feed not a problem, so I should just call from the nearest metro. Banzai! A friendly host in one of the world's most expensive cities – what a relief.

The offer of food and possibly shelter was still fifty-five miles away, so I redoubled efforts to orient myself within the hieroglyphics of the city map. After buying a paltry amount of very expensive yen I made my way to the subway with purple imitation-velvet seats and began the long journey with exchanges, which flowed well enough. In fact the train spent much of the distance above ground, affording me a long, slow introduction to Tokyo. As dusk gathered and then fled before the train's nose, lights all across Tokyo lit up in a panorama of dancing neon. I had never seen so much neon for such an expanse, not as intense as Times Square's but more shockingly relentless. Among the bright brush strokes of meaningless script, an occasional word in English jumped out almost with the clang of a bell.

After I called from the arranged stop, host Christopher himself picked me up in the fancy Akasaka section of town. A model of English warmth he was exceedingly friendly, even worrying if my mobile home was too heavy. He couldn't have been more cheerful, despite the fact that two hours had passed since my first call, and he had left the middle of his dinner party in order to fetch me.

The party itself, a kaleidoscope of light, smells, food, and noisy people as I entered the apartment door, welcomed me with one last clang. An extra chair had been found and a plate of the main course saved, as I settled in with hellos all around and a brief summary on how the heck I had gotten here. As Christopher was a successful businessman, his guests were a spattering of young Western professionals (no Japanese), carving out an insular existence on the globe's far eastern edge. The woman sitting next to me had arrived,

following a world stint a bit more comfortable than mine, and stayed after meeting an attractive young Englishman, now her husband. Several others had arrived all but penniless in Japan and were sympathetic with the plight of a "foreign devil" just reaching these shores. Overwhelmed with hospitality and fatigue I excused myself early and fell heavily onto the spare room's mattress, an all-encompassing blankness taking over my brain, my senses, every cell in my malnourished body.

I slept soundly and had no desire to get up the next morning, even after ten hours in bed. I must have had too much sleep, to be so heavy with it, and got up to shower and join Bindy, Chris's lady-friend, for a coffee. She invited me to lunch later with her and Chris but I declined, begging off with the excuse of travel fatigue. After she left I went back to bed. How lazy! I don't usually behave like such a slug, but so many months of travel were finally catching up with me, so near to the circle's close at the end of my world's circumnavigation.

It was more than that, though, for I turned deliriously ill that afternoon. At first my body alternated between waves of heat and chills, no matter the weight of blankets thrown over me. Was I on the airplane again? How could I turn off the air conditioning? Then my head suddenly cleared and my body poured sweat in quantities far exceeding sports or sex, soaking both sheets and mattress. While disturbing it was not an altogether unpleasant experience, like the first nocturnal rush of bed-wetting as a child, creating one's small pocket of warmth.

I was asleep and undisturbed when Christopher returned that late evening; I had thought it best to wait and see if I quickly improved before sounding an alarm. After all, heat stroke in Nairobi had done almost as much mischief to my body for a brief period, so couldn't this just be a strong case of travel fatigue?

But when fresh waves of heat, chills, and sweats accompanied by, for novelty's sake, dry heaves, endured that night, I realized enough was enough and left a note asking Christopher to knock on my door before he left. When he did and saw my sickly appearance as I tried to explain, in a rational sort of way, why I might be just over-tired, he immediately suggested he send his secretary by in an hour to take me to the doctor.

I reluctantly agreed.

After Chris's departure I slouched back onto my soggy bed and wondered how it could have come to this. I vaguely remembered, between bouts of sleep, delirium, and blankness, moments or minutes of fear and excitement, times when my thoughts focused and then clarified on the dangers ahead. At some point I realized I was quite ill. From my well-worn chapter on unhealth I diagnosed my bouts as malaria. Then I wondered if I would die, which in a clean way would make sense for I had flirted with Faustian destruction and demise the entire trip. If my life were fiction, I thrilled, then death by malaria could work, a kind of poetic justice. ("An American youth, bitten too many times by travel bug, succumbs.")

Or maybe it was in moments of delirium, of floating in and out of consciousness, that I considered the rawness of my fate and nearly made peace with my departure, my temperature as high as the angels. Years of reading the romantics from Dostoyevsky to Updike had prepared me well for this tawdry sacrifice, this dying for one's cheap beliefs and artlessness. Why not go out with a flourish, in a stranger's apartment in Tokyo? Why?

Somehow I managed to shower and, after a long or short wait, heard the door bell ring and beckon me to answer. Half expecting to meet the grim reaper on the far side of the bright white door I was startled to find not one but two Japanese women – was I seeing double? – who were barely taller than my navel.

They bowed slightly, introduced themselves in a hurried manner, and efficiently bundled me into one of Christopher's coats and out into a waiting taxi. If it weren't for the nausea of sudden activity I would have positively enjoyed myself on such an interesting outing. In any event I made several wan attempts at making light of the situation, like Reagan on the way to the operating table.

As the cab swayed in and out of traffic, keeling to its own compass, I felt secure with one secretary stationed protectively to each side, as if to keep me from toppling out the door. They were apparently much relieved to find the task of ambulancing a *gaijin* to a Western doctor less

burdensome than feared. Indeed, the twin to my right expressed her relief by commenting on my joviality.

"We so glad you joking," she said haltingly and with hope, "before we come, we decide who take head, who take feet!"

Ritual dismemberment, I feared with a smile.

Upon hearing my symptoms Dr. Symonds preliminarily diagnosed malaria, but appeared puzzled when I showed him both of my prescriptions for malarial prophylactics, as he primly called them. He drew blood in any case, commented on my thinness, and asked I wait half an hour for the results. Sure, I said, and amused myself over sweet nothings in the waiting room.

His Japanese nurse startled me with the news that hepatitis, instead of malaria, was the likely culprit. What hepatitis meant or entailed I didn't have the foggiest notion and didn't bother to ask. A second blood test in order to confirm would be available in two days – maybe I would ask then. After paying an outrageous sum in yen by credit card, I left with my two cheerful escorts who had given up trying to conceal their amusement at an inherently mirthful situation. Ill, at long last helpless and ill: the irony of my predicament did not escape me.

The next several days were effortlessly filled with the logistics of departure, as leaving had already become a reflex habit. Yet, at last, I felt above it all, floating. The second blood test confirmed, yes, that I had been felled by hepatitis, a disease of the liver no less, but which exact type no one could tell. Doc Symonds seconded Lonely Planet's position that viral hepatitis is contracted from unsanitary food or water and can incubate for up to six weeks after initial exposure. That could easily place my rendezvous with microbes in India, as I had left Calcutta only a month prior. I called my airline, Northwest Orient, and without much hassle changed my flight directly to Seattle, dropping the stop in Honolulu, and moved my departure date to as soon after the test results as possible. Dr. Symonds said it would be fine for me to fly, just to wrap up in blankets and to not sneeze on anyone.

In the meantime I tried to eat small portions of none too solid foods, for I was having a tough time keeping anything down as my panicked liver had stopped producing the bile that aids digestion. I tried some reheated potatoes and lamb with the fat removed, which returned three hours later as regurgitated baby food. Despite the diagnosis my unmasked illness brazenly kept me company for a while longer. That night, like the one before, I ran through the musical scales of heat, chill, and sweat, wetting my sheets and mattress once again. This was just one more nuisance, for I had to spend much of the next day up and around, waiting for the mattress to dry out before I could return for a much needed afternoon nap. Suddenly my needs were quite simple.

I tried calling Mum collect but the operator could only reach the answering machine, which stubbornly refused to accept charges. Only later did I realize we were calling in the middle of the night, her time. When I tried a second time, morning her time, and still didn't connect, I asked the operator to try Dad's number.

Although I hadn't spoken to her for over a year I immediately recognized Molly's voice. Eager with anticipation she accepted charges and told me how glad she was to hear mine.

"I have good news and bad news. . ." I started.

I could hear her frown as worry suddenly tinged the line. "Are you ill?"

"Yes," I replied, "the good news is I'm coming home, but the bad news is that I'm ill with hepatitis."

When we discussed the disease and a few details, the concern in her voice nearly made me cry. It had been so long since I heard love for me in the voice of another.

Before hanging up I briefly spoke to my sister Lily, whose voice had lost its cute, privileged baby twang over the intervening year. When I asked her if she had been *bad*, she immediately said *yes*, which made me smile.

Explaining my failed attempts to get through I asked Molly to call Mum with my telephone number, which she did, for within an hour I was beckoned by the phone. After hearing the crackle of an

intercontinental connection I found a voice very much like my mother's on the far end of the distant line.

I spent my last evening in Tokyo alone. Christopher had a business dinner to attend, for which I was thankful as I felt too sickly to be sociable. I listened to Beethoven's "Waldstein" Piano Sonata while gazing at the inspiring view of nighttime Tokyo, filled with huge neon signs that flash hot white on Akasaka's nearby buildings or, farther away, like fireflies in the distance. The sonata developed architecturally, one floor built on another like all these tall and stout buildings, a melody of geometry. When looking down I recalled Bindy pointing out a private garden many stories below, which she explained belonged to Mr. Toyota himself, who could be seen on occasion shuffling around the garden filled with chairs, fountains, and a pool with carp. It looked too impossibly minuscule to be such a rich man's private backyard, but then the scale was different here, more compact, nearly suffocating. I experienced a sense of vertigo, teetering on the edge of nightlife, and withdrew.

I returned to the States as if in a long dream. Chris – my last and thankfully one of my most generous hosts – dropped me off at a Narita air terminal in downtown Tokyo. There, thanks to Japanese efficiency, I could check my bag to Seattle for I was finally, at long last, unable to carry my mobile home any longer, and ride the direct bus to the airport. At the main terminal I went on an exhausting and nearly fruitless journey in search of one more gift. I had already bought an early Christmas present for every family member, except younger brother Tim. After the longest time I found a techie and compact calculator, but then could barely summon the energy to get back to the gate, needing to sit and rest like an old man on the way.

Maybe it was nervous excitement but I didn't sleep a moment during the nighttime eight hour flight to Seattle. The prospect of returning to such an unknown America, lurching ahead to new rhythms, fads, and worries, unsettled me. What would it be like? Would I still recognize it?

Would it recognize me? I managed to nibble on a bit of dinner without resorting to the air sickness bag, but did so disdainfully, with the confidence I could have made it without food for a whole week and still tough it through this last test, the last hurdle of a journey without end. Feeling diminutive and hunched over myself, after several months in the Short People's continent of Asia, I gawked at all the tall American boys crowding the aisle. They looked out of place until we flew over the Olympic Mountains in the direct morning light. Only then, floating above the majesty of the Olympics, did I understand the outsized proportions of this strange race called Americans, whose people somehow fit the land.

Over the Pacific, perhaps, I would look out my black hole window searching for sparks of life in the seamless night of daydreams, but found none. We crossed over the international date line and were afforded the opportunity of living twice through the very same day in history: a Saturday, September 15th, 1984. Gone, already, were the nights of bus or train travel with a vibrant, endless, tropical world pressing through the window and embracing my lone, breathing body. Here and now I searched and searched and could only look into a timeless void. The plane's engines, as if speaking in code, droned on.

When Molly and then Mum had asked about my return plans I told them I would recover for a few weeks with Skip in Seattle, before resuming the trip and hitching across the States as planned. After all, post-payment to Dr. Symonds, I was all but broke and had already lined up a ranch job in Wyoming through a woman with the wonderfully Western name of Tish Tilt, whom I met on one of my Odysseus-like Ionian Sea crossings. As this plan didn't go over well with either mother, Mum offered to pay for a ticket to Boston if I would return home to recover. She didn't have to ask twice: I quickly relented. Yes, I said: *yes*. After all, I was in need of a rest.

When we settled down on the tarmac of Seattle's airport, the ground swelling up to meet my shrunken stomach, I rejoiced inwardly and heaved a sigh of relief that exhaled in stutters like water down a rippled washboard. The poker-faced customs man asked me how long I had

been out of the country and accepted my answer of four hundred days with hardly a twitch, but looked up when I declared in parting, "Glad to be back!" The ticket to Boston, as promised, was waiting for me at the airline counter.

My six hour flight over the massive, busy continent was interrupted by a brief rest in Chicago. With so much land speeding beneath me I felt disoriented, dizzy – without the slow, close-to-earth caress of her every fold, the country appeared foreign to me, the rapid flyover a tragic waste of valuable hitchhikable territory. My journal's last entry:

> Chicago. I poked about O'Hare, during our stop, feeling like a spy. So this is America? The lip of skyscrapers, seen from the air, rested on the vast dark mouth of Lake Michigan, glistening in the cool, low autumnal sun like teeth. The crisp clearness made for a scenic landing; we swung by a line of highlighted metallic bodies ready to hurtle skyward. Ah, the beauty – America. I retained a sob.

When I met Mum at Logan International Airport, which appeared sweetly calm and familiar with Boston's unhurried beat, it was nearly the exact spot where she had dropped me off over thirteen months previously, with the same clear sun shining on a life of seemingly limitless possibilities. She looked different, a little frailer, more prematurely aged and even more concerned, as if about to burst into tears of regret.

And what of me? After the shock of recognition and the altering of paths to intersect, she smiled bravely before giving me a large but delicate homecoming hug, for I was jaundiced yellow and, at one hundred and forty pounds, twenty-five pounds lighter to the wind.

I didn't say anything, but it was already understood – now, at last, it was her turn to take care of me.

Epilogue

≈

I remember waking early under the press of blankets, to watch the fuzzy pale-orange sun hoist over the horizon and slowly climb the frail and soon leafless branches of the sugar maple stationed outside the window. The colors were disturbingly harsh, the branches and city sky drained of warmth.

The Cambridge hospital where I was birthed confirmed the diagnosis of viral hepatitis, which was a relief as serum hepatitis was making headlines at the time by felling patients in western Massachusetts. As the only cure is clean food and rest I was bedridden for several months, while my crippled liver died and slowly rejuvenated, one cell at a time.

During the nascent weeks of recovery I developed an early morning routine, walking at first to the end of the driveway, then half a block down Highland Street, then all the way down the block and eventually around all four corners of my diminished world. I managed the course only with the sled-dog help of Chloe, Mum's young Siberian Husky, whose leash and inbred desire to haul weight pulled me back up the inclines.

In wonder at an old world I closely monitored the seasonal changes from fall to winter, from the gradual southern shift of the sunrise out my second floor window to the maple's stuttered loss of leaves. Like a recalcitrant squirrel faced with on-rushing deprivation, my body fitfully accumulated the lost pounds.

In moments of quiet recognition it amazed me to have accomplished what I had set out to do, circling our small planet on such a lean

budget. My body had absorbed eight months of malarial pills and water-muddying iodine tablets, as well as many foods, liquids, and sights which were unfamiliar. At a cost both physically and spiritually, for the body is but thin armor for the soul.

In the odyssey's dying months in Asia I sent missives to my journey's muses, including Mrs. Macinlay, Daniela, and Mira. In Calcutta I found a postcard titled "Buddha Subduing Mira," after the Buddha style of Sukathai, which I dispatched to her while doubting it possible. Years later I was told Mira married a ski bum, though I suspect he was much more than that.

I never received my letters back from Daniela and heard, many years later from Brownie, that she never married the Pucci heir. She called once, early in my convalescence to wish me a speedy recovery, but her voice seemed far away and I didn't have the energy to say anything. I felt foggy, at a deafening loss for words. Daniela – my enigmatic and elusive Daniela, the thought of whom had sustained me for so many months and miles in so many strange places – ended the transatlantic call quickly and that was that. We lost touch.

The Macinlays invited me over New Year's to the promised house party, on another small island, this one in the sunny Bahamas. I shouldn't have, but I accepted. The materialism – principally of other guests – was disturbing, and my body and soul were still in shock, so I drank too much and made a fool of myself.

I exchanged Christmas greetings with Rusty and Celeste for a number of years, out of gratitude for all they had done for me during one of the most dangerous years of my life, but eventually that too sputtered out. The generational ties between families had come to an end, thanks to me, demonstrating once again the impermanence of things.

As the years roll on and the journeys become less and less physically challenging, I have nothing but gratitude to these guardian angels who, like little Ute, kept me going for another day.

* * *

As for Mum, on my return from the Bahamas she took to the bottle again, dashing the hopes of the prior year. I moved out, this time for good, and the disease took its leisurely course for decades to come, crumbling the ties of an already damaged family.

They say the process of recovery is a long one and ongoing, whose finality is never certain, the end never clear. Perhaps it is the process itself, the going and the getting there that counts, rather than the shifting destinations.

The years pass and little remains outwardly of those wandering months, other than this collection of words – and one enduring idiosyncracy. Soon after my return and early on in my recuperation I noticed a strange, recurring tic with my right, non-writing hand: sometimes when my body is relaxed, it tightens into an involuntary, foreign fist.

Ofttimes I don't notice, but it is usually there, like an old friend. I can only guess that my body carries the memory of those indelible times, like traces of fear, and in moments of inattention concentrates them in a reflexive grip. While the immediacy of the experiences fades, I may well carry the reflex with me to the grave, in one last spasm of memory.

Acknowledgments

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One travels alone, encouraged by so many.

To all my hosts, many mentioned, some not, I am eternally grateful for their generosity. Little did they know how their kindnesses kept me from bodily or emotional harm. Truly, there must be a Lord of Hosts who protects the young and innocent from the consequences of their actions – some of the time.

For the unruliest adventure of writing, earliest support came from Maureen Earl, Clifford Irving, Brad Newsham, Michele Earl, Victoria Tilney, and many others. My first and greatest cheerleader was my sister Lily, who insisted on a writing routine and attended the first public reading of a raw first chapter in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

My heartfelt thanks go to Gil Sewall and Mike Cannell for timely comments and readings, and especially to Doreen Hemlock and John Arbab for such careful reviews, including of foreign languages.

Clearly, remaining errors, a somewhat jejune diet, and so much else remain the responsibility of the author.

About the Author

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Ben Batchelder has traveled some of the most remote roads the world offers.

Nothing in his background, from a degree in Visual & Environmental Studies at Harvard College to an MBA from the Wharton School, adequately prepared him for the experiences.

Yet he perseveres, for through such journeys life unfolds. Having written of two previously, he currently is a mountain man in the interior of Brazil who comes to down the sea at Miami Beach, Florida.

His last published work, *To Belém & Back*, received a starred review from *Publishers Weekly*.

For more about the author, visit www.benbatchelder.com

About My World Book

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For more information on *My World Book*, subscribe to the author's site and visit www.benbatchelder.com/world

Notes

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