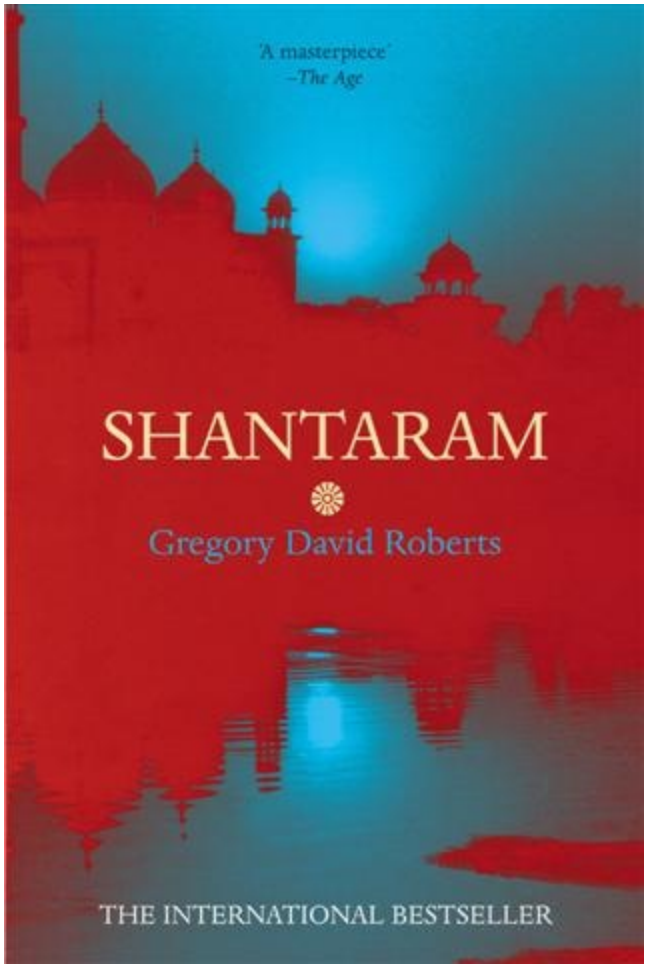

Shantaram

Gregory David Roberts

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Shantaram

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Book Jacket Information:

_Shantaram is a novel based on the life of the author, Gregory David Roberts. In 1978 Roberts committed a series of armed robberies while addicted to heroin, and was sentenced to nineteen years'

imprisonment. In July 1980 he escaped over the front wall of Victoria's maximum-security prison, in broad daylight, thereby becoming one of Australia's most wanted men for what turned out to be the next ten years.

His journey took him to New Zealand, Asia, Africa and Europe, but his home for most of those years was Bombay-where he established a free medical clinic for slum-dwellers, and worked as a counterfeiter, smuggler, gunrunner, and street soldier for one of the most charismatic branches of the Bombay mafia.

_Shantaram deals with all this, and more. It is an epic, mesmerizing tale of crowded slums and five-star hotels, romantic love and prison torture, mafia gang wars and Bollywood films, and spiritual gurus and brutal battlefields.

It weaves a seamless web of unforgettable characters, amazing adventures, and superb evocations of Indian life.

This remarkable book can be read as a vast, extended thriller, as well as a superbly written meditation on the nature of good and evil. It is a compelling tale of a hunted man who had lost everything-his home, his family, and his soul-and came to find his humanity while living at the wildest edge of experience.

Nothing like this has been written before, and nobody but Greg Roberts could have written it now.

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Gregory David Roberts was born in Melbourne, and has lived in India, New Zealand, Germany, and Switzerland. He speaks four languages and has traveled widely in Asia, Africa and Europe. He is now a full-time writer and lives in Melbourne.

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Praise for Shantaram

"Shantaram is a big and big-hearted book... It's got everything you could ever want in a novel-memorable characters, tortured romances, wild comic capers in exotic locales; stories of heroism and cowardice, love and betrayal, sin and redemption...

"This vast tapestry of tales is sewn together with the skill of a master storyteller... Roberts has one hell of an imaginative gift...

"What, in the end, strikes you most about this swashbuckling and ultimately life-affirming romp of a novel is that it is also the kind the aesthetic triumph we once called-without blushing-a masterpiece."

- Cameron Woodhead, The Age

"It is a tale, by turns gripping, hilarious, moving and instructive. It evokes the raucous tangle of modern India superbly."

- Frank Campbell, The Australian

"Shantaram is not so much a mirror as a mirror ball, spinning with relentless drive, dazzling but ungras-pable. And, again, audacious.

Gloriously audacious."

- Nicola Robinson, The Sydney Morning Herald

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For my mother

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May all those you love find the truth in you and be true to your love.

Shantaram

Part One

Chapter One

It took me a long time and most of the world to learn what I know about love and fate and the choices we make, but the heart of it came to me in an instant, while I was chained to a wall and being tortured. I realized, somehow, through the screaming in my mind, that even in that shackled, bloody helplessness, I was still free: free to hate the men who were torturing me, or to forgive them. It doesn't sound like much, I know. But in the flinch and bite of the chain, when it's all you've got, that freedom is a universe of possibility. And the choice you make, between hating and forgiving, can become the story of your life.

In my case, it's a long story, and a crowded one. I was a revolutionary who lost his ideals in heroin, a philosopher who lost his integrity in crime, and a poet who lost his soul in a maximum-security prison. When I escaped from that prison, over the front wall, between two gun-towers, I became my country's most wanted man. Luck ran with me and flew with me across the world to India, where I joined the Bombay mafia. I worked as a gunrunner, a smuggler, and a counterfeiter. I was chained on three continents, beaten, stabbed, and starved. I went to war. I ran into the enemy guns. And I survived, while other men around me died. They were better men than I am, most of them: better men whose lives were crunched up in mistakes, and thrown away by the wrong second of someone else's hate, or love, or indifference.

And I buried them, too many of those men, and grieved their stories and their lives into my own.

But my story doesn't begin with them, or with the mafia: it goes back to that first day in Bombay. Fate put me in the game there.

Luck dealt the cards that led me to Karla Saaranen. And I started to play it out, that hand, from the first moment I looked into her green eyes. So it begins, this story, like everything else- with a woman, and a city, and a little bit of luck.

The first thing I noticed about Bombay, on that first day, was the smell of the different air. I could smell it before I saw or heard anything of India,

even as I walked along the umbilical corridor that connected the plane to the airport. I was excited and delighted by it, in that first Bombay minute, escaped from prison and new to the wide world, but I didn't and couldn't recognize it. I know now that it's the sweet, sweating smell of hope, which is the opposite of hate; and it's the sour, stifled smell of greed, which is the opposite of love. It's the smell of gods, demons, empires, and civilizations in resurrection and decay. It's the blue skin-smell of the sea, no matter where you are in the Island City, and the blood-metal smell of machines. It smells of the stir and sleep and waste of sixty million animals, more than half of them humans and rats. It smells of heartbreak, and the struggle to live, and of the crucial failures and loves that produce our courage. It smells of ten thousand restaurants, five thousand temples, shrines, churches, and mosques, and of a hundred bazaars devoted exclusively to perfumes, spices, incense, and freshly cut flowers. Karla once called it the worst good smell in the world, and she was right, of course, in that way she had of being right about things. But whenever I return to Bombay, now, it's my first sense of the city-that smell, above all things-that welcomes me and tells me I've come home.

The next thing I noticed was the heat. I stood in airport queues, not five minutes from the conditioned air of the plane, and my clothes clung to sudden sweat. My heart thumped under the command of the new climate.

Each breath was an angry little victory. I came to know that it never stops, the jungle sweat, because the heat that makes it, night and day, is a wet heat.

The choking humidity makes amphibians of us all, in Bombay, breathing water in air; you learn to live with it, and you learn to like it, or you leave.

Then there were the people. Assamese, Jats, and Punjabis; people from Rajasthan, Bengal, and Tamil Nadu; from Pushkar, Cochin, and Konarak; warrior caste, Brahmin, and untouchable; Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Parsee, Jain, Animist; fair skin and dark, green eyes and golden brown and black; every different face and form of that extravagant variety, that incomparable beauty, India.

All the Bombay millions, and then one more. The two best friends of the smuggler are the mule and the camel. Mules carry contraband across a border control for a smuggler. Camels are unsuspecting tourists who help

the smuggler to get across the border. To camouflage themselves, when using false passports and identification papers, smugglers insinuate themselves into the company of fellow travelers- camels, who'll carry them safely and unobtrusively through airport or border controls without realizing it.

I didn't know all that then. I learned the smuggling arts much later, years later. On that first trip to India I was just working on instinct, and the only commodity I was smuggling was my self, my fragile and hunted freedom. I was using a false New Zealand passport, with my photograph substituted in it for the original. I'd done the work myself, and it wasn't a perfect job.

I was sure it would pass a routine examination, but I knew that if suspicions were aroused, and someone checked with the New Zealand High Commission, it would be exposed as a forgery fairly quickly. On the journey to India from Auckland, I'd roamed the plane in search of the right group of New Zealanders. I found a small party of students who were making their second trip to the sub-continent. Urging them to share their experience and travellers' tips with me, I fostered a slender acquaintance with them that brought us to the airport controls together. The various

Indian officials assumed that I was traveling with that relaxed and guileless group, and gave me no more than a cursory check.

I pushed through alone to the slap and sting of sunlight outside the airport, intoxicated with the exhilaration of escape: another wall scaled, another border crossed, another day and night to run and hide. I'd escaped from prison almost two years before, but the fact of the fugitive life is that you have to keep on escaping, every day and every night. And while not completely free, never completely free, there was hope and fearful excitement in the new: a new passport, a new country, and new lines of excited dread on my young face, under the trey eyes. I stood there on the trample street, beneath the baked blue bowl of Bombay sky, and my heart was as clean and hungry for promises as a monsoon morning in the gardens of Malabar.

"Sir! Sir!" a voice called from behind me.

A hand grabbed at my arm. I stopped. I tensed every fighting muscle, and bit down on the fear. Don't run. Don't panic. I turned.

A small man stood before me, dressed in a grimy brown uniform, and carrying my guitar. More than small, he was a tiny man, a dwarf, with a large head, and the startled innocence of Down syndrome in his features. He thrust the guitar at me.

"Your music, sir. You are losing your music, isn't it?"

It was my guitar. I realized at once that I must've forgotten it near the baggage carousel. I couldn't guess how the little man had known that it belonged to me. When I smiled my relief and surprise, the man grinned back at me with that perfect sincerity we fear and call simple-minded. He passed the guitar to me, and I noticed that his hands were webbed like the feet of a wading bird. I pulled a few notes from my pocket and offered them to him, but he backed away awkwardly on his thick legs.

"Not money. We are here to help it, sir. Welcome in India," he said, and trotted away into the forest of bodies on the path.

I bought a ticket to the city with the Veterans' Bus Service, manned by ex-servicemen from the Indian army. I watched as my backpack and travel bag were lifted to the top of a bus, and dumped onto a pile of luggage with precise and nonchalant violence, and decided to keep the guitar in my hands. I took a place on the bench seat at the back of the bus, and was joined there by two long-haired travellers. The bus filled quickly with a mix of Indians and foreigners, most of them young, and traveling as inexpensively as possible.

When the bus was close to full, the driver turned in his seat, scowled at us menacingly, spat a jet of vivid red betel juice through the open doorway, and announced our imminent departure.

"Thik hain, challo!"

The engine roared, gears meshed with a growl and thunk, and we sped off at alarming speed through crowds of porters and pedestrians who limped,

sprang, or side-stepped out of the way with only millimeters to spare. Our conductor, riding on the bottom step of the bus, cursed them with artful animosity.

The journey from the airport to the city began on a wide, modern motorway, lined with shrubs and trees. It was much like the neat, pragmatic landscape that surrounded the international airport in my home city, Melbourne. The familiarity lulled me into a complacency that was so profoundly shattered, at the first narrowing of the road, that the contrast and its effect seemed calculated. For the first sight of the slums, as the many lanes of the motorway became one, and the trees disappeared, clutched at my heart with talons of shame. Like brown and black dunes, the acres of slums rolled away from the roadside, and met the horizon with dirty heat-haze mirages.

The miserable shelters were patched together from rags, scraps of plastic and paper, reed mats, and bamboo sticks. They slumped together, attached one to another, and with narrow lanes winding between them. Nothing in the enormous sprawl of it rose much above the height of a man.

It seemed impossible that a modern airport, full of prosperous and purposeful travellers, was only kilometers away from those crushed and cindered dreams. My first impression was that some catastrophe had taken place, and that the slums were refugee camps for the shambling survivors. I learned, months later, that they were survivors, of course, those slum-dwellers: the catastrophes that had driven them to the slums from their villages were poverty, famine, and bloodshed. And five thousand new survivors arrived in the city every week, week after week, year after year.

As the kilometers wound past, as the hundreds of people in those slums became thousands, and tens of thousands, my spirit writhed.

I felt defiled by my own health and the money in my pockets. If you feel it at all, it's a lacerating guilt, that first confrontation with the wretched of the earth. I'd robbed banks, and dealt drugs, and I'd been beaten by prison warders until my bones broke. I'd been stabbed, and I'd stabbed men in return. I'd escaped from a hard prison full of hard men, the hard way-over the front wall. Still, that first encounter with the ragged misery of the slum,

heartbreak all the way to the horizon, cut into my eyes. For a time, I ran onto the knives.

Then the smoulders of shame and guilt flamed into anger, became fist-tightening rage at the unfairness of it: What kind of a government, I thought, *what* kind of a system allows suffering like _this?

But the slums went on, kilometre after kilometre, relieved only by the awful contrast of the thriving businesses and crumbling, moss-covered apartment buildings of the comparatively affluent.

The slums went on, and their sheer ubiquity wore down my foreigner's pieties. A kind of wonder possessed me. I began to look beyond the immensity of the slum societies, and to see the people who lived within them. A woman stooped to brush forward the black satin psalm of her hair.

Another bathed her children with water from a copper dish. A man led three goats with red ribbons tied to the collars at their throats. Another man shaved himself at a cracked mirror. Children played everywhere. Men

carried water in buckets. Men made repairs to one of the huts. And everywhere that I looked, people smiled and laughed.

The bus stopped in a stutter of traffic, and a man emerged from one of the huts near my window. He was a foreigner, as pale- skinned as any of the new arrivals on the bus, and dressed only in a wrap-around sheet of hibiscus-patterned cotton. He stretched, yawned, and scratched unselfconsciously at his naked belly. There was a definitive, bovine placidity in his face and posture. I found myself envying that contentment, and the smiles of greeting he drew from a group of people who walked past him to the road.

The bus jerked into motion once more, and I lost sight of the man. But that image of him changed everything in my attitude to the slums. Seeing him there, a man as alien to the place as I was, let me picture myself in that world. What had seemed unimaginably strange and remote from my experience suddenly became possible, and comprehensible, and, finally, fascinating.

I looked at the people, then, and I saw how busy they were-how much industry and energy described their lives. Occasional sudden glimpses inside the huts revealed the astonishing cleanliness of that poverty: the spotless floors, and glistening metal pots in neat, tapering towers. And then, last, what should've been first, I saw how beautiful they were: the women wrapped in crimson, blue, and gold; the women walking barefoot through the tangled shabbiness of the slum with patient, ethereal grace; the white-toothed, almond-eyed handsomeness of the men; and the affectionate camaraderie of the fine-limbed children, older ones playing with younger ones, many of them supporting baby brothers and sisters on their slender hips. And half an hour after the bus ride began, I smiled for the first time.

"It ain't pretty," the young man beside me said, looking at the scene beyond the window. He was Canadian, the maple leaf patch on his jacket declared: tall and heavy-set, with pale eyes, and shoulder-length brown hair. His companion looked like a shorter, more compact version of himself; they even wore identical stonewashed jeans, sandals, and soft, calico jackets.

"Come again?"

"This your first time?" he asked in reply. I nodded. "I thought so. Don't worry. From here on, it gets a little better. Not so many slums and all. But it ain't good anywheres in Bombay. This here is the crummiest city in India, y'can take my word."

"You got that right," the shorter man agreed.

"But from here on in, you got a couple nice temples and some big British buildings that are okay-stone lions and brass street lights and like that. But this ain't India. The real India is up near the Himalayas, at Manali, or at the holy city of Varanasi, or down the coast, at Kerala. You gotta get outta the city to find the real India."

"Where are you guys headed?"

"We're going to stay at an ashram," his friend announced. "It's run by the Rajneeshis, at Poona. It's the best ashram in the country."

Two pairs of clear, pale-blue eyes stared at me with the vague, almost accusatory censure of those who've convinced themselves that they've found the one true path.

"You checkin' in?"

"Sorry?"

"You checkin' into a room, or you passin' on through Bombay today?"

"I don't know," I replied, turning to look through the window once more. It was true: I didn't know whether I wanted to stay in Bombay for a while or continue on to... somewhere else. I didn't know, and it didn't matter to me.

Just at that moment, I was what Karla once called the most dangerous and fascinating animal in the world: a brave, hard man, without a plan. "I haven't really got any plans. But I think I'll stay in Bombay for a while."

"Well, we're stayin' overnight, and catchin' the train tomorrow.

If you want, we can share a room. It's a lot cheaper with three."

I met the stare in his guileless, blue eyes. Maybe it would be better to share a room at first, I thought. Their genuine documents and their easy smiles would smother my false passport.

Maybe it would be safer.

"And it's a lot safer," he added.

"Yeah, right," his friend agreed.

"Safer?" I asked, assuming a nonchalance I didn't feel.

The bus was moving more slowly, along narrow channels of three- and four-storey buildings. Traffic churned through the streets with wondrous and mysterious efficiency-a ballistic dance of buses, trucks, bicycles, cars, ox-carts, scooters, and people.

The open windows of our battered bus gave us the aromas of spices, perfumes, diesel smoke, and the manure of oxen, in a steamy but not unpleasant mix, and voices rose up everywhere above ripples of unfamiliar music. Every corner carried gigantic posters, advertising Indian films. The supernatural colours of the posters streamed behind the tanned face of the tall Canadian.

"Oh, sure, it's a lot safer. This is Gotham City, man. The street kids here have more ways to take your money than hell's casino."

"It's a city thing, man," the short one explained. "All cities are the same. It's not just here. It's the same in New York, or Rio, or Paris. They're all dirty and they're all crazy. A city thing, you know what I'm sayin'? You get to the rest of India, and you'll love it. This is a great country, but the cities are truly fucked, I gotta say."

"And the goddamn hotels are in on it," the tall one added. "You can get ripped off just sittin' in your hotel room and smokin' a little weed. They do deals with the cops to bust you and take all your money. Safest thing is to stick together and travel in groups, take my word."

"And get outta the cities as fast as you can," the short one said. "Holy shit!

D'you see that?"

The bus had turned into the curve of a wide boulevard that was edged by huge stones, tumble-rolled into the turquoise sea. A small colony of black, ragged slum huts was strewn upon those rocks like the wreckage of some dark and primitive ship. The huts were burning.

"God-_damn! Check that out! That guy's cookin', man!" the tall Canadian shouted, pointing to a man who ran towards the sea with his clothes and hair on fire. The man slipped, and smashed heavily between the large stones. A woman and a child reached him and smothered the flames with their hands and their own clothes.

Other people were trying to contain the fires in their huts, or simply stood, and watched, as their flimsy homes blazed. "D'you see that? That guy's gone, I tell ya."

"Damn right!" the short one gasped.

The bus driver slowed with other traffic to look at the fire, but then revved the engine and drove on. None of the cars on the busy road stopped. I turned to look through the rear window of the bus until the charred humps of the huts became minute specks, and the brown smoke of the fires was just a whisper of ruin.

At the end of the long, seaside boulevard, we made a left turn into a wide street of modern buildings. There were grand hotels, with liveried doormen standing beneath coloured awnings. Near them were exclusive restaurants, garlanded with courtyard gardens. Sunlight flashed on the polished glass and brass facades of airline offices and other businesses. Street stalls sheltered from the morning sunlight beneath broad umbrellas. The Indian men walking there were dressed in hard shoes and western business suits, and the women wore expensive silk. They looked purposeful and sober, their expressions grave as they bustled to and from the large office buildings.

The contrast between the familiar and the exceptional was everywhere around me. A bullock cart was drawn up beside a modern sports car at a traffic signal. A man squatted to relieve himself behind the discreet shelter of a satellite dish. An electric forklift truck was being used to unload goods from an ancient wooden cart with wooden wheels. The impression was of a plodding, indefatigable, and distant past that had crashed intact, through barriers of time, into its own future. I liked it.

"We're almost there," my companion declared. "City centre's just a few blocks. It's not really what you'd call the downtown area.

It's just the tourist beat where most of the cheap hotels are.

The last stop. It's called Colaba."

The two young men took their passports and travellers' cheques from their pockets and pushed them down the fronts of their trousers. The shorter man even removed his watch, and it, too, joined the currency, passport, and other

valuables in the marsupial pouch of his underpants. He caught my eye, and smiled.

"Hey," he grinned. "Can't be too careful!"

I stood and bumped my way to the front. When the bus stopped I was the first to take the steps, but a crowd of people on the footpath prevented me from moving down to the street. They were touts-street operatives for the various hoteliers, drug dealers, and other businessmen of the city-and they shouted at us in broken English with offers of cheap hotel rooms and bargains to be had. First among them in the doorway was a small man with a large, almost perfectly round head. He was dressed in a denim shirt and blue cotton trousers. He shouted for silence from his companions, and then turned to me with the widest and most radiant smile I'd ever seen.

"Good mornings, great sirs!" he greeted us. "Welcome in Bombay!

You are wanting it cheap and excellent hotels, isn't it?" He stared straight into my eyes, that enormous smile not wavering. There was something in

the disk of his smile-a kind of mischievous exuberance, more honest and more excited than mere happiness-that pierced me to the heart. It was the work of a second, the eye contact between us. It was just long enough for me to decide to trust him-the little man with the big smile. I didn't know it then, but it was one of the best decisions of my life.

A number of the passengers, filing off the bus, began beating and swatting at the swarm of touts. The two young Canadians made their way through the crowd unmolested, smiling broadly and equally at the bustling touts and the agitated tourists. Watching them dodge and weave through the crowd, I noticed for the first time how fit and healthy and handsome they were. I decided there and then to accept their offer to share the cost of a room. In their company, the crime of my escape from prison, the crime of my existence in the world, was invisible and inconceivable.

The little guide grabbed my sleeve to lead me away from the fractious group, and toward the back of the bus. The conductor climbed to the roof with simian agility, and flung my backpack and travel bag into my arms.

Other bags began tumbling to the pavement in an ominous cadenza of

creaks and crashes. As the passengers ran to stop the hard rain of their valuables, the guide led me away again, to a quiet spot a few metres from the bus.

"My name is Prabaker," he stated, in his musically accented English. "What is your good name?"

"My good name is Lindsay," I lied, using the name from my false passport.

"I am Bombay guide. Very excellent first number Bombay guide, I am. All Bombay I know it very well. You want to see everything. I know exactly where is it you will find the most of everything. I can show you even more than everything."

The two young travellers joined us, pursued by a persistent band of ragged touts and guides. Prabaker shouted at his unruly colleagues, and they retreated a few paces, staring hungrily at our collection of bags and packs.

"What I want to see right now," I said, "is a clean, cheap hotel room."

"Certainly, sir!" Prabaker beamed. "I can take you to a cheap hotel, and a very cheap hotel, and a too much cheap hotel, and even such a cheap hotel that nobody in a right minds is ever staying there also."

"Okay, lead on, Prabaker. Let's take a look."

"Hey, wait a minute," the taller of the two young men interjected. "Are you gonna pay this guy? I mean, I know the way to the hotels. No offence to you, buddy-I'm sure you're a good guide and all-but we don't need you."

I looked at Prabaker. His large, dark brown eyes were studying my face with open amusement. I've never known a man who had less hostility in him than Prabaker Kharre: he was incapable of raising his voice or his hand in anger, and I sensed something of that even then, in the first minutes with him.

"Do I need you, Prabaker?" I asked him, my expression mock- serious.

"Oh, yes!" he cried in reply. "You are so very needing me, I am almost crying with your situation! Only God knows what terrible things are happening to you without my good self to guide your body in Bombay!"

"I'll pay him," I told my companions. They shrugged, and lifted their packs.

"Okay. Let's go, Prabaker."

I began to lift my pack, but Prabaker grabbed at it swiftly.

"I am carrying it your luggages," he insisted politely.

"No, that's okay. I'm fine."

The huge smile faded to a pleading frown.

"Please, sir. It is my job. It is my duty. I am strong in my backs. No problem. You will see."

All my instincts revolted at the idea.

"No, really..."

"Please, Mr. Lindsay, this is my honour. See the people."

Prabaker gestured with his upturned palm to those touts and guides who'd managed to secure customers from among the tourists.

Each one of them seized a bag, suitcase, or backpack and trudged off, leading his party into the flak-traffic with brisk determination.

"Yeah, well, all right..." I muttered, deferring to his judgment. It was just the first of countless capitulations that would, in time, come to define our relationship. The smile stretched his round face once more, and he grappled with the backpack, working the straps onto his shoulders with my help. The pack was heavy, forcing him to thrust his neck out, lean over, and launch himself forward into a trundling gait. My longer steps brought me up level with him, and I looked into his straining face. I felt like the white bwana, reducing him to my beast of burden, and I hated it.

But he laughed, that small Indian man. He chattered about Bombay and the sights to be seen, pointing out landmarks as we walked.

He spoke with deferential amiability to the two Canadians. He smiled, and called out greetings to acquaintances as he passed them. And he was strong, much stronger than he looked: he never paused or faltered in his step throughout the fifteen-minute journey to the hotel.

Four steep flights in a dark and mossy well of stairs, at the rear of a large, sea-front building, brought us to the foyer of the India Guest House. Every floor on the way up had carried a different shield-Apsara Hotel, Star of Asia Guest House, Seashore Hotel-indicating that the one building was actually four separate hotels, each one of them occupying a single floor, and having its own staff, services, and style.

The two young travellers, Prabaker, and I tumbled into the small foyer with our bags and packs. A tall, muscular Indian, wearing a dazzlingly white

shirt and a black tie, sat behind a steel desk beside the hallway that led to the guest rooms.

"Welcome," he said, a small, wary smile dimpling his cheeks.

"Welcome, young gentlemen."

"What a dump," my tall companion muttered, looking around him at the flaking paint and laminated wooden partitions.

"This is Mr. Anand," Prabaker interjected quickly. "Best manager of the best hotel in Colaba."

"Shut up, Prabaker!" Mr. Anand growled.

Prabaker smiled the wider.

"See, what a great manager is this Mr. Anand?" he whispered, grinning at me. He then turned his smile to the great manager. "I am bringing three excellent tourists for you, Mr. Anand. Very best customers for the very best hotel, isn't it?"

"I told you to shut up!" Anand snapped.

"How much?" the short Canadian asked.

"Please?" Anand muttered, still glowering at Prabaker.

"Three people, one room, one night, how much?"

"One hundred twenty rupees."

"What!" the shorter one exploded. "Are you kidding me?" "That's too much," his friend added. "C'mon, we're outta here."

"No problem," Anand snapped. "You can go to somewhere else."

They began to gather their bags, but Prabaker stopped them with an anguished cry.

"No! No! This is the very most beautiful of hotels. Please, just see it the room! Please, Mr. Lindsay, just see it the lovely room! Just see it the lovely room!"

There was a momentary pause. The two young men hesitated in the doorway. Anand studied his hotel register, suddenly fascinated by the hand-written entries. Prabaker clutched at my sleeve. I felt some sympathy for the street guide, and I admired Anand's style.

He wasn't going to plead with us, or persuade us to take the room. If we wanted it, we took it on his terms. When he looked up from the register, he met my eyes with a frank and honest stare, one confident man to another. I began to like him.

"I'd like to see it, the lovely room," I said.

"Yes!" Prabaker laughed.

"Okay, here we go!" the Canadians sighed, smiling.

"End of the passage," Anand smiled in return, reaching behind him to take the room key from a rack of hooks. He tossed the key and its heavy brass nameplate across the desk to me. "Last room on the right, my friend."

It was a large room, with three single beds covered by sheets, one window to the seaward side, and a row of windows that looked down upon a busy street. Each of the walls was painted in a different shade of headache-green.

The ceiling was laced with cracks. Papery scrolls of paint dangled from the corners. The cement floor sloped downwards, with mysterious lumps and irregular undulations, toward the street windows. Three small plywood side-tables and a battered wooden dressing table with a cracked mirror were the only other pieces of furniture. Previous occupants had left evidence of their tenure: a candle melted into the neck of a Bailey's Irish Cream bottle; a calendar print of a Neapolitan street scene taped to one wall; and two forlorn, shrivelled balloons hanging from the ceiling fan. It was the kind of room that moved people to write their names and other messages on the walls, just as men do in prison cells.

"I'll take it," I decided. "Yes!" Prabaker cried, scurrying away at once toward the foyer.

My companions from the bus looked at one another and laughed.

"I can't be bothered arguin' with this dude. He's crazy."

"I hear ya," the shorter one chuckled. He bent low and sniffed at the sheets before sitting down gingerly on one of the beds.

Prabaker returned with Anand, who carried the heavy hotel register. We entered our details into the book, one at a time, while Anand checked our passports. I paid for a week in advance.

Anand gave the others their passports, but lingered with mine, tapping it against his cheek thoughtfully.

"New Zealand?" he murmured.

"So?" I frowned, wondering if he'd seen or sensed something. I was Australia's most wanted man, escaped from a jail term of twenty years for armed robberies, and a hot new name on th Interpol fugitive list. What does he want? What does he know?

"Hmmm. Okay, New Zealand, New Zealand, you must be wanting something for smoke, some lot of beer, some bottles whisky, change money, business girls, good parties. You want to buy something, you tell me, na?"

He snapped the passport back into my hand and left the room, glaring malevolently at Prabaker. The guide cringed away from him in the doorway, cowering and smiling happily at the same time.

"A great man. A great manager," Prabaker gushed, when Anand was gone.

"You get a lot of New Zealanders here, Prabaker?"

"Not so many, Mr. Lindsay. Oh, but very fine fellows they are.

Laughing, smoking, drinking, having sexes with women, all in the night, and then more laughing, smoking, and drinking."

"U-huh. I don't suppose you'd happen to know where I could get some hashish, Prabaker?"

"Noooo problem! I can get it one tola, one kilo, ten kilos, even I know where it is a full warehouse..."

"I don't need a warehouse full of hash. I just want enough for a smoke."

"Just it happens I have it one tola, ten grams, the best Afghan charras, in my pocket. You want to buy?"

"How much?"

"Two hundred rupees," he suggested, hopefully. I guessed that it was less than half that price. But two hundred rupees-about twelve dollars American, in those years-was one- tenth of the price in Australia. I tossed a packet of

tobacco and cigarette papers to him. "Okay. Roll up a joint and we'll try it out. If I like it, I'll buy it."

My two roommates were stretched out on their parallel beds. They looked at one another and exchanged similar expressions, raising their foreheads in sedimentary wrinkles and pursing their lips as Prabaker pulled the piece of hashish from his pocket. They stared with fascination and dread while the little guide knelt to make the joint on the dusty surface of the dressing table.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, man?"

"Yeah, they could be settin' us up for a drug bust or somethin'!"

"I think I feel okay about Prabaker. I don't think we'll get busted," I replied, unrolling my travel blanket and spreading it out on the bed beneath the long windows. There was a ledge on the window sill, and I began to place my keepsakes, trinkets, and lucky charms there-a black stone given to me by a child in New Zealand, a petrified snail shell one friend had found, and a bracelet of hawk's claws made by another. I was on the run. I had no home

and no country. My bags were filled with things that friends had given me: a huge first-aid kit that they'd pooled their money to buy for me, drawings, poems, shells, feathers.

Even the clothes I wore and the boots on my feet were gifts that friends had given me. Every object was significant; in my hunted exile, the windowsill had become my home, and the talismans were my nation.

"By all means, guys, if you don't feel safe, take a walk or wait outside for a while. I'll come and get you, after I have a smoke.

It's just that I promised some friends of mine that if I ever got to India, the first thing I'd do is smoke some hash, and think of them. I mean to keep that promise. Besides, the manager seemed pretty cool about it to me. Is there any problem with smoking a joint here, Prabaker?"

"Smoking, drinking, dancing, music, sexy business, no problem here,"

Prabaker assured us, grinning happily and looking up momentarily from his task. "Everything is allow no problem here.

Except the fighting. Fighting is not good manners at India Guest House."

"You see? No problem."

"And dying," Prabaker added, with a thoughtful wag of his round head.

"Mr. Anand is not liking it, if the people are dying here."

"Say what? What is he talking about dying?"

"Is he fuckin' serious? Who the fuck is dyin' here? _Jesus!"

"No problem dying, baba," Prabaker soothed, offering the distraught Canadians his neatly rolled joint. The taller man took it, and puffed it alight.

"Not many people are dying here in India Guest House, and mostly only junkies, you know, with the skinny faces. For you no problem, with your so beautiful big fat bodies."

His smile was disarmingly charming as he brought the joint to me.

When I returned it to him, he puffed at it with obvious pleasure, and passed it to the Canadians once more.

"Is good charras, yes?"

"It's real good," the taller man said. His smile was warm and generous-the big, open-hearted smile that the long years since then have taught me to associate with Canada and Canadians.

"I'll take it," I said. Prabaker passed it to me, and I broke the ten-gram lump into two pieces, throwing one half to one of my roommates. "Here.

Something for the train ride to Poona tomorrow."

"Thanks, man," he answered, showing the piece to his friend.

"Say, you're all right. Crazy, but all right."

I pulled a bottle of whisky from my pack and cracked the seal. It was another ritual, another promise to a friend in New Zealand, a girl who'd asked me to have a drink and think of her if I managed to smuggle myself

safely into India with my false passport. The little rituals-the smoke and the drink of whisky-were important to me. I was sure that I'd lost those friends, just as I'd lost my family, and every friend I'd ever known, when I'd escaped from prison. I was sure, somehow, that I would never see them again. I was alone in the world, with no hope of return, and my whole life was held in memories, talismans, and pledges of love.

I was about to take a sip from the bottle, but an impulse made me offer it to Prabaker first.

"Thank you too much, Mr. Lindsay," he gushed, his eyes wide with delight.

He tipped his head backward and poured a measure of whisky into his mouth, without touching the bottle to his lips.

"Is very best, first number, Johnnie Walker. Oh, yes."

"Have some more, if you like."

"Just a teeny pieces, thank you so." He drank again, glugging the liquor down in throat-bulging gulps. He paused, licking his lips, then tipped the bottle back a third time. "Sorry, aaah, very sorry. Is so good this whisky, it is making a bad manners on me."

"Listen, if you like it that much, you can keep the bottle. I've got another one. I bought them duty free on the plane."

"Oh, thank you..." he answered, but his smile crumpled into a stricken expression.

"What's the matter? Don't you want it?"

"Yes, yes, Mr. Lindsay, very yes. But if I knew this was my whisky and not yours, I would not have been so generous with my good self in the drinking it up."

The young Canadians laughed.

"I tell you what, Prabaker. I'll give you the full bottle, to keep, and we'll all share the open one. How's that? And here's the two hundred rupees for the

smoke."

The smile shone anew, and he swapped the open bottle for the full one, cradling it in his folded arms tenderly.

"But Mr. Lindsay, you are making a mistake. I say that this very best charras is one hundred rupees, not two."

"U-huh."

"Oh, yes. One hundred rupees only," he declared, passing one of the notes back to me dismissively.

"Okay. Listen, I'm hungry, Prabaker. I didn't eat on the plane.

Do you think you could show me to a good, clean restaurant?"

"Very certainly, Mr. Lindsay sir! I know such excellent restaurants, with such a wonder of foods, you will be making yourself sick to your stomach with happiness."

"You talked me into it," I said, standing and gathering up my passport and money. "You guys coming?"

"What, out there? You gotta be kidding."

"Yeah, maybe later. Like, much later. But we'll watch your stuff here, and wait for you to come back."

"Okay, suit yourselves. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

Prabaker bowed and fawned, and politely took his leave. I joined him, but just as I was about to close the door, the tall young man spoke.

"Listen... take it easy on the street, huh? I mean, you don't know what it's like here. You can't trust no-one. This ain't the village. The Indians in the city are... well, just be careful, is all. Okay?" At the reception desk, Anand put my passport, travel cheques, and the bulk of my cash in his safe, giving me a detailed receipt, and I stepped down to the street with the words of the

young Canadian's warning wheeling and turning in my mind like gulls above a spawning tide.

Prabaker had taken us to the hotel along a wide, tree-lined, and relatively empty avenue that followed a curve of the bay from the tall, stone arch of the Gateway of India Monument. The street at the front of the building was crammed with people and vehicles, however, and the sound of voices, car horns, and commerce was like a storm of rain on wood and metal roofs.

Hundreds of people walked there, or stood in talking groups.

Shops, restaurants, and hotels filled the street side by side along its entire length. Every shop or restaurant featured a smaller sub-shop attached to the front of it. Two or three attendants, seated on folding stools, manned each of those small encroachments on the footpath. There were Africans, Arabs, Europeans, and Indians. Languages and music changed with every step, and every restaurant spilled a different scent into the boiling air.

Men with bullock wagons and handcarts wound their way through heavy traffic to deliver watermelons and sacks of rice, soft drinks and racks of clothes, cigarettes and blocks of ice. Money was everywhere: it was a centre for the black-market trade in currencies, Prabaker told me, and thick blocks of bank notes were being counted and changing hands openly. There were beggars and jugglers and acrobats, snake charmers and musicians and astrologers, palmists and pimps and pushers. And the street was filthy.

Trash tumbled from the windows above without warning, and garbage was heaped in piles on the pavement or the roadway, where fat, fearless rats slithered to feast.

Most prominent on the street, to my eyes, were the many crippled and diseased beggars. Every kind of illness, disability, and hardship paraded there, stood at the doorways of restaurants and shops, or approached people on the street with professionally plaintive cries. Like the first sight of the slums from the windows of the bus, that glimpse of the suffering street brought a hot shame to my healthy face. But as Prabaker led me on through the roistering crowd, he drew my attention to other images of those beggars that softened the awful caricature presented by the performance of their piteousness. One group of beggars sat in a doorway, playing cards, some

blind men and their friends enjoyed a meal of fish and rice, and laughing children took turns to ride with a legless man on his little trolley.

Prabaker was stealing sideways glances at my face as we walked.

"How are you liking our Bombay?"

"I love it," I answered, and it was true. To my eyes, the city was beautiful. It was wild and exciting. Buildings that were British Raj-romantic stood side

to side with modern, mirrored business towers. The haphazard slouch of neglected tenements crumbled into lavish displays of market vegetables and silks. I heard music from every shop and passing taxi. The colours were vibrant. The fragrances were dizzyingly delicious. And there were more smiles in the eyes on those crowded streets than in any other place I'd ever known.

Above all else, Bombay was free-exhilaratingly free. I saw that liberated, unconstrained spirit wherever I looked, and I found myself responding to it with the whole of my heart. Even the flare of shame I'd felt when I first saw the slums and the street beggars dissolved in the understanding that they were free, those men and women. No-one drove the beggars from the streets. No-one banished the slum-dwellers. Painful as their lives were, they were free to live them in the same gardens and avenues as the rich and powerful. They were free. The city was free. I loved it.

Yet I was a little unnerved by the density of purposes, the carnival of needs and greeds, the sheer intensity of the pleading and the scheming on the street. I spoke none of the languages I heard. I knew nothing of the cultures there, clothed in robes and saris and turbans. It was as if I'd found myself in a performance of some extravagant, complex drama, and I didn't have a script.

But I smiled, and smiling was easy, no matter how strange and disorienting the street seemed to be. I was a fugitive. I was a wanted man, a hunted man, with a price on my head. And I was still one step ahead of them. I was free.

Every day, when you're on the run, is the whole of your life. Every free minute is a short story with a happy ending.

And I was glad of Prabaker's company. I noticed that he was well known on the street, that he was greeted frequently and with considerable warmth by a wide range of people.

"You must be hungry, Mr. Lindsay," Prabaker observed. "You are a happy fellow, don't mind I'm saying it, and happy always has it the good appetites." "Well, I'm hungry enough, all right. Where is this place we're

going to, anyway? If I'd known it would take this long to get to the restaurant, I would've brought a cut lunch with me."

"Just a little bit not much too very far," he replied cheerfully.

"Okay..."

"Oh, yes! I will take you to the best restaurant, and with the finest Maharashtra foods. You will enjoy, no problem. All the Bombay guides like me eat their foods there. This place is so good, they only have to pay the police half of usual baksheesh money. So good they are."

"Okay..."

"Oh, yes! But first, let me get it Indian cigarette for you, and for me also.

Here, we stop now."

He led me to a street stall that was no more than a folding card table, with a dozen brands of cigarettes arranged in a cardboard box. On the table there was a large brass tray, carrying several small silver dishes. The dishes contained shredded coconut, spices, and an assortment of unidentifiable pastes. A bucket beside the card table was filled with spear-shaped leaves, floating in water. The cigarette seller was drying the leaves, smearing them with various pastes, filling them with ground dates, coconut, betel, and spices, and rolling them into small packages. The many customers crowded around his stall purchased the leaves as fast as his dexterous hands could fill them.

Prabaker pressed close to the man, waiting for a chance to make his order.

Craning my neck to watch him through the thicket of customers, I moved

closer toward the edge of the footpath. As I took a step down onto the road, I heard an urgent shout.

"_Look _out!"

Two hands grasped my arm at the elbow and jerked me back, just as a huge, fast-moving, double-decker bus swept past. The bus would've killed me if those hands hadn't halted me in my stride, and I swung round to face my saviour. She was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. She was slender, with black, shoulder-length hair, and pale skin. Although she wasn't tall, her square shoulders and straight-backed posture, with both feet planted firmly apart, gave her a quietly determined physical presence.

She was wearing silk pants, bound tightly at the ankles, black low-heeled shoes, a loose cotton shirt, and a large, long silk shawl. She wore the shawl backwards, with the double-mane of the liquid fabric twirling and fluttering at her back. All her clothes were in different shades of green.

The clue to everything a man should love and fear in her was there, right from the start, in the ironic smile that primed and swelled the archery of her full lips. There was pride in that smile, and confidence in the set of her fine nose. Without understanding why, I knew beyond question that a lot of people would mistake her pride for arrogance, and confuse her confidence with impassivity. I didn't make that mistake. My eyes were lost, swimming, floating free in the shimmering lagoon of her steady, even stare. Her eyes were large and spectacularly green. It was the green that trees are, in vivid dreams. It was the green that the sea would be, if the sea were perfect.

Her hand was still resting in the curve of my arm, near the elbow. The touch was exactly what the touch of a lover's hand should be: familiar, yet exciting as a whispered promise. I felt an almost irresistible urge to take her hand and place it flat against my chest, near my heart. Maybe I should've done it. I know now that she would've laughed, if I'd done it, and she would've liked me for it. But strangers that we were then, we stood for five long seconds and held the stare, while all the parallel worlds, all the parallel lives that might've been, and never would be, whirled around us. Then she spoke.

"That was close. You're lucky."

"Yes," I smiled. "I am."

Her hand slowly left my arm. It was an easy, relaxed gesture, but I felt the detachment from her as sharply as if I'd been roughly woken from a deep and happy dream. I leaned toward her, looking behind her to the left and then to the right.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I'm looking for your wings. You are my guardian angel, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid not," she replied, her cheeks dimpling with a wry smile. "There's too much of the devil in me for that."

"Just how much devil," I grinned, "are we talking about here?"

Some people were standing in a group, on the far side of the stall. One of them-a handsome, athletic man in his mid-twenties - stepped to the road and called to her. "Karla! Come on, _yaar!"

She turned and waved to him, then held out her hand to shake mine with a grip that was firm, but emotionally indeterminable. Her smile was just as ambiguous. She mightVe liked me, or she might've just been happy to say goodbye.

"You still haven't answered my question," I said, as her hand slipped from mine.

"How much devil have I got in me?" she answered me, the half- smile teasing her lips. "That's a very personal question. Come to think of it, that might just be the most personal question anyone ever asked me. But, hey, if you come to Leopold's, some time, you could find out."

Her friends had moved to our side of the little stand, and she left me to join them. They were all Indians, all young, and dressed in the clean, fashionably western clothes of the middle class. They laughed often and leaned against one another familiarly, but no-one touched Karla. She

seemed to project an aura that was attractive and inviolable at the same time. I moved closer, pretending to be intrigued by the cigarette seller's

work with his leaves and pastes. I listened as she spoke to them, but I couldn't understand the language. Her voice, in that language and in that conversation, was surprisingly deep and sonorous; the hairs on my arms tingled in response to the sound of it. And I suppose that, too, should've been a warning. The voice, Afghan matchmakers say, is more than half of love. But I didn't know that then, and my heart rushed in, where even matchmakers might've feared to tread.

"See, Mr. Lindsay, I bought it just two cigarettes for us,"

Prabaker said, rejoining me and offering one of the cigarettes with a flourish. "This is India, country of the poor fellows. No need for buying whole packet of cigarettes here. Just one cigarette, you can buy only. And no need for buying it any matches."

He leaned forward and took up a length of smouldering hemp rope that was hanging from a hook on the telegraph pole, next to the cigarette stall.

Prabaker blew the ash from the end of it, exposing a little orange ember of fire, which he used to puff his cigarette alight.

"What is he making? What are they chewing in those leaves?"

"Is called paan. A most very excellent taste and chewing it is.

Everyone in Bombay is chewing and spitting, chewing and more spitting, no problem, day and night also. Very good for health it is, plenty of chewing and full spitting. You want to try it? I will get it for you some."

I nodded and let him make the order, not so much for the new experience of the paan as for the excuse it offered to stand there longer, and look at Karla.

She was so relaxed and at home, so much a part of the street and its inscrutable lore. What I found bewildering, all around me, seemed to be mundane for her. I was reminded of the foreigner in the slum-the man I'd seen from the window of the bus. Like him, she seemed calm and content in Bombay. She seemed to belong. I envied her the warmth and acceptance she drew from those around her.

But more than that, my eyes were drawn to her perfect loveliness.

I looked at her, a stranger, and every other breath strained to force its way from my chest. A clamp like a tightening fist seized my heart. A voice in my blood said yes, yes, yes... The ancient Sanskrit legends speak of a destined love, a karmic connection between souls that are fated to meet and collide and enrapture one another. The legends say that the loved one is instantly recognised because she's loved in every gesture, every expression of thought, every movement, every sound, and every mood that prays in her eyes. The legends say that we know her by her wings-the wings that only we can see-and because wanting her kills every other desire of love.

The same legends also carry warnings that such fated love may, sometimes, be the possession and the obsession of one, and only one, of the two souls twinned by destiny. But wisdom, in one sense, is the opposite of love. Love survives in us precisely because it isn't wise.

"Ah, you look that girl," Prabaker observed, returning with the paan and following the direction of my gaze. "You think she is beautiful, na? Her name is Karla."

"You know her?"

"Oh, yes! Karla is everybody knows," he replied, in a stage whisper so loud that I feared she might hear. "You want to meet her?"

"Meet her?"

"If you want it, I will speak to her. You want her to be your friend?"

"What?"

"Oh, yes! Karla is my friend, and she will be your friend also, I think so.

Maybe you will make a lot of money for your very good self, in business with Karla. Maybe you will become such good and closely friends that you will have it a lot of sexes together, and make a full enjoyment of your bodies. I am sure you will have a friendly pleasure."

He was actually rubbing his hands together. The red juices of the paan stained the teeth and lips of his smile. I had to grasp at his arm to stop him from approaching her, there, in the group of her friends.

"No! Stop! For Christ's sake, keep your voice down, Prabaker. If I want to speak to her, I'll do it myself."

"Oh, I am understand," he said, looking abashed. "It is what foreigners are calling foreplay, isn't it?"

"No! Foreplay is... never mind what foreplay is!"

"Oh, good! I never mind about the foreplays, Mr. Lindsay. I am an Indian fellow, and we Indian fellows, we don't worry about the foreplayings. We go straight to the bumping and jumping. Oh yes!"

He was holding an imaginary woman in his hands and thrusting his narrow hips at her, smiling that red-juiced smile all the while.

"Will you stop that!" I snapped, looking up to see if Karla and her friends were watching him.

"Okay, Mr. Lindsay," he sighed, slowing his rhythmic thrusts until they stopped altogether. "But, I can still make a good offer of your friendship to the Miss Karla, if you like?"

"No! I mean-no, thank you. I don't want to proposition her. I ... Oh God, what's the use. Just tell me... the man who's talking now-what language is he speaking?"

"He is speaking Hindi language, Mr. Lindsay. You wait one minute, I will tell you what is it he is saying."

He moved to the far side of the stall and joined her group quite unselfconsciously, leaning in to listen. No-one paid any attention to him. He nodded, laughed with the others, and returned after a few minutes.

"He is telling it one very funny story, about an inspector of Bombay Police, a very great powerful fellow in this area. That inspector did lock up a very

clever fellow in his jail, but the clever fellow, he did convince the inspector to let him out again, because he told the inspector he had some gold and jewels.

Not only that, but when he was free, the clever fellow sold the inspector some of the gold and some jewels. But they were not really gold and not really jewels. They were the imitations, and very cheaply not the really things. And the worst mischief, the clever fellow lived in the inspector's house for one week before he sold the not-really jewels. And there is a big rumour that the clever fellow had sexy business with that inspector's wife.

Now the inspector is crazy, and so much angry, that everybody is running when they see him."

"How do you know her? Does she live here?" "Know who, Mr. Lindsay-that inspector's wife?"

"No, of course not! I mean the girl-Karla."

"You know," he mused, frowning hard for the first time, "there are a lots of girls in this Bombay. We are only five minutes from your hotel. In this five minutes, we have seen it hundreds of girls. In five minutes more, there is more hundreds of girls.

Every five minutes, more hundreds of girls. And after a little of walking, we will see hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds-"

"Oh, hundreds of girls, great!" I interrupted sarcastically, my voice much louder than I'd intended it to be. I glanced around.

Several people were staring at me with undisguised contempt. I continued, in a hushed tone. "I don't want to know about hundreds of girls, Prabaker.

I'm just... curious... about... about that girl, okay?"

"Okay, Mr. Lindsay, I will be telling you everything. Karla-she is a famous businessman in Bombay. Very long she is here. I think five years maybe.

She has one small house, not far. Everybody knows the Karla."

"Where is she from?"

"I think, German, or something like that."

"But she sounded American."

"Yes, is sounding, but she is from German, or like to the German.

And now, anyway, is almost very Indian. You want to eat your foods now?"

"Yeah, just a minute."

The group of young friends called out their goodbyes to others near the paan stand, and walked off into the mill and swirl of the crowd. Karla joined them, walking away with her head held high in that curiously straight-backed, almost defiant posture. I watched her until she was swallowed by the people-tide of the crowds, but she never looked back.

"Do you know a place called Leopold's?" I asked Prabaker as he joined me, and we started to walk once more.

"Oh, yes! Wonderful and lovely place it is, Leopold's Beer Bar.

Full of the most wonderful, lovely peoples, the very, very fine and lovely people. All kind of foreigners you can find there, all making good business.

Sexy business, and drugs business, and money business, and black-market business, and naughty pictures, and smuggler business, and passport business, and-"

"Okay, Prabaker, I get it."

"You want to go there?" "No. Maybe later." I stopped walking, and Prabaker stopped beside me. "Listen, what do your friends call you? I mean, what's your name for short, instead of Prabaker?"

"Oh, yes, short name I am having also. My short name is Prabu."

"Prabu... I like it."

"It's meaning the Son of Light, or like to that. Is good name, yes?"

"Is good name, yes."

"And your good name, Mr. Lindsay, it is really not so good, if you don't mind I'm telling your face. I don't like it this long and kind of a squeaky name, for Indian people speaking."

"Oh, you don't?"

"Sorry to say it, no. I don't. Not at all. Not a bit. Not even a teensy or a weensy-"

"Well," I smiled, "I'm afraid there's not a lot I can do about it."

"I'm thinking that a short name-Lin-is much better," he suggested. "If you're not having objections, I will call you Lin."

It was as good a name as any, and no more or less false than the dozen others I'd assumed since the escape. In fact, in recent months I'd found myself reacting with a quirky fatalism to the new names I was forced to adopt, in one place or another, and to the new names that others gave me.

Lin. It was a diminutive I never could've invented for myself. But it sounded right, which is to say that I heard the voodoo echo of something ordained, fated: a name that instantly belonged to me, as surely as the lost, secret name with which I was born, and under which I'd been sentenced to twenty years in prison.

I peered down into Prabaker's round face and his large, dark, mischievous eyes, and I nodded, smiled, and accepted the name. I couldn't know, then, that the little Bombay street guide had given me a name thousands of people, from Colaba to Kandahar, from Kinshasa to Berlin, would come to know me by. Fate needs accomplices, and the stones in destiny's walls are mortared with small and heedless complicities such as those. I look back, now, and I know that the naming moment, which seemed so insignificant then, which seemed to demand no more than an arbitrary and superstitious yes or no, was in fact a pivotal moment in my life.

The role I played under that name, and the character I became-

Linbaba-was more real, and true to my nature, than anyone or anything that I ever was before it. "Yes, okay, Lin will do."

"Very good! I am too happy that you like it, this name. And like my name is meaning Son of Light in Hindi language, your name, Lin, has it also a very fine and so lucky meaning."

"Yeah? What does Lin mean in Hindi?"

"It's meaning _Penis!" he explained, with a delight that he expected me to share.

"Oh, great. That's just... great."

"Yes very great, very lucky. It is not exactly meaning this, but it is sounding like ling, or lingam, and that is meaning penis."

"Come off it, man," I protested, beginning to walk once more.

"How can I go around calling myself Mr. Penis? Are you kidding me? I can see it now-Oh, hello, pleased to meet you, my name is Penis. No way.

Forget it. I think we'll stick to Lindsay."

"No! No! Lin, really I'm telling you, this is a fine name, a very power name, a very lucky, a too lucky name! The people will love this name, when they hear it. Come, I will show you. I want to leave it this bottle of whisky you gave to me, leave it with my friend, Mr. Sanjay. Here, just here in this shop.

Just you see how he likes it your name."

A few more paces along the busy street brought us to a small shop with a hand-painted sign over the open door:

RADIO SICK

Electric Repair Enterprises Electrical Sales and Repairs, Sanjay Deshpande Proprietor Sanjay Deshpande was a heavy-set man in his fifties with a halo of grey-white hair, and white, bushy eyebrows. He sat behind a solid wooden counter, surrounded by bomb-blast radios, eviscerated cassette players, and boxes of parts. Prabaker greeted him, chattering in rapid Hindi, and passed the bottle of whisky over the counter. Mr. Deshpande slapped a meaty hand on it, without looking at it, and slid it out of sight on his side of the counter. He took a sheaf of rupee notes from his shirt pocket, peeled off a number, and passed them across with his palm turned downward.

Prabaker took the money and slipped it into his pocket with a movement as swift and fluid as the tentacle-grab of a squid. He finished talking, at last, and beckoned me forward.

"This is my very good friend," he informed Mr. Deshpande, patting me on the arm. "He is from New Zealand."

Mr. Deshpande grunted.

"He is just today coming in Bombay. India Guest House, he is staying."

Mr. Deshpande grunted again. He studied me with a vaguely hostile curiosity.

"His name is Lin. Mr. Linbaba," Prabaker said.

"What's his name?" Mr. Deshpande asked.

"Lin," Prabaker grinned. "His name is Linbaba."

Mr. Deshpande raised his impressive eyebrows in a surprised smile.

"Linbaba?"

"Oh, yes!" Prabaker enthused. "Lin. Lin. Very fine fellow, he is also."

Mr. Deshpande extended his hand, and I shook it. We greeted one another, and then Prabaker began to tug at my sleeve, pulling me towards the

doorway.

"Linbaba!" Mr. Deshpande called out, as we were about to step into the street. "Welcome in Bombay. You have any Walkman or camera or any ghetto-blasting machine for selling, you come to me, Sanjay Deshpande, at Radio Sick. I am giving best prices."

I nodded, and we left the shop. Prabaker dragged me a few paces further along the street, and then stopped.

"You see, Mr. Lin? You see how he likes it your name?"

"I guess so," I muttered, bewildered as much by his enthusiasm as by the brief exchange with Mr. Deshpande. When I got to know him well enough, when I began to cherish his friendship, I discovered that Prabaker believed with the whole of his heart that his smile made a difference, in people's hearts and in the world. He was right, of course, but it took me a long time to understand that truth, and to accept it.

"What's the baba part, at the end of the name? Lin, I can understand. But what's the Linbaba bit all about?"

"Baba is just a respecting name," Prabaker grinned. "If we put baba up on the back of your name, or on the name of anybody special, it is like meaning the respect we give it to a teacher, or a holy persons, or a very old, old, old-"

"I get it, I get it, but it doesn't make me any more comfortable with it, Prabu, I gotta tell ya. This whole penis thing... I don't know."

"But you did see, Mr. Sanjay Deshpande! You did see how he liked it your name! Look, see how the people love this name. You see now, you look, I will tell it to everybody! Linbaba! Linbaba!

Linbaba!"

He was speaking in a shout, addressing strangers as they passed us on the street.

"All right, Prabu, all right. I take your word for it. Calm down." It was my turn to tug at his sleeve, and move him along the street. "I thought you wanted to _drink the whisky?"

"Ah, yes," he sighed, "was wanting it, and was already drinking it in my mind also. But now, Linbaba, with this money from selling your good present to Mr. Sanjay, I can buy two bottles of very bad and nicely cheap Indian whisky, to enjoy, and plenty of money left for one nice new shirt, red colour, one tola of good charras, tickets for enjoying air condition Hindi picture, and two days of foods. But wait, Linbaba, you are not eating it your paan. You must put it now in the side of your mouth and chew it, before it is getting stale and not good for taste."

"Okay, how do I do it? Like this?"

I put the leaf-wrapped parcel, almost the size of a matchbox, into the side of my mouth between the cheek and the teeth, as I'd seen the others do. Within seconds, a suffusion of aromatic sweetnesses possessed my mouth. The taste was sharp and luscious - honeyed and subtly piquant at the same time.

The leaf wrapping began to dissolve, and the solid, crunchy nibbles of shaved betel nut, date, and coconut swirled in the sweet juices.

"You must spit it out some paan now," Prabaker said, staring at my grinding jaws with earnest concentration. "You make like this, see? Spit him out like this."

He spat out a squirt of red juice that landed on the road, a metre away, and formed a palm-sized blotch. It was a precise, expert procedure. Not a speck of the juice remained on his lips.

With his enthusiastic encouragement, I tried to imitate him, but the mouthful of crimson liquid bubbled out of my mouth, left a trail of slobber on my chin and the front of my shirt, and landed with an audible splat on my right boot.

"No problem this shirt," Prabaker frowned, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, and smearing the blood-red fluid deeper into my shirtfront with

vigorously ineffective rubbing. "No problem your boots also. I will wipe

him just like this, see? I must ask it now, do you like the swimming?"

"Swimming?" I asked, swallowing the little paan mixture that was still in my mouth.

"Oh, yes. Swimming. I will take you to Chowpatty beach, so nice beach it is, and there you can practise chewing and spitting and chewing and more spitting the paan, but without so many of all your clothes only, for a good saving on your laundry."

"Listen, about that-going around the city-you work as a guide, right?"

"Oh, yes. Very best Bombay guide, and guiding all India also."

"How much do you charge per day?"

He glanced at me, his cheeks appled in the impish grin I was learning to recognise as the clever under-side of his broad and gentle smile.

"I charge hundred rupees all day," he said.

"Okay..."

"And tourists buy it the lunch."

"Sure."

"And taxi also, tourists pay."

"Of course."

"And Bombay bus tickets, all they pay."

"Yeah."

"And chai, if we drink it on a hot afternoon, for refreshing our good selves."

"U-huh-"

"And sexy girls, if we go there, on a cool night, if we are feeling a big needy swelling in our-"

"Yeah, okay, okay. Listen, I'll pay you for the whole week. I want you to show me Bombay, teach me a bit about the city. If it works out okay, there'll be a bonus for you at the end of the week. How does that sound?"

The smile sparked his eyes, but his voice was surprisingly sombre as he replied.

"This is your good decision, Linbaba. Your very good decision."

"Well," I laughed, "we'll see. And I want you to teach me some Hindi words, okay?"

"Oh, yes! I can teach everything! Ha means yes, and nahin means no, and pani means water, and khanna means foods, and-"

"Okay, okay, we don't have to learn it all at once. Is this the restaurant?

Good, I'm starved." I was about to enter the dark and unprepossessing restaurant when he stopped me, his expression suddenly grave. He frowned, and swallowed hard, as if he was unsure how to begin.

"Before we are eating this good foods," he said, at last, "before we... before we make any business also, something there is, I must tell it to you."

"O-kay... "

His manner was so dejected that I felt a twinge of apprehension.

"Well, now I am telling... that tola charras, the one I was selling to you in hotel..."

"Yes?"

"Well... that was the business price. The really price-the friendship price-is only fifty rupees for one tola Afghani charras." He lifted his arms, and then let them slap down at his thighs. "I charged it fifty rupees too much."

"I see," I answered quietly. The matter was so trivial, from my point of view, that I was tempted to laugh out loud. It was obviously important to him, however, and I suspected that he wasn't often moved to make such admissions. In fact, as he told me much later, Prabaker had just then decided to like me, and for him that meant he was bound to a scrupulous and literal honesty in everything he said or did. It was at once his most endearing and most irritating quality, that he always told me the whole of the truth.

"So... what do you want to do about it?"

"My suggestion," he said seriously, "we smoke it that business price charras very fast, until finish that one, then I will buy new one for us. After from now, it will be everything friendship prices, for you and for me also. This is a no problem policy, isn't it?"

I laughed, and he laughed with me. I threw my arm around his shoulder and led him into the steamy, ambrosial activity of the busy restaurant.

"Lin, I think I am your very good friend," Prabaker decided, grinning happily. "We are the lucky fellows, isn't it?"

"Maybe it is," I replied. "Maybe it is."

Hours later, I lay back in a comfortable darkness, under the sound-strobe of a ceaselessly revolving ceiling fan. I was tired, but I couldn't sleep. Beneath my windows the street that had writhed and toiled in daylight was silent, subdued by a night- sultriness, moist with stars. Astounding and puzzling images from the city tumbled and turned in my mind like leaves on a wave of wind, and my blood so thrilled with hope and possibility that I couldn't suppress a smile, lying there in the dark. No-one, in the world I'd left behind me, knew where I was. No-one, in the new world of Bombay, knew who I was. In that moment, in those shadows, I was almost safe.

I thought of Prabaker, and his promise to return early in the morning to begin my tours of the city. Will he come? I wondered.

Or will I see him somewhere later in the day, walking with another newly arrived tourist? I decided, with the faint, impersonal callousness of the lonely, that if he were as good as his word, and turned up in the morning, I would begin to like him.

I thought of the woman, Karla, again and again, surprised that her composed, unsmiling face intruded so often. If you go to Leopold's, some time, maybe you'll find out. That was the last thing she'd said to me. I didn't know if it was an invitation, a challenge, or a warning. Whatever it was, I meant to take her up on it. I meant to go there, and look for her. But not yet.

Not until I'd learned a little more about the city she seemed to know so well.

I'll give it a week, I thought. A week in the city...

And beyond those reflections, as always, in fixed orbits around the cold sphere of my solitude, were thoughts of my family and my friends. Endless.

Unreachable. Every night was twisted around the unquenchable longing of what my freedom had cost me, and all that was lost. Every night was pierced by the spike of shame for what my freedom continued to cost them, the loved ones I was sure I would never see again.

"We could'a beat him down, you know," the tall Canadian said from his dark corner on the far side of the room, his sudden voice in the whirring silence sounding like stones thrown on a metal roof.

"We could'a beat that manager down on the price of this room.

It's costin' us six bucks for the day. We could'a beat him down to four. It's not a lotta money, but it's the way they do things here. You gotta beat these guys down, and barter for everything.

We're leavin' tomorrow for Delhi, but you're stayin' here. We talked about it before, when you were out, and we're kinda worried about you. You gotta

beat 'em down, man. If you don't learn that, if you don't start thinkin' like that, they're gonna fuck you over, these people. The Indians in the cities are real mercenary, man. It's a great country, don't get me wrong. That's why we come back here. But they're different than us. They're... hell, they just expect it, that's all. You gotta beat 'em down."

He was right about the price of the room, of course. We could've saved a dollar or two per day. And haggling is the economical thing to do. Most of the time, it's the shrewd and amiable way to conduct your business in India.

But he was wrong, too. The manager, Anand, and I became good friends, in the years that followed. The fact that I trusted him on sight and didn't haggle, on that first day, that I didn't try to make a buck out of him, that I worked on an instinct that respected him and was prepared to like him, endeared me to him.

He told me so, more than once. He knew, as we did, that six of our dollars wasn't an extravagant price for three foreign men to pay. The owners of the hotel received four dollars per day per room. That was their base line. The dollar or two above that minimum was all Anand and his staff of three room boys shared as their daily wage. The little victories haggled from him by foreign tourists cost Anand his daily bread, and cost them the chance to know him as a friend.

The simple and astonishing truth about India and Indian people is that when you go there, and deal with them, your heart always guides you more wisely than your head. There's nowhere else in the world where that's quite so true.

I didn't know that then, as I closed my eyes in the dark and breathing silence on that first night in Bombay. I was running on instinct, and pushing my luck. I didn't know that I'd already given my heart to the woman, and the city. And knowing none of it, I fell, before the smile faded from my lips, into a dreamless, gentle sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

She walked into Leopold's at the usual time, and when she stopped at a table near me to talk with friends, I tried once more to find the words for the foliant blaze of her green eyes. I thought of leaves and opals and the warm shallows of island seas. But the living emerald in Karla's eyes, made luminous by the sunflowers of gold light that surrounded the pupils, was softer, far softer.

I did eventually find that colour, the green in nature that was a perfect match for the green in her lovely eyes, but it wasn't until long months after that night in Leopold's. And strangely, inexplicably, I didn't tell her about it.

I wish now with all my heart that I did. The past reflects eternally between two mirrors - the bright mirror of words and deeds, and the dark one, full of things we didn't do or say. I wish now that from the beginning, even then in the first weeks that I knew her, even on that night, the words had come to tell her... to tell her that I liked her.

And I did-I liked everything about her. I liked the Helvetian music of her Swiss-American English, and the way she pushed her hair back slowly with a thumb and forefinger when she was irritated by something. I liked the hard-edged cleverness of her conversation, and the easy, gentle way she touched the people she liked when she walked past them or sat beside them.

I liked the way she held my eyes until the precise moment when it stopped being comfortable, and then smiled, softening the assail, but never looked away.

She looked the world in the eye and stared it down, and I liked that about her because I didn't love the world then. The world wanted to kill me or catch me. The world wanted to put me back in the same cage I'd escaped from, where the good guys, the guys in prison-guard uniforms who got paid to do the right thing, had chained me to a wall and kicked me until they broke my bones. And maybe the world was right to want that. Maybe it was no worse than I deserved. But repression, they say, breeds resistance in some men, and I was resisting the world with every minute of my life.

The world and I are not on speaking terms, Karla said to me once in those early months. The world keeps trying to win me back, she said, but it

doesn't work. I guess I'm just not the forgiving type. And I saw that in her, too, right from the start. I knew from the first minute how much like me she was. I knew the determination in her that was almost brutal, and the courage that was almost cruel, and the lonely, angry longing to be loved. I knew all that, but I didn't say a word. I didn't tell her how much I liked her. I was numb, in those first years after the escape: shell-shocked by the disasters that warred in my life. My heart moved through deep and silent water. No-one, and nothing, could really hurt me. No-one, and nothing, could make me very happy. I was tough, which is probably the saddest thing you can say about a man.

"You're becoming a regular here," she teased, ruffling my hair with one hand as she sat down at my table.

I loved it when she did that: it meant that she'd read me accurately, that she was sure I wouldn't take offence. I was thirty then-ugly, taller than average, with wide shoulders, a deep chest, and thick arms. People didn't often ruffle my hair.

"Yeah. I guess I am."

"So, you went around on tour with Prabaker again? How was it today?"

"He took me to the island, Elephanta, to see the caves."

"A beautiful place," she remarked quietly, looking at me, but dreaming of something else. "If you get the chance, you should visit the Ajanta and Ellora caves, in the north of the state. I spent the night there, once, at Ajanta, in one of the caves. My boss took me there."

"Your boss?"

"Yes, my boss."

"Is he European, your boss, or Indian?"

"Neither one, actually."

"Tell me about him."

"Why?" she asked with a direct, frowning stare.

I was simply making conversation, trying to keep her near me, talking to me, and the sudden wariness that bristled in the single word of her question surprised me. "It's no big deal," I replied, smiling. "I'm just curious about how people get work here, how they make a living, that's all."

"Well, I met him five years ago, on a long-distance flight," she said, looking down at her hands and seeming to relax once more.

"We both got on the plane at Zurich. I was on my way to Singapore, but by the time we got to Bombay he'd convinced me to get off the plane and work for him. The trip to the caves was... something special. He arranged it, somehow, with the authorities, and I went up there with him, and spent the night in a big cave, full of stone sculptures of the Buddha, and a thousand chattering bats. I was safe. He had a bodyguard posted outside. But it was incredible. A fantastic experience. And it really helped me to ... to put things in focus. Sometimes you break your heart in the right way, if you know what I mean."

I wasn't sure what she meant; but when she paused, expecting a reply, I nodded as if I did understand.

"You learn something or you _feel something completely new, when you break your heart that way," she said. "Something that only you can know or feel in that way. And I knew, after that night, I would never have that feeling anywhere but India. I knew-I can't explain it, I just knew somehow-that I was home, and warm, and safe. And, well, I'm still here..."

"What kind of business is he in?"

"What?"

"Your boss-what does he do?"

"Imports," she said. "And exports."

She lapsed into silence, turning her head to scan the other tables.

"Do you miss your home?"

"My home?"

"Yeah, I mean your other home. Don't you ever get homesick for Switzerland?"

"In a way, yes I do. I come from Basel-have you ever been there?"

"No, I've never been to Europe."

"Well, you must go, and when you go there you must visit Basel.

It's really a very European city, you know? It's divided by the river Rhine into Great Basel and Small Basel, and the two halves of the city have really different styles and attitudes, so it's like living in two cities at the same time. That used to suit me once. And it's right on the meeting place of three countries, so you can just walk across the border into Germany and France.

You can have breakfast in France, you know, with coffee and baguettes, and lunch in Switzerland, and dinner in Germany, without leaving the city by more than a few kilometres. I miss Basel, more than I miss Switzerland."

She stopped, catching her breath, and looked up at me through soft, unpainted lashes.

"Sorry, I'm giving you a geography lesson here."

"No, no, please go on. It's interesting."

"You know," she said slowly, "I like you, Lin."

She stared that green fire into me. I felt myself reddening slightly, not from embarrassment, but from shame, that she'd said so easily the very words, I like you, that I wouldn't let myself say to her.

"You do?" I asked, trying to make the question sound more casual than it was. I watched her lips close in a thin smile.

"Yes. You're a good listener. That's dangerous, because it's so hard to resist.

Being listened to-really listened to-is the second-best thing in the world."

"What's the first best thing?"

"Everybody knows that. The best thing in the world is power."

"Oh, is it?" I asked, laughing. "What about sex?"

"No. Apart from the biology, sex is all about power. That's why it's such a rush."

I laughed again.

"And what about love? A lot of people say that love is the best thing in the world, not power."

"They're wrong," she said with terse finality. "Love is the opposite of power. That's why we fear it so much."

"Karla, dear one, the things you say!" Didier Levy said, joining us and taking a seat beside Karla. "I must make the conclusion that you have wicked intentions for our Lin."

"You didn't hear a word we said," she chided.

"I don't have to _hear you. I can see by the look on his face.

You've been talking your riddles to him, and turning his head around. You forget, Karla, that I know you too well. Here, Lin, we'll cure you at once!"

He shouted to one of the red-jacketed waiters, calling the man by the number "4" emblazoned on the breast pocket on his uniform.

"Hey! Char number! Do battlee beer! What will you have, Karla?

Coffee? Oh, char number! Ek coffee aur. Jaldi karo!"