

Journey

Jae Watson

Legend  Press
Independent Book Publisher

Legend Press Ltd
13a Northwold Road, London, N16 7HL
info@legendpress.co.uk
www.legendpress.co.uk
www.myspace.com/legendpress

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Part 1

Chapter 1

'We must travel in the direction of our fear' John Berryman, *A Point of Age*¹

There are journeys that take us miles from home, broadening our minds, widening our horizons, and then there are journeys that take us into lost or undiscovered regions of ourselves, into the landscape of the mind and the contours of the soul. The choices we make along the way, as well as the chance encounters, all have a part in sculpting our internal geography; the process, as I was about to discover, can be both painful and terrifying.

My journey with Sara Fitzgerald began in the restless autumn following the terrorist attacks, when London was awash with fear, blinking and trembling in the path of a brakeless truck. It was one of my reasons for leaving the city, although not the only one. As for Sara, I had no idea at the start of our journey why she chose to go travelling at that particular point in her life, but then there were many things about Sara I didn't yet know.

I suppose we could have been any two friends – twenty-something, looking for adventure, following in the well-worn path of the gap-year traveller. But that wasn't to be. Things happened, things that would draw me into a journey of discovery and self-discovery; things that would irrevocably split my life in two.

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Sara and I arrived in Delhi after two months of travelling and an eighteen-hour journey from Sunauli – a sleepy village straddling the Indian-Nepal border. It was a wearying journey with too many stops. At each station the train was greeted by a frenzied scramble: vendors pushed freshly-made omelettes and bhajias through window grilles, or climbed on board to turn the carriage into a culinary circus. Wiry men, with large metal urns swinging from their necks, glided through the carriages crying out, “chai, chai garam,” in gravelled tenors. We finished each meal with this sweet concoction, spiced with ginger and cardamom, and then hurled the rough ceramic cups out of the window to smash on the tracks below. My keen sense of responsibility, inherited from my father, wouldn’t allow me to do this at first and I hoarded little bags of rubbish while searching in vain for waste bins. I eventually gave up. I still drew the line at plastic, a curse on India’s landscape, but anything remotely edible I handed over to nature and to the herds of brown pigs, which happily devoured everything from yesterday’s newspaper to rotten vegetables and human faeces.

After tea, a carnival of beggars paraded through the carriage. First, a man bereft of his legs, swinging gracefully on his arms, then a blind man whose misted eyes danced subversively in their sockets, and finally a girl of perhaps five or six who cleaned the carriage with a twig brush before opening her hand in our faces like a grubby lotus flower. I gave the girl fifty rupees because she had actually done something useful and then, as always, battled with my conscience. I bet everyone gave the child money and never the legless man. I imagined him swinging home rupee-less to his expectant family.

“Hey, Marianne, I could kill for a beer and a cigarette.” Sara interrupted my thoughts.

I shot her a look that said keep your voice down; the family sitting opposite were Muslim and I didn’t want to offend. They had been kind to us on the journey, pushing vegetable pakoras and over-ripe oranges into our laps while plying us with questions about our lives in England.

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“Is it true that many men and women live together without ever getting married?”

“Is it always foggy in London?”...

Sara didn't notice my look; her head was buried in the *Hindustan Times*. Every now and then she read a snippet out loud. “*An inter-caste marriage took a riotous turn in Gonda on Wednesday night when over a dozen people went on the rampage, attacking Mr Manoj Damodar Naik with stones, wooden sticks – dandas – slaps, fist blows and threatened him with dire consequences. The victim said that his inter-caste marriage had fuelled the trouble.*’ I've been to a few weddings like that.”

I let out a small laugh but continued to stare out of the window. I was in awe of this vast country, which could spring delights and horrors like a grinning Jack-in-the-box and I loved travelling by train; it was a good opportunity to rest from the frenetic pace, to gather my thoughts. I liked the sense of moving forward at great speed yet taking up only a narrow space in the landscape, slicing through small strips of life, without the need to interact.

“Oh God, Mari!” Sara exclaimed a few minutes later. “*A family of eleven were wiped out by a tanker in a road mishap in Delhi. According to police reports, the driver of the tanker, Mr P. Nallayyan, was delivering dry chillies when he lost control of the vehicle and rammed it into the family, who lived on the roadside. They were all killed instantly.*’ I don't think the word ‘mishap’ quite does the story justice, do you?”

Sara's voice drifted through my thoughts, making little impact on my emotions. We heard stories like this on a daily basis and to my shame I was quickly growing numb to some of the horrors of life in India. Besides, I had horrors of my own to deal with. I fixed my eyes on the patchwork poverty of the rural scenery, made innocuous by the barrier of window grilles, until the sun melted into the deep folds of the night.

Before midnight we prepared for sleep. There was a three-tier sleeping system, with two sets of bunks in each carriage. We always made for the top bunks, away from curious stares.

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They weren't exactly comfortable although the firm leather was preferable to the budget hotel beds I had tossed and turned in over previous months. I quickly learned that you rarely find silence in India: jumbled words drift through the night to tangle with fragmented dreams; holy cows, ribs and hip-bones pushing through undernourished flesh, brush against walls and pound the earth in their endless search for food.

When I couldn't sleep I thought about my travels – the people I'd met, the places I'd seen – but mostly I thought about Nathaniel. It was nearly three months since he had ended our relationship – coldly, inexplicably – and I was still reeling from the blow, still no closer to understanding why. He haunted my dreams and sometimes, in the deepest part of the night, I was certain he was thinking of me at the exact moment I was thinking of him, that we were connected by an invisible thread stretching between the continents. I believed it would only be a matter of time before he made contact. My certainty usually evaporated in the uncompromising heat of the morning sun.

It was a scorching day at the end of October when we arrived at New Delhi Station. I sensed a bristling tension in the city that I hadn't felt anywhere else. The choking heat was a shock to my system after the piercingly fresh air of the Himalayas, where we had just spent ten wonderful days trekking. A soft, thick dust – stirred up by a terrifying number of motorbikes, cars and auto-rickshaws – caught in our throats and covered everything in a grey shroud.

We booked into a hotel in Paharganj, a seedy but enthralling part of the city littered with cheap accommodation.

“I don't want to hang around here for too long.” Sara was brushing her hair in a small mirror, which hung over a cracked sink. She pulled it into a ponytail using a silk headscarf, the way she usually wore it during the day – denying admirers the sight of its full glory until nightfall.

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“Me neither. I think we should catch that train to Agra tomorrow evening.” I nudged her along so I could find a space to brush my own hair, which was inferior in length and lustre to Sara’s treacle cascade but not bad by ordinary standards. Nathaniel had once described it as “warm honey”, but then he used to love everything about me.

I had been told at my school in Shrewsbury, in that unequivocal way boys have of categorising girls, that I was of above-average attractiveness. However, London, where I went to university, was full of beautiful people and ‘average’ took on a different meaning. Sara was definitely above average; I imagined she was often startled by the beauty of her own reflection.

I think it was Simone Weil who said that a beautiful woman, on seeing herself in the mirror, knows, ‘This is I’; an ugly woman knows with equal certainty, ‘This is not I’.

I was happiest with my reflection when I caught it off-guard, when I saw it as I imagined Nathaniel used to – unselfconscious, happy; that was when I knew I was seeing *myself*. Nathaniel had always been quick to tell me I was beautiful and everyone needs to hear those words from time to time. I don’t remember hearing them from my mother, who left when I was three years old, and the words didn’t sit easily with my gentle father – they were too bold for him. It takes courage to speak them out loud. Perhaps that’s why my mother abandoned him – abandoned us.

That evening Sara and I had a basic thali in one of the vibrant cafés of the Paharganj and then, exhausted, we crashed out for the night. The following day we visited the Jama Masjid Mosque, the largest in India, and then browsed in the Chandni Chowk Bazaar for a couple of hours before returning to our hotel. I still couldn’t shake off the sense of unease I was experiencing and, despite the wonders on offer in Delhi, I couldn’t wait to leave.

At dusk, we left the hotel to make our way back to New Delhi Station, where we planned to catch a train to Agra. We were late because Sara couldn’t find her stash of cannabis and

wouldn't leave without it.

"We're going to miss the train!" I repeated at frequent intervals, sharp irritation rising in my voice. The thought of spending another night in Delhi was unappealing. Sara eventually found her supply, but we then had to run with our heavy backpacks on if we were to stand any chance of catching the train.

Lights were beginning to twinkle as we approached the marketplace, which was still bustling with hoards of people shopping for the approaching Diwali and Eid celebrations. The sound of many voices chatting and haggling merged into an excited chorus; small children, bored with shopping, tugged at their mother's saris, while the fluid eyes of older children darted about like swallows in anticipation of the coming events.

It was as we reached the market stalls that the bomb went off. We were no more than fifty metres from the centre of the blast and we dropped instantly to our stomachs with our faces buried in the dust. My rucksack rammed into the back of my neck, making it difficult to raise my head, but I could see masses of screaming people and the unearthly sight of bodies falling in slow motion from the sky; a shower of blood drenched the earth.

"Oh god!", "Oh shit" was all we said for seconds, maybe minutes.

Sara jumped up before I did, threw off her backpack and ran towards the chaos. I followed more slowly, with a sickening terror that quivered in my heart. I could only think that there might be another blast. I remembered hearing of those who had escaped the London tube attacks only to jump on the fated bus.

I could smell blood, hot and bitter, and the thick stench of fear, which I had never believed could be so tangible; I saw the faces of people who thought the world was at an end, eyes impossibly big, mouths gaping at the horror. Some people ran about frantically, fingers pulling at their own hair; others were paralysed, frozen into the ground, as if cursed by the Queen of Narnia. I wanted to run, run and keep running. My heart pounded with the force of adrenalin; my limbs twitched with

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the desire for flight. But then something else kicked in; it came from another part of me, above and beyond my instinct – the desire not to be a coward, the need to run towards my fear. It wasn't heroism; it was survival.

As I reached the crowd I lost sight of Sara. I stared into the centre of the mayhem; people were wailing and tugging at the arms of loved ones who lay so obviously dead, all life blasted from their bodies.

I realised how little I could do, how useless I was. Then I saw a child of perhaps three or four standing alone, frozen next to the body of a woman, presumably her mother. There was a small pool of blood forming around the woman's head.

I picked the child up; her shabby skirt was drenched in urine. I held her close to me, kissing her tangled hair, telling her it would be ok. Her fragile body offered me as much comfort as I hope I offered her.

We both stared in hopeless horror at the mother. Judging from her clothes she was poor – a beggar, probably an 'Untouchable', not even worthy of belonging to a caste. We had been told never to give money to these women, who begged, child in arms; they would only spend it on alcohol; it would never benefit the child. Occasionally I gave them food if I had any to spare.

"Mata!" the child said, as if uttering her first word; she pointed limply towards her mother. Then, as if this single word had the potency of a spell, the woman's body twitched into life, first an arm, then a leg. She pushed herself up into a seated position and rubbed her head; the flow of blood was now drying into a scarlet mask on one side of her face. She looked around, dazed, and saw me with her child. Without speaking, she struggled to a standing position and shuffled towards me, as if obeying deeply primitive instincts. She moved slowly, zombie-like, arms stretched before her. A large gold ring through her nose emphasised the fragility of her tiny frame.

"You must see a doctor," I said, "you're injured."

She didn't speak but gestured again for the child. Reluctantly,

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I handed the little girl to her. I felt exposed, as if giving up my battle shield.

“Please, let me take you to the hospital,” I continued, partly feeling the need to be of use, partly wanting an excuse to leave the Dantesque scene, but it was obvious the woman didn’t understand. She hardly seemed aware of the bloody carnage around her, as if it was only to be expected along with the daily grind of hunger and hopelessness that marked her life. Her eyes looked dead; nothing could harm her, not even the terrorist’s bomb.

She held out one hand to me in what looked like an automatic gesture – she probably did it in her sleep. It was a quick movement, hand out and then into the mouth, miming the act of eating. She did this three times. I pulled out a five-hundred rupee note from my money belt and placed it in her hand.

“Buy food!” I said. “Please, buy food.” I mimicked her own earlier actions and then pointed at the child’s stomach.

She nodded, without surprise, without gratitude, and walked away. The child waved her tiny, dusty hand at me as if we were saying goodbye after a day at the seaside.

Then the police were swarming around the scene, shouting, pushing us back.

“Get away, get away, you must go to your homes.”

I saw Sara and went to her. I noticed she had blood on her hands and a little on her forehead, like smudges made by the priest on Ash Wednesday. She looked wild, her hair flowing loose about her shoulders. We instinctively put our arms around each other, but we didn’t move or speak. We seemed drawn to the scene like pins to a magnet. We should have been part of it; we should have been there those few crucial minutes earlier. If we had, we would have been caught in the centre of the blast. To leave the scene would surely be to leave our destiny.

We did eventually return to the hotel, where our room was still vacant. When we examined our backpacks they were splattered with thick clots of blood, which we scrubbed off

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vigorously before washing the unspeakable evidence from our own bodies.

I rang my dad to let him know I was ok; I didn't tell him just how close we had been to the centre of the blast. To my knowledge Sara didn't contact anyone. We were both subdued and when we did talk we could only speak about the incident, in disbelieving tones.

“Were we really there? Did it really happen?”

I asked Sara what she had done when we were apart.

“Not much,” she replied.

I pushed her to tell me about the blood on her hands and she admitted, almost with embarrassment, that she'd tried to help a man with a wounded arm, before being shooed away by police.

“Talk about out of the frying pan into the fire,” I said, thinking about one of my reasons for leaving London. Sara smiled, a Mona Lisa smile, as if there was more meaning to my comment than I knew. Despite how shaken we were, neither of us suggested going home and we both agreed that we wanted to continue our travels as planned.

We soon learned that there had in fact been three blasts that day. Ours had been the first at 5.40pm, followed by one in Sarojini Nagar, another crowded market in the south of Delhi, and the third on a bus in Govindpuri to the south-east. We tried to find out more detailed information but there was a great deal of confusion and idle speculation in the streets.

That night I dreamed about the child and her mother, the lack of emotion in their faces, the resignation in their eyes. It had scared me as much as the sight of the bloodied corpses.

Over the next two days we avidly read local newspapers and discovered that sixteen people had died in the Paharganj explosion and forty-three in Sarojini Nagar. Many more were injured.

Police Commissioner KK Paul said that explosives in Paharganj were planted either in a motorcycle or a rickshaw, while in Sarojini Nagar it was thought a pressure cooker had been placed near a gas cylinder. Reports said that the explosions

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were intended to cause maximum damage in places frequented by people from all religions.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said, “These are dastardly acts of terrorism. We are resolute in our commitment to fight terrorism in all forms.” He added that ten people had been detained in connection with the bombings.

Security officials commented that they could not rule out the involvement of Lashkar-e-Toiba, a radical Muslim group fighting for the self-determination of Kashmir.

Some observers believed that militants might have been trying to scupper improving relations between Pakistan and India. Pakistan condemned the explosions as ‘Criminal acts of terrorism’.

As police sifted through the charred debris for clues, a group calling itself Inqilabi Muhaz (IIM) telephoned news organisations to claim it had carried out the explosion to further its ends in Kashmir. However, no organisation of that name appeared to be known by police or to experienced observers in Kashmir.

As we read and re-read accounts of the blasts and spoke to locals as well as other travellers, we slowly began to organise the horrors in our minds. I knew already that the scenes would never leave me; they were as much part of my life now as a childhood trip to the zoo or memories of my graduation day.

It was Tuesday before we could book seats again on the train to Agra, and that evening we retraced our steps to New Delhi Station at an almost identical time, passing the devastation on our way. As we reached the station entrance a man ran towards us, holding one arm in the air, eyes wild and zealous. I cried out and braced myself for flight, thinking he was either a terrorist or a maniac, but as he drew closer I recognised Sara’s headscarf tied like a militant band, or perhaps a lover’s memento, around his arm.

“Madam, you saved my life!” he cried. I thought he was about to fall at Sara’s feet but he just bowed several times.

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“They told me in the hospital that your prompt actions saved me from certain death. How can I thank you? What can I do?”

Sara looked uncomfortable.

“Nothing, you can do nothing. I’m just glad you’re alive.”

“There must be something,” he persisted.

“Just keep on living. Look, I’m sorry, we have a train to catch.” She held his hand briefly but was already moving away from him into the station.

“Sara! For God’s sake!” I said, grabbing her arm. “You did an amazing thing; why are you so embarrassed by it?”

She slowed her pace. “I only tied a sodding scarf around his arm. What else could I do? Watch him die?”

Not for the first time, I was struck by how little I knew Sara, by how little any of us know each other. Another person’s mind is a Pandora’s box without a key. It is hard to imagine that anyone else thinks as we do – the madness of never ceasing thought, the trivial snippets that childishly play in our heads and surprise us with their absurdity, remnants of nursery rhymes from childhood or inane songs that go round in our minds on a never-ending loop. This along with the fear of what others might think and a nagging self-criticism.

We imagine that other people have a purity of thought and clarity of purpose that we lack. For example, I imagined that on the day of the bombings, Sara saw a man with an injured arm and, without any other thought to distract her from her purpose, ran to him, ripped the scarf from her head and firmly tied it around his arm, just above the point of injury. In reality, perhaps she considered running from the scene, or leaving the man until someone came along better qualified to deal with his injuries. Perhaps she even worried about ruining her clothes with the inefaceable mark of his blood.

And what about the bombers setting out to complete their tasks, striding towards their day’s deadly work? Apart from running through instructions in their minds, remembering the details of the plan, perhaps the first bomber is wishing

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he'd had a pee before leaving home, his bladder throbbing with discomfort. The second meanwhile may be seething about a row he'd had with a friend the previous night, although the friendship had probably run its course. He turns the friend's caustic words over in his mind, wishing he'd come up with the fantastic put-down, with its right blend of sarcasm and wit, which has just formed perfectly in his mind. Perhaps the third bomber is realising, with a cold fear – unlike the scorching terror he is about to inflict – that he never meant to get in this deep. He knows he's the weakest link in an otherwise solid chain, but he can't pull out; he fears the impact of failure more than the consequences of honesty.

Of course I didn't share any of these musings with Sara. We climbed aboard the train for Agra, alone with our jumbled thoughts, each a perfectly sealed casket.

Chapter 2

I met Sara in unusual circumstances. We had both graduated from London University, but I studied English Literature while she read Law; I lived north, she lived south. It was unlikely our paths would have crossed in the normal course of events.

The first thing that struck me about Sara was her voice. I later learned that her father was from Galway; this accounted for the soft lilt that combined with a harder English tone to produce something clear and melodic. I heard her voice before I saw her, speaking with calm.

“You don’t understand!” The voice came from an open sash window in a house in Islington. It was a summer’s day, the sort of day when the heat droops over everything like a dusty blanket, choking the air and muting the light. There was no breeze to disperse the fumes spewed out by a legion of cars; London was sipping a deadly cocktail. In only a matter of days, terrorists would devastate the Underground and create a climate of fear, which would run like an icy seam through the heart of the city.

I don’t know why, but I stopped. I was on my way to a friend’s place – one of the few people I knew in London with a garden. It’s a mixed area; one minute you’re walking past grand Georgian houses set around elegant squares, gardens bursting with roses and hollyhocks, but turn a corner and the place is teeming with flats and bed-sits, abandoned fridges littering the pavements and weeds pushing through concrete drives. The area I was now passing through definitely belonged to the first category.

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Then the voice changed in tone; it was louder and tight with tension.

“It’s the only thing I want from you!” It was still a strong voice with no hint of victim in it but I sensed the frayed edges of panic. I imagined the girl must be standing close to the window, which meant she was some distance from the door and perhaps in a vulnerable position – although vulnerable is not a word I have since used to describe Sara.

There was no one else in the square, which is unusual in London at anytime but the stagnant heat seemed to have driven people indoors, or into the welcome shade of gardens. I found it difficult to assess the situation. Did I need to worry? Was it any of my business? Then I heard a thud and a scream.

I looked around again, hoping to get help, but there was still no one in sight. You hear stories about members of the public intervening in fights, helping victims of attack – in the streets, on buses – and ending up injured or, worse still, dead. Most people didn’t bother anymore. I’m not sure why I did.

I cautiously opened the little iron-gate and climbed through a mass of pink roses, which released their scent around me, so that I could look through the low sash window into the house. I saw an elegant room, pale green and cream, decorated in a style sympathetic to the period of the house. I noticed a baby grand piano in one corner, on top of which was a simple vase containing the same pink roses, probably plucked from the garden that morning. On the floor I saw a girl bending over a fair-haired man, who was lying awkwardly. He looked to be unconscious or even dead.

I couldn’t see the girl’s face since a dark shaft of hair covered it. I didn’t say anything at first; she didn’t look to be in immediate danger and I felt detached, as if I was watching a scene in a murder mystery play. I remember thinking how striking a vignette it was – a perfect room with two beautiful figures, she bending over him so that her hair swept his apparently lifeless groin.

I could see her dilemma. The door appeared to open inwards

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and the bulk of his body blocked it. He was a tall man, over six-foot and well-built. She looked fragile in comparison. If she attempted to move him, which would be difficult on a carpeted floor, he might come round and harm her. She seemed to be checking he was ok, but then she stood up and tried to drag him away from the entrance, pulling at his arm with little success.

“Move you bastard!” she said. I was concerned she was in a state of shock and it was at that point I decided to speak.

“Are you alright?” I asked. My voice came out small and shaky. She let go of, or rather dropped, his arm and turned to me. Her face was beautiful: creamy skin, dark blue eyes, full lips parted so that she had the expression of a child caught eating strawberries saved for afternoon tea.

“Who are you?” she asked, in an accusing tone.

“Marianne,” I said apologetically. “I heard you scream; I thought you might need help.”

She lowered her head and seemed to consider my offer for a few seconds. She then came over to the window.

“Look,” she spoke calmly, “I met this guy in a bar.” She nodded towards him. “I didn’t realise he was a nutter; he tried to rape me.”

I must admit, despite my shock at her allegation, I did wonder what the girl was doing going home with a complete stranger; it seemed very irresponsible.

“I really need to get my things from upstairs,” she continued, “my purse and stuff. Could you help me move him?” I was surprised by the request; we weren’t talking about a box of books or a log in the road. It was a man who, at the very least, was unconscious.

“Don’t you think you should call an ambulance...and the police? If he tried to rape you-”

“No!” she was emphatic, glancing quickly behind her. “I’ll do that once I get my stuff. It’s too complicated.” She put her hand on my arm through the window.

“Please Marianne, if he comes round he’ll kill me. I need to get my things, quickly!”

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“Ok,” I said, already drawn into Sara’s fine silver web. “Just help me through the window.”

Together, we dragged the man into the centre of the room; I flinched when I saw blood on his temple. We stepped into the hallway and closed the door.

“How did he fall?” I asked, still trying to piece things together. “He’s a big man!”

“He tripped on the rug, banged his head.” She was distracted. “Look, I’ll only be a minute; wait for me here.” She flew up the staircase.

The reality of the situation then hit me; I felt sick; my body shook. I moved towards the front door ready for flight if I heard the slightest noise coming from the room. I leaned against a silk-papered wall, closing my fingers around my mobile phone. I decided that, if it came to it, the girl would have to fend for herself.

I noticed several rosewood-framed photographs in the hallway, showing portraits of individuals or family groups. The fair-haired man appeared in most of them, usually towering above a small woman with well-cut auburn hair, and two grinning children.

I know you can’t tell everything about a person’s character from a photograph, but I thought the man looked kind. He had a tanned, freckled face and fair lashes, which framed striking blue eyes. He was probably only in his mid-thirties but he had deep lines etched around his eyes, which I imagined were caused by smiling and squinting into the Riviera sun.

I doubted the words of the girl and thought about calling the police but, at that moment, Sara came leaping down the stairs with a bag over one shoulder. Her face was transparent.

“Thanks so much for waiting, Marianne; I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

She left the front door slightly ajar and we stepped outside where the heat closed around us once more. She was taller than I’d thought, less fragile. She wore a diaphanous green top and low-waisted jeans; her hair trailed darkly over her shoulders.

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“I called an ambulance from upstairs; they won’t be long. I need to get away from here.”

“But...”

“Let’s go and get a drink, hey?” Her long fingers fumbled with a packet of cigarettes. “I’m shaking all over.” She managed to extract one and light it, offering me another in the process. I refused – I don’t smoke but had a sudden urge to accept one, to be included in Sara’s drama. I felt a sense of intimacy with her, as if we had been friends for a long time. I later realised she had this effect on everyone. In that moment my life, my plans, didn’t seem to matter; she had seduced me away from my path and onto her own.

Perhaps, with hindsight, I am making it all sound too dramatic, or maybe I am trying to excuse my questionable behaviour but, at first, I saw Sara as a victim, someone who needed my help. I had been reading tons of feminist literature as research for a freelance article I was working on; I was steeped in the likes of Virginia Woolf, Kate Chopin and Toni Morrison. Sara’s story fitted in with my thinking.

I was also a bit fed-up with my life at the time; some of my closest friends had left London after graduating, while others were firmly rooted in smart careers that demanded all of their attention. In contrast, I seemed to have lost my direction altogether.

After graduating, I applied for a place on a reputable journalism course but, despite a good degree, I had been turned down with a brief letter advising me to ‘get some life experience and try again’. I was deeply disappointed; it ruined my neat five-year plan: complete the course, get a good job in journalism and write novels from a sunny garden-flat. Instead, for three years, I had been doing whatever scraps of – usually mind-numbing – work were thrown to me by an agency that only cared about creaming off their slice of my earnings, and I was still living in a dilapidated flat in Finsbury Park. In my spare time I wrote and tried to catch the attention of newspapers and

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magazines with my articles. I applied again for the journalism course and for a second time I was rejected. As a result, I was feeling less than content.

There was something else as well, something harder to explain. London seemed a city gripped by fear; it was a nebulous kind of fear that infiltrated everything. It prowled the streets and darkened the Underground; it froze solid in our hearts. It wasn't just about the threat of terror attacks – although of course that was a major factor – it was also about the reported rise in violent crime, the abuse and murder of children, war and rumours of war. Whether real or imagined, nowhere appeared safe, not our public transport system, our streets, not even our hospitals and schools. The planet itself seemed to be in revolt, with an eruption of earthquakes, floods and tidal waves as well as unpredictable climatic change. The British press reported it all with a kind of sick glee, feasting on one disaster after another. It seemed irresponsible to me and I started to become disillusioned with my chosen profession.

Young people were blamed for binge drinking and drug taking, for not caring enough about anything, but it seemed more likely that we were made inert by the sense that we were powerless to do anything. The response for many was to drink, dance and be merry, for tomorrow we might die.

The only really positive thing in my life that summer had been Nathaniel. We'd talked several times about moving in together and Nathaniel was more than ready to do it immediately, but I stalled on the decision.

I had met Nathaniel in my first term, my first week, at university. He was in the final year of a psychology degree. He stood out immediately from the frenetic crowd of new students who were desperately trying to be noticed, scrambling to sign up for fresher activities. Not because he was physically striking, although he possessed a cool, classic beauty with his discerning blue eyes, fine determined nose and wheat-blond hair that looked like it was being permanently redesigned by the wind (it was the only thing about him that lacked control). Not

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because he was trying to be cool either, although he was cool, but because he wasn't trying to be anything. He was the eye of the hurricane, the calm amid the frenzy.

I asked him for directions to a place he was already going and we went there together. By the time we arrived I knew I could love him. We discovered we were in the same hall of residence and made arrangements to meet for a drink later that week.

I had never expected to fall in love while so young and while my angsty friends were still enjoying one dramatic sexual encounter after another. They were cynical about my relationship with Nathaniel, saying things like, "It will never last," and, "Why don't you play the field?" The problem was that I really did believe (back then) that Nathaniel was *the one*, although I felt like a freak of nature for believing such a thing in the hedonistic, quick-fix world of university.

I always seemed to have one foot rooted in the past, in a time when love happened like a lightning strike, suddenly, unexpectedly, and burned forever in the heart of the bewildered love-struck. My heroines were not the fickle, fluffy creatures of 21st Century chick-lit but the dark and dangerous creations of sexually-suppressed Victorian England.

However, I was also scared of grown-up commitment and a little embarrassed by the thought of settling down at the tender age of twenty-four – although my parents and grandparents had been deeply entrenched in married life by then. In consequence I pulled away from Nathaniel, leaving us both wounded and confused.

"Yeah sure!" I said to Sara. "I just need to call my friend to tell her I'll be late."

I didn't make it to my friend's place that day. Sara and I went for a coffee on Upper Street and then caught a tube from Angel to Soho where we drank in various bars until two in the morning. We talked a lot, mainly about inconsequential things and mainly about people Sara knew. She painted a vivid picture of her world, her wealthy friends and their antics: Sebastian,

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supposedly in hiding from the Russian mafia, staying with his English cousins in Kensington, always pissed on vodka and recounting outlandish tales; Maddie, a bipolar lawyer who was hilariously indiscreet about her celebrity clients when high, but so difficult to be around when low that even her pet poodle jumped to its death from the third-floor balcony...

Sara had a way of talking about people and about events that made me feel she was disclosing a slightly wicked secret and that she had chosen me to disclose it to. She was a child opening a door to a magical world, one hand to her lips telling me to shush, the other ushering me in. I could just about see a tantalising strip of her world. In comparison my own world seemed flat and monochrome and I longed to step inside with her.

In Sara's presence I didn't exactly forget the events that had taken place earlier that evening – the freckled man, the blood on his temple – it was more that they lost their horror; they became part of the drama that was Sara's world, smoothed into normality by her hypnotic voice.

I hadn't drunk so much in ages and when I miraculously found my way home and onto my bed, I fell into an unsatisfying sleep, splintered by dreams. It was only the next morning, when I was curled up on my sofa sipping coffee, that I thought again about the freckled man and hoped that Sara really had called an ambulance. For all I knew, two grinning children had skipped into their sunny lounge the previous day to discover their father's stiff and bloodied corpse.

Chapter 3

'Man has places in his heart which do not yet exist, and into them enters suffering in order that they may have existence.'
Leon Bloy, *The Pilgrim of the Absolute* ²

We arrived in Agra tired and irritable, still trying to make sense of our horrific experience in Delhi. Sara had been subdued on the train journey and seemed eager to throw off her backpack as soon as possible. We managed to find a clean, cheap hotel with a wonderful view of the Taj Mahal from the rooftop. We were content to sit up there for the evening, bathing our faces in the mellow orange glow of the falling sun.

The hotel owner, Rajpal, came up to join us. We told him about our near miss and he offered us sympathy as well as grass, which we readily accepted. I wanted to forget, at least for a while, the scenes I had witnessed.

"It's good stuff," he said, "from Nepal." He stayed with us to share the spliff and to talk for a while. He was a Sikh man, tall and very attractive. He asked us numerous questions about our lives in England, but we were more interested in finding out about his life and the Sikh culture.

He described the beliefs of his ancestors and their crusade for dharmayudha (righteousness). "Sikhism had its roots in protest," he said. "It was a reaction against the caste system and the menial drudgery of the Dalits...untouchables. It aimed to fuse the best of Islam and Hinduism."

"And what's this?" Sara asked, fingering the steel bangle on

Rajpal's right wrist.

"It's a Karra." He looked directly into Sara's eyes, which at that moment appeared large and child-like. "It symbolises fearlessness and strength."

I thought I noticed something passing between them – a moment.

"Indian people seem so much happier than Westerners, despite their relative poverty," I said.

Raj threw his head back and laughed, revealing strong, white teeth.

"What's so funny?"

"It just reminds me of my father. He used to tell me stories when I was a child about the Westerners who flocked here in the 1960s searching for peace, wisdom and whatever else. My father's business happened to be on what became known as the 'Hippy Trail' and he became very rich by local standards, almost overnight. Suddenly he was able to afford all the things these flower children were running here to escape." He laughed again, perhaps at the joyful irony of it all. I felt naïve for making such a simplistic comment and had the sense, as I often did, of being outside of something.

"What was your father's business?" Sara asked.

"Incense, brass, cheap jewellery; you know, everyday sorts of things. They couldn't get enough of it; they looked to my father as if he were imbued with some great wisdom – he was a very striking man, especially in his turban. "*Money is the root of all evil,*" they would say as they handed over their rupees. My father would smile and nod, wisely. "The most misquoted line in the Bible," he said to the family later. "The *love* of money is the root of evil, not money itself. It is a very costly misquote." He chuckled as he counted his day's earnings. "But they can afford it."

"He just didn't understand. "Why don't they look to their own prophet? He's not such a bad chap." My father was a big fan of Jesus. "They come here clutching every single holy book to their chests except for the Bible, as if they're ashamed of it,"

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he used to say.”

“I guess people just get bored with their own culture and religion,” I replied. “You know, dusty churches, old ladies in hats. Eastern stuff seems more...exotic, somehow.”

“Well, I’ll let you into a little secret.” Raj leaned forward, his eyes glittering. “People are just as likely to be unhappy here in India as you lot are in your English castles. They live with the same fears as you: the fear of other races; the fear of other religions; the fear of anyone who isn’t from the same town, the same street; the fear of anyone who isn’t like their family; the fear of anyone who isn’t like themselves.”

I noticed Sara looking intently at Raj as he spoke, an almost religious fervour in her eyes.

“Look at the current situation,” he continued in mellifluous tones. “Muslims and Hindus killing each other, Sunnis fighting Shi’ites, neighbour against neighbour. See what you have just witnessed in Delhi. Where does it all end? When one miserable man is left standing and what is the point of that? I tell you, you have as much chance of finding happiness in your own backyard as you do in an Ashram in India, with all its mantras, incense and jangling bells; they are just aids, not answers.”

“Oh great,” I said, “so what’s the point?”

“The point is...if there is a point...given half a chance many Indians would choose a Western lifestyle, even though it wouldn’t make them any happier. We could all swap lives with each other like a never-ending game of musical chairs but it wouldn’t bring us happiness.”

“So what does bring happiness?”

“See, there you go again!” Raj wagged his finger at me. “I haven’t got all the answers, you know. I’m not a guru; I’m not even a very good Sikh. I just get on with my life, like everyone else. All I know is that I have spoken with a lot of people on this rooftop, from every culture and nationality. It doesn’t matter where they’re from, who they are – some have the secret, some don’t.”

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Raj rose from his seat. “Anyway, it’s late and we have to be up early.”

The following morning Raj escorted us to the Taj Mahal to see the great mausoleum by sunrise. “Before all the tourists arrive,” he had suggested. We had a wonderful day and found Raj to be a knowledgeable and entertaining guide. That night he cooked us a delicious Punjabi meal, which we ate with him on the rooftop, continuing our philosophical discussions until two in the morning. I then went to bed, leaving Sara and Raj alone.

I woke up at six and Sara still wasn’t in her bed. I guessed something had happened between them and I went back to sleep. I slept until ten and awoke again to find Sara’s bed untouched. I showered and dressed, ready for a day in Agra. I assumed Sara would be on the rooftop, or having breakfast locally, but she was nowhere to be found. We had planned to go to Agra Fort that day and the following day to explore Fatehpur Sikri, a ghostly city which, according to the *Lonely Planet*³, was a ‘Striking legacy of Mughal history and a good example of Hindu and Muslim combined architecture’.

I left a note for Sara in the hotel room and one with the receptionist, who told me he had no idea of Sara’s whereabouts. I said I was going to a nearby café for breakfast, if she wished to join me, or otherwise I would meet her back at the hotel in an hour.

I didn’t see Sara all of that day and not until late that night. Neither could I find Rajpal and had to assume they had gone somewhere together. I eventually made my own way to Agra Fort but, despite the impressiveness of the 16th Century sandstone edifice and the beauty of the pearl mosque within its walls, I was too pissed off with Sara to really appreciate it.

Sara and I had planned our twelve-month trip on a wet Saturday afternoon in a Camden café. We had agreed on several issues but, most importantly, we had agreed never to abandon each other for a man, or to break pre-made arrangements on our

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journey. This didn't mean we wouldn't enjoy the odd fling or one-night-stand, in fact we knew this was likely to happen and that it would add sparkle to the journey. But, in reality, I was grieving for Nathaniel and didn't want another serious relationship. Sara had plenty of opportunity but seemed content with the odd flirtation. In other words, the agreement worked very well until Agra.

When Sara returned at midnight I was sitting on the rooftop reading *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* by Sogyal Rinpoche⁴. It was a bit hard going and my thoughts were all over the place.

'When I first came to the West,' said Rinpoche, 'I was shocked by the contrast between the attitudes to death I had been brought up with and those I now found...Western society has no real understanding of death or what happens in death or after death...According to the wisdom of Buddha, we can actually use our lives to prepare for death...In the Buddhist approach, life and death are seen as one whole, where death is the beginning of another chapter of life. Death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected...we find the whole of life and death presented together as a series of constantly changing transitional realities known as bardos...bardos are occurring continuously throughout life and death and are junctures when the possibility of liberation, or enlightenment, is heightened...'

What would I do if Sara didn't turn up at all, I had thought, not because she had been abducted or murdered – for some reason this didn't cross my mind – but rather because she had found a new adventure, a better adventure than the old one?

'The bardos are particularly powerful opportunities for liberation because there are certain moments that are much more powerful than others and much more charged with potential, when whatever you do has a crucial and far reaching effect...'

Perhaps I would return to England, try to persuade Nathaniel

to come back to me. I still couldn't believe that his love had vanished.

'I think of a bardo as being like a moment when you step towards the edge of a precipice...'

But I couldn't return; it would have seemed like failure. It would also mean stepping back into pain and uncertainty. Anyway, I thought painfully, it was likely that Nathaniel had already begun a new life with someone else.

'...such a moment, for example, is when a master introduces a disciple to the essential, original, and innermost nature of his or her mind.'

What on earth was going on in Nathaniel's mind? I wished I had known. Or Sara's for that matter; her mind was increasingly a mystery to me.

'The greatest and most charged of these moments, however, is the moment of death.'

"Wow, what a day!" Sara seemed to fly onto the roof and land in front of me like some Hindu goddess. Her hair was dishevelled and she had dark circles under her strangely illumined eyes. I didn't speak.

"You should go to Fatehpur Sikri; it's so amazing and really vast."

I think I must have looked disbelieving. Not only had she been out all day without letting me know, she had visited the place we had both planned to see the following day. In fact, I had read the description to her on the train coming to Agra and said how much I wanted to see it. My mind began to work overtime; what sort of bitch was she? She was either cruel or very stupid to think I wouldn't be angry and Sara was far from stupid. She pulled a chair up next to mine.

"Look, I'm sorry Mari. It would have been really nice to go together but it was just such a good opportunity and you were asleep. I didn't want to disturb you."

"What the fuck do you mean disturb me? You didn't think about me; you wanted to go with Raj, so you did, without giving me a second thought. That's what you do, Sara; you're selfish."

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For a second she looked genuinely shocked; I might even have seen a small gasp of hurt in her eyes. “I’m really, really sorry Marianne. Look, we can go again tomorrow. It’s impossible to see it all in one day anyway.”

“Sara, don’t you understand? You can’t just break arrangements without letting me know...we agreed.” I fought back tears. “I didn’t know where the hell you were; I was worried you’d been murdered or abducted.” I know this was a lie but I was trying to find a way of driving the message home to her.

“But I left you a note. Didn’t you get it?”

This knocked me into silence. I had searched the room, asked at the hotel reception – there was nothing.

“I didn’t see one. Where?”

“I put it on your bed.”

“But why on earth did you put it there? I probably kicked it off in my sleep.”

“I’m sorry.” She looked slightly perplexed. I didn’t know whether to feel even more angry or relieved. She had thought about me but she had still broken our arrangement.

“Look Sara,” I rose from my chair, feeling confused. “I’m knackered; we can talk in the morning. Maybe it’s better if we go our separate ways for a while.”

I didn’t really want that to happen but I did want to punish her in some way and it was very hard to make Sara feel repentant about anything. I left her on the rooftop and went to our room. I found the note under my bed, written in Sara’s elegant script:

Dear Mari,

It’s six a.m. I’ve just spent an amazing night with Raj (you should definitely do it with a Sikh). He has to go to Fatepur Sikri on business. He wants me to go too and said we could see the ruins while we’re there. I don’t want to wake you at this ridiculous hour but I’m too high to go to sleep.

I’m really, really sorry; I know we had an arrangement but

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I'll make it up to you, I promise – I really like this guy. Have a lovely day without me – I'm sure you're sick of me by now anyway! Don't worry if you want to go to Agra Fort; I'm not that bothered. I'll be back tonight to tell you all the gory details!

Love you

Sara x

I sat on my bed and read the note three times. Against my will, the anger evaporated. If I had seen it that morning I might have felt mildly pissed off but I would have understood and been determined to enjoy a day alone.

I suddenly felt ashamed at how I'd spoken to Sara. She had rarely done anything to hurt me, but I had a kind of nagging premonition that one day she would. This seemed to shadow my opinion of her, inform my decisions. It was as if, at the very core of me, I didn't trust her, yet I had no real reason not to. I considered going back up to the roof to apologise but a less forgiving, less gracious part of me wouldn't; I still wanted her to feel remorse.

I climbed into bed and stared at the ceiling. Strips of orange light, cast through wooden window shutters, made a blurred pattern on the uneven plasterwork. A ceiling fan groaned as it turned, perhaps tired of its pointless journey, each blade cutting mercilessly through the orange light, sending a welcome waft of air onto my shamed face. This was maybe the point of its existence.

I could hear the voices of locals outside speaking quickly, urgently. I tried to imagine what they were saying, what could be so important. Then I heard a high-pitched frantic bark, one of the many feral dogs that roamed in packs through the streets of every town in India, ganging up on weaker dogs or worrying the cows. Several others joined in to form a ragged chorus.

I wished I had seen the note that morning. How on earth did it fall from the bed and slip underneath? When I really thought about it, it seemed unlikely. The beds were basic structures,

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wooden slats with a thin mattress on top. The note was under the very middle of the bed – if it had been anywhere else I would have seen it.

Fresh doubts crowded my mind. Perhaps Sara had only placed the note there on her return, to cover her tracks before joining me on the rooftop? My mind wouldn't rest from its suspicious workings. When Sara climbed into her bed an hour later I pretended to be asleep.