

Safe

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SARAH HAS ONE PHOTOGRAPH OF THE TWO OF THEM, DEREK AND JENNIFER, which if nothing else is proof that they existed and were not, as it sometimes seemed later, something conjured up by heat and lonesomeness.

The photo is really just of Derek. He's leaning back in the rickety chair, cheeks and chin covered in a thick lather. Eyes closed, smile wide in the midday sun. On their dusty walk back into town the three of them had stopped at a roadside barber whose chair, mirror, pots of soap, water buckets, and straight-blade razors were meticulously arranged on a towel in the shade of a tree. Derek negotiated the price of a shave like the practiced traveller he must have been after however many months traversing the subcontinent. Perhaps years. Sarah never asked.

Of Jennifer, the photo shows only an arm—freckled, a few blotches of red, purple, and blue. The arm glints with the twenty-odd glass bangles that every female backpacker ends up wearing in India, along with the bindi on the forehead, jasmine in the hair. As they never would have done at home.

At the time, it occurred to Sarah that it was probably not so safe to get your face and throat shaved by a shy man with an open blade at a roadside stall. Her guidebook warned against it. For all the fearless things she felt she'd done in the time she'd been travelling, there were still things she probably would not do, even if she were a man, a roadside shave among them.

She had been three months in India. A lifetime. Travelling solo, occasionally meeting and parting with an eclectic assortment of other wanderers. Julien, from Bordeaux, who reeked of sandalwood incense and tried to interest her in some hashish in the back of the bus to Bangalore. Misty, an acupuncturist from California, who had a pair of tango shoes clipped to the outside of her backpack, just in case. It had been a relief,

she thought at one point on that shimmering day, to meet people as normal and fun as Jennifer and Derek. For most of their time together, they seemed to her to have been a kind of rescue, salvaging what might have been a day spent watching the world from the roof of her guesthouse without venturing out at all.

Sarah arrived in Agra at dawn after one full day and two nights on the long-distance train from Chennai. She wanted to see the Taj Mahal, that ubiquitous emblem of India, before heading home.

She stepped out of the station as the first call-to-prayer was crackling from the loudspeakers of distant minarets, stars still blinking from the night sky. Lugging her packsack towards an auto-rickshaw driver, Sarah loaded her bag onto the passenger bench and climbed in beside it while the driver shooed a sleeping cow from the road.

A spurt of exhaust curled through the open sides of the rickshaw, replaced as they progressed towards downtown with alternating wafts of cooking oil, sewage, and marigolds—these last stacked high in curbside stalls for the Hindu faithful to take to temple.

Sarah's driver took her to the Mumtaz Guest House she'd selected from her guidebook. Then, on his suggestion, she agreed to let him take her onwards to the Taj Mahal after she had checked in and dropped her bag in her room, even though it was just a short walk away.

This was better, he said in broken English as he drove her to the gates, "because it *Holi*."

She mistook him to mean holy, a holy site. But *Holi*, she learned from her guidebook later, is an annual festival in northern India—a celebration of the end of winter. On *Holi*, she read, men were notorious for imbibing too many *bhang* lassies while the women steered clear of their clutching hands as well as the hurled puffs of coloured talc—*gulaal*—followed

by spurts of water used to blend the powdered dye into the clothes and skin.

But Sarah didn't know this until later, when she'd left the Taj Mahal to return to the guesthouse. She forgot everything her driver had told her when she first saw what she'd come to see.

To her dismay, she cried. Not because of its beauty, although the Taj Mahal was indisputably beautiful in the first bloom of morning light: the day's first visitors trickling quietly past the watercourse, the glowing marble mausoleum reflected in the oblong pool. Sarah cried because, after all this time on her own, seeing a sight as recognizable, as cliché somehow as the Taj Mahal, was like bumping into an old friend.

Later she wondered if perhaps Derek had seen her teary-eyed on the steps of the monument, which would fit. She had no sense of time that morning as she meandered around the domes and ornamental gardens, wondering at the colours and the light, taking picture after picture. She was cross-legged behind the central tomb, listening to *Snow Patrol* on her iPod, her camera and lenses strewn around her, when a British accent nearby said, "That's quite the camera."

And it was. It was ridiculous to have lugged all this around with her when she'd been travelling with so little—a digital SLR with detachable lenses. But her photos and music had been her cherished companions, giving her a focus and a purpose when solitude threatened to swallow her whole.

Sarah looked up at the voice: a man older than Sarah, probably in his early thirties, with tousled blonde hair, five-days growth on his chin, a battered daypack on the ground beside him. A fellow traveller. She plucked the earbud from her ear.

"I'm Derek," he said, stretching his hand across the stone towards her. They spent a few minutes marvel-

ling together at the Taj Mahal, then inevitably ended up comparing notes on where they'd been in India. Derek, originally from Manchester, now considered himself something of a professional traveller: he had spent the last few months in Rajasthan and the Kashmir. Before that, in Nepal, hiking the Annapurna circuit.

Sarah had spent her entire time in India in the south, in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Off the beaten track.

"Why the south?" Derek asked Sarah.

She shrugged. "I talked to people who'd been here who said that south India would be the easiest for a woman travelling alone. Maybe not as accustomed to solo female travellers as the north, but also not as aggressive. More respectful of women generally."

"And was it?" asked Derek, smiling.

Sarah smiled back. "Yes, I think it was. People stared. I mean, the men *gawked*, especially in the smaller towns. But I was never actually harassed or threatened."

She glanced about on the marble terrace around her, making sure she'd loaded all her gear back into her pack. "I can't tell if it's different here or not," she said. "I actually just got here this morning."

She didn't say it to Derek, but she hadn't even planned to come north: her flight was leaving from Bombay the following week. The impulse to spend her last few days in Agra had grown in part out of a sense of pride at having kept herself safe so long. She'd found her stride, she'd toughened up, she was almost home.

Derek was also staying at the Mumtaz Guest House and they shared a ride back. By now, the city had woken up, the morning's peace cracked wide by blaring music and honking horns. This time their sputtering rickshaw was chased by whooping men, white grins set into faces purpled by the *gulal*, who doused Sarah and Derek in red and blue powders,

then sprayed them with water to set the dye. She wasn't scared. If anything these men seemed clownish, not menacing, but she felt safer with Derek than she would have felt on her own.

Back at the guesthouse, Sarah had to ask for a spare key—she'd locked hers in the room in her haste to get to the Taj Mahal at dawn. The man at the reception desk clucked in disapproval when he saw the colours on her clothes and face.

"Good Indian ladies stay home-side for *Holi*," he said wagging his head in that yes-no way Sarah had seen every single day in India. He tilted his chin and glugged from an imaginary bottle to demonstrate what it was she should have been avoiding, his eyebrows hopping twice to emphasize his point.

Sarah showered, changed, and tried in vain to rinse the colour from her clothes, arms, and face.

"It just doesn't come off!" she said when she spotted Derek later that morning on the rooftop patio of the Mumtaz. Derek was watching the mayhem below, clouds of vibrant dust drifting above the shouts and laughter. Half of the guesthouse appeared to be up there, peering down at the streets, partly horrified, partly delighted.

"This is Jennifer," Derek said, introducing Sarah to the woman beside him. "She's Canadian too."

"Hi," said Jennifer, turning to greet Sarah. She was roughly the same age, with shoulder-length brown hair tied up like Sarah's, to keep off the heat. "From Kitchener," she said, pushing her glasses up her nose. "This is wild, isn't it?"

Later Sarah couldn't remember whether it was Derek's idea or Jennifer's but one of them suggested a trip to a pool at a posh hotel, an option Sarah's *Lonely Planet* guidebook had noted for the bigger, more touristy cities. *Many top-tier hotels with pools permit day visitors*

for a fee. In all her weeks of budget travel, Sarah had not succumbed to this particular treat, despite the heat and relentlessness of India.

“We can’t just stay trapped up here,” Derek said. “Live a little!”

It was a rowdy ride to get there pursued by boys and men, shirts drenched in purple perspiration, who managed to splatter all of them and their rickshaw with colours. One nimble teenager managed a gleeful squeeze of Jennifer’s leg through the open side of the rickshaw before their driver managed to weave out of the crowds, shaking a mottled purple fist and bellowing in Hindi.

The hotel was extraordinary, the pool a long, cool kiss in the searing sun.

“Imagine staying here!” Jennifer cooed, squinting up at the balconies overlooking the pool. “Who has the kind of money to stay at a place like this, and chooses India?”

“Rich Indians,” said Derek, and they all laughed.

In the pool, they played a game of Derek’s invention that involved real and made-up Indian words, plus a lot of splashing. They talked about what they loved and hated about India, the quirky people they’d met along the way, how cheaply they were living day-to-day. Sarah hadn’t felt so carefree since she left home.

Derek was still interested in Sarah’s camera, teasing her for backpacking with something so valuable.

“I’m careful,” she told him. And she was. She had kept it out of site at the pool until Derek said: “Let’s have a look at your Taj Mahal pictures.”

Jennifer peered over Derek’s shoulder as he clicked through the frames. “I thought it was kind of tacky, didn’t you?” she asked Sarah. “The whole story of the

Shah building a monument to his dead wife—that’s pathetic. If he loved her so much, he should have spent more of his money on a bunch of concubines and nannies so she wouldn’t die having his twentieth kid, or whatever.”

Jennifer waited to get a laugh, and didn’t. “And so many people!” she grimaced. “Mind you, I went yesterday afternoon—the main tomb smelt like a gym.”

Sarah was dumbfounded that anyone who’d actually been to the Taj Mahal could find it anything short of astonishing. “I guess if it had been crowded I might have felt differently,” she said carefully, “but it was so peaceful there this morning.” Sarah looked over at Derek to back her up, but he was still engrossed in her photographs.

When it was time to leave the pool, they opted to walk back to their hotel. Most of the merrymakers seemed now to be sleeping off the morning’s excesses. But once again, Derek offered a certain security that Sarah hadn’t realized she missed.

“Are you together?” she had asked Jennifer back at the pool: Jennifer and Derek seemed so relaxed with one another. But Jennifer acted so taken aback by the question that Sarah almost didn’t believe her. “No,” she insisted. “We met here in Agra, like you.”

Yet they were planning to continue on to Varanasi together that night; the sleeper train left at 11:00. And maybe that was the first piece of the day to crumble, the first piece that didn’t hold in place alongside Jennifer’s vehement denial.

At the roadside barber on their way back, Sarah couldn’t resist taking out her camera again. The barber was asleep in his own chair as they approached, immaculate in a starched shirt, hair coiffed, the hem of his *lungi* hoisted up and tucked in at the waist expos-

ing his dusty knees and plastic sandals. Years later, this one day in India would stand out for Sarah above so many other days, yet all she really has to show for it are two photos: the sleeping man and the beaming, lathered, Derek.

Back at the Mumtaz, all three stopped at the front desk. Sarah wanted to ask about visiting Agra Fort the next day. Jennifer and Derek needed to settle the bills for their rooms.

“But you do not travel on with your sister?” the man asked, bewildered, looking between Jennifer and Sarah. They looked at each other’s pink and blue faces, laughed, and shook their heads: not sisters, they told him.

“You think all foreign girls look the same?” Derek said, a slight smile.

The desk manager bristled. “Both from Canada,” he declared, jabbing at his tattered reservation book. Then gesturing at their faces, he mimed their glasses and a ponytail in his own oiled, black hair. “Same-same.”

Sarah went up the short flight of steps to her room.

“Can we just leave our bags in your room until our train tonight?” Jennifer asked as she climbed past.

“Sure,” Sarah replied. “Just come by when you’re ready.”

At first they sat in Sarah’s room, then Derek suggested they go back on the rooftop. But there was no more revelry to watch down below and the heat was pressing itself earthwards like a stone.

Jennifer offered to fetch a deck of cards from her bags. Sarah handed her the key to her room, then, after a minute, opted to follow her down to get some water.

But when she got to the room, Jennifer did not have the cards and didn’t appear to be looking for

them. She was stepping quickly across the room, looking flushed.

“I don’t feel so good,” Jennifer said hurriedly, shutting the bathroom door behind her. If anything, Sarah thought, Jennifer looked sheepish, not unwell. Sarah glanced around the room and everything, it seemed, was in its place. Derek and Jennifer had their stuff piled by the door, and her own backpack stood in the opposite corner, partly shut. The clothes from that morning, ruined but dry, hung over the back of a chair. Sarah checked: her iPod, camera, and gear were in the top pocket of the pack, untouched. She zipped everything closed.

“Do you mind if I just lie down?” Jennifer said when she came out of the bathroom, flopping down on Sarah’s bed.

Sarah had enjoyed the day so much, enjoyed these fleeting friends, but she didn’t know them. She did not know Jennifer at all. It didn’t feel right for her to be here on her own, among Sarah’s scant possessions.

“I’ll stay with you,” she said, moving her newly colourful clothes off the chair and sitting down. At a loss, she took out her journal and started to write a letter she’d either copy into an email or just keep in these pages. She’d filled three journals on this trip, two SD cards in her camera. If she had anything of value it was these things, her words, music, and images that had kept her company so long.

Sarah thought of the Dangers and Annoyances chapter in her guidebook; she’d had plenty of time in restaurants and in transit, to read it cover to cover. It warned about pickpockets and train-thieves, but it also cautioned about just this sort of thing. *Unhappily there are more than a few backpackers who make their money go further by helping themselves to other people’s.*

Jennifer didn’t seem to be sleeping; she was shifting irritably on the thin mattress. A fan on the ceiling

slugged slowly at the heat: a boxer throwing some final, futile punches. Sarah, sticky in her chair, was thinking how silly it was that she was sitting there, like some kind of clammy chaperone.

Derek by now was likely wondering what they were up to, but Sarah couldn't will herself to go up and tell him. She was trying to suppress a paranoia that had bloomed out of nowhere, tainting this perfect day. Pausing to read what she'd written, her letter read like the blather of someone alone too long, coming unhinged. *Dear Lisa: You're going to think I'm losing it. I've had one of the best days of my entire trip but for no good reason I feel like I just can't trust anyone. These people I've met seem great, but now I just don't know? I'll probably never send this—I'm writing to keep myself busy while a complete stranger sleeps in my bed.* ☹

Sarah wanted to laugh, but a kind of tension had crept over her that she couldn't shake. It was as if the line between what was real and what was false, or at least fashioned in her own mind, had blurred or shifted. Worse, that she herself, keeping herself safe for so long, had nudged it out of place. She no longer knew how to put it right.

When Derek knocked at her door to suggest dinner, Jennifer peeled herself out of the bed. "Too much sun today," she muttered. Sarah saw, or thought she saw, a questioning glance between Derek and Jennifer. She couldn't be sure.

"Will you take your stuff now?" Sarah asked nonchalantly. "We can eat somewhere en route to the station."

"Let's just eat nearby," Derek said. "Is it okay to just leave everything in your room? We've got lots of time and I'd feel better keeping it here for now."

Jennifer was quiet at the restaurant, although Derek was lively and chatty, trying to convince Sarah to take a camel trek in Rajasthan. They ordered their food,

but it didn't come, and it didn't come—twilight skulking over the city like a fog. If she could have, Sarah would have left, gone back to her own room, with her own things, forgetting that this anxiety had ever taken hold. She told herself that she was okay, everything was okay—if anything was ruining the day, it was her. As for her room, it was locked, and these friends, whether friends or not, were here with her. They couldn't have gotten to their packs in Sarah's room, or anything else for that matter, even if they wanted to.

But all at once Jennifer pushed back her chair: "I'm going back to the hotel," she announced sullenly. "I don't feel well; I'm going to go lie down."

Sarah let her leave without saying aloud the thing that Jennifer obviously hadn't thought of, a sort of thrum rising in her as she kept silent. *Jennifer can't get in*, she thought. *She doesn't have a key.*

Sarah made idle talk as much as she could with Derek; he seemed quieter now. But still their meal didn't arrive. After a while they lapsed into silence and Sarah, whose mind had started racing again, thought abruptly about the man at the desk at the Mumtaz who had let her into her room when she'd locked her key inside earlier in the day. Who thought she and Jennifer were sisters. That they looked exactly the same.

"You know, I'm not hungry," Derek said finally, standing up and running a hand through his shaggy hair. "You stay and eat, but I think I should check on Jennifer. We need to get to the station."

Sarah looked up and he looked right back at her, inscrutable.

"I'm not hungry either," she said lightly, but she felt both reckless and resolute, hardly caring about their waiter who came after them, puzzled, as they made their way swiftly to the door. They had left money for their sodas, but nothing for the food that never came. Sarah heard him calling after them as they made their

way back down the muggy street to the Mumtaz.

Jennifer was sitting on a plastic chair outside the guesthouse, her head in her hands.

“Your friend has been asking for your room key,” the manager at the desk said as they walked by. He seemed to be bracing for another argument. “This I am not allowing,” he insisted, sounding defensive.

“I just wanted to lie down,” Jennifer mumbled, almost inaudible.

Sarah just nodded at the man and said nothing as she went up the steps to her room. She coaxed her key into the lock, twirled it open, then stood back in the hallway, her door flung wide as they went in and heaved their big packs onto their backs, daypacks in front. She glanced at her own bag in the corner, all zipped up. Safe. From the hall she could just make out the corner of the desk at the foot of the stairs where the man sat sipping his *chai*. She thought: he would come if I called.

They descended together, past the front desk, out into the thick night. If they exchanged any light goodbyes, false Facebook promises, Sarah couldn't remember what they were. She felt shaken somehow: triumphant, but also foolish. She watched them trudge down the street toward the station until they were lost in the jumble of locals and tourists, still

splattered with colour, drifting between the restaurants and shops.

Instead of returning to her room, Sarah twisted in the other direction, across the street, choosing at random another open-air rooftop restaurant, the Taj View. She chose a tiny table away from the other diners, right at the railing, ordered a Seven-Up, a *Saag Paneer*, some *Paratha*—her favourite. When it came, it tasted different there, in the north, than it did in the south.

If she leaned out over the railing, way out, she could see the street below and the doors of the Mumtaz—other travellers coming and going. She couldn't resist watching, which was silly, she knew. They wouldn't be back. Her heart had been in her throat for what seemed like hours, although she knew this was impossible, knew that most of the day had been a welcome escape, a lark, that had somehow soured.

A breeze in the air, finally, was urging away the heat of the long day.

If she turned, tore her gaze away from her own shabby guesthouse to look across the restaurant, out over the roofs in the opposite direction, she could see the Taj Mahal glowing solidly in the distance, milky minarets reaching toward the night sky like an embrace.