

*WHAT day is it today? I wonder to myself, looking through the window of the dessert shop at Connaught Place. Curious as an abandoned kitten, I observe the world in which the newly established Indian middle class eats its first morning muffin and drinks machine-made espresso at European prices. I look at this parallel universe, in which I see only the reflection of some other reality that I know only in my dreams, and whose skin I shed off somewhere along the way, cast off to the side of the road or the railway line. A plump Indian woman, bathed in excess, eats cake in the room filled with polished furniture, while next to me, a man without a leg crawls down the road, pulling a cart with cardboard boxes behind him. Probably his home. The street, as always, is loud and dusty, though this part of the city appears elegant, European, British... colonial. The buildings are whitewashed, the advertisements bright.

On the corner of the television screen showing news of a press conference by politicians of the world's most powerful countries, it says that it is Wednesday. But wasn't yesterday Wednesday? No! Must be, seeing the way things go, that yesterday was Tuesday. Who knows anymore, who could count those days that blend one into another and serve only to point our civil duties in the form of the work we are expected to give to the community. "Where are those days now, when you're on the street?" I ask myself. "They simply no longer exist!"

As the wealthy Indian woman pours instant black coffee into her porcelain cup, I get the impression that we pour our lives by some shortcuts unknown to us, so that not even we know who is who, and where our place is in this grand scheme.

It was one such shiny, air-conditioned, pleasant and, ultimately, artificial and unreal dessert shop, a similar cafe, that I raced out of just two weeks ago, realising that all that was within it was no longer my world and that this was not the world I wanted to fit into, not a world in which I wanted to count my days as though hypnotised, walking through this world I am only just getting to know like a soap bubble, under a glass bell protected by the comfort of solid walls, soft mattresses and fragrant hot tea and coffee, cherries in a freshly baked cake, and a few Indian spices here and there at dinners served on shiny plates. I took the knife and cut that stump off. I had run out, onto the street and started walking.

At that moment, my intent, my decision, it was perfectly clear. I knew what I didn't want. Out there was a world full of life, full of smells and colours. I wanted to meld with them, regardless of what the Westerners would call hygienic conditions, because the Indian streets are dirty, full of garbage and misery, though even this is something real, clear, tangible and uncontrived.

Two weeks ago, when that happened, I had very little money, and now... Now there were no longer bills or coins in my pockets. There was nothing left to hold me back or tempt me to enter into such an

air-conditioned cafe, in which couples shared their thoughts on the latest TV show they watched the night before on the local programme. No, this was now impossible!

In Paharganj, I weaved by way through the forests of tourists, backpackers on the one hand, and sellers, tourism workers and phony holy men on the other. I passed by the large red fortress and penetrated through the rush of yellow tuk-tuk taxis, hearing a variety of shouts on all sides, under the overpass, over the railway line, past small makeshift fast food restaurants, small, black and limbless people, ancient toothless, grey-haired women, past a small boy shining shoes and several churches bearing the image of Mother Theresa in front of their doors, all the way back to the large market surrounded by incredibly dense and noisy traffic. Millions of electrical and telephone wires ran overhead the market roof, or better said the tent, looking like a clumsy spider web. An entire family of monkeys jumped on and swung from these wires. They walked one behind the other, look down at the world and all the events going on underneath then, bearing their teeth and laughing. Here and there, one of them would jump down on the ground, run over to a passerby carrying a bag full of vegetables, and rip open the plastic sheath, taking out what it pleased. Fast and uncatchable, they are sacred to many. Truly mischievous and a great deal of fun. This was my first encounter with this animal, my first true insight into its restless nature. From that moment, I began to notice them every day.

Next to the market, I found a small Shiva temple, and entered it as though guided. Inside, a handful of sadhus were seated in meditation and marihuana smoke. The entrance was, of course, open, so I entered and also sat down. No one there understood English, so we spent our time communicating using hand gestures. After a while, they seemed to understand my position. The sadhus have long been on the road, and they change their position frequently by travelling throughout India. Their hair is long, faces thin, and eyes glassy. They worship the deity Shiva and are in search of enlightenment.

Alongside Brahman and Vishnu, the creator and maintainer, Shiva is portrayed as the destroyer, as the one who comes last in order to keep this world within him until the cycle of recreation. Everything moves in a circle, an eternal and endless circle. This is a massive wheel, and outside the wheel is a great big nothing, a great infinity, and a great *everything* that unite us.

The central place in the temple features the lingam, which is portrayed as a male sex organ lying in yoni or the female sexuality, representing the inseparability of male and female, symbolising the unity of those two principles and the whole of creation. Flowers are scattered around the symbol, and everything smells of India, of the mixture of spices in the air.

Once I realised that this was a place I could sleep, I didn't hesitate to lay down my backpack and position myself among the wandering sadhus who, due to their heavy use of marihuana, have no idea where they are and how things work. One grabbed me, pulled me towards him, and made hand gestures that he wanted to arm wrestle. He was so weak that I let him win the first bout, which made

him immeasurably happy, and which gave everyone else a good laugh. I let him win the second and third bouts too. Let the man enjoy his moment.

For the past two weeks, I have been sleeping in the temple and wandering the streets of New Delhi. No one asks me for alms, as I guess I now fit into the Indian concept of someone who has nothing to give and the only thing he can do is receive. That emptiness suits me more than anything else in my life. I have not even the faintest thought, as I once thought I did, to share this knowledge and present it to the curious people in my homeland, so should them just how lovely and exotic, how far away, new and beautiful it all is here.

The people in the temple change every day. Some of the sadhus stay longer, though most just carry on to their next destination, unknown to me. They simply pick up their alms plates, wrap themselves in white, orange or black cloth, and lose themselves in the dense crowds around the market. Their eyes are half-closed from the weed they smoke, just as the eyes of Shiva meditating on the slopes of the Himalayas are half-closed, and the whirlwind of thoughts is stirred up by the intoxicating smoke.

Finally, I pull away from the window of the cafe on Connaught Place, to set off towards the temple where this afternoon I will meet who knows how many different passersby and new neighbours. Somewhere high above me, the sun fights down, barely penetrating through the dense smog of New Delhi that is unrelenting in its grip made up of noise and strong smells, and of a million human fates.

I pass under the broad underpass that, like all the other overpasses in this town, is a meeting place for various groups. Here, at the margins, there are small food sellers, makeshift stands made up of a few boards and some plastic sheeting. Dense traffic runs past them, and the rickshaw bicycles and rickshaw cars run on the sidewalk, finding their stops. Indians lie on the bicycle rickshaws, spread out across the seat right up to the handle bars, lying, sleeping, in wait for their next customer. Below, in the shade and darkness created by the broad road above us, addicts hide out in cardboard boxes, smoking opium.

This is the rhythm of New Delhi, a fast and smelly city, the capital, a city with tens of thousands of orphaned boys, and of underage girls for whom the pavement is their bed. There are the curious, light-haired beauties in their Indian clothing that they paid ten times more for from the corner seller, with a camera hanging round their neck, recording it all. I see myself in another reality the same as this one. There are the traders and buyers, the millionaires and prominent citizens. The extremes all there in a small and crowded place. Perhaps these opposites only become meaningful in India, when faced one with another, in which there are no conflicts, only a simple life in which everything is acceptable because that is the way it must be.

A dozen butterflies have flown into the temple and are fluttering around the lingam, performing a dance around this phallus symbol, tickling it at its top. They look like a cloud that comes together for a

moment, then again opens up, moving a second to the left, then a second to the right, then up, then down, and finally separating, before gathered together and flying right out of the door of the temple in an unknown direction. They were startled by the touch of a tall, thin, long-haired sadhu, with a stern and serious look, focused directly ahead, in which it seems as though nothing could distract him from his focus. I hadn't seen this sadhu in this temple before. He differed from the others that had shifted through here over the past two weeks with his height, and his clear concentration, and strong and decisive steps, while at the same time exuding a softness that was easy to see if you looked into his eyes, as deep as the universe. He wore an orange lungi that looked like a dress and a yellow wrap around his head. Under the wrap was his long, braided hair, with braids of up to a meter and a half in length. He was too thin, though his face and beard looked healthy. He reached out and touched the lingam. He looked at me directly in the eyes as I stood at the entrance to the temple, all worn out by my wanderings.

“Were you thinking of staying here,” he asked me directly, continuing, “here with these so-called holy people?”

“I just...” I stuttered, standing before the door, looking at this man who looked like a ship's mast in this small and crowded temple.

I could hear shouts from the street, and the sound of monkeys bickering over the tin rooftops.

“This is a temple of Shiva, temple of the destroyer, but also the one who enables recreation. You have chosen well, though this company... Do you really think that this high man, who has dined on marihuana smoke for breakfast, lunch and dinner for the past twenty years, plans on using his brain?” he says, as he swings his arm around in a circle over the high sadhus lying on the temple floor. Some are praying, others sleeping.

“I am only passing through. I believe I will be leaving this temple soon,” I respond to the man, who is still standing there, unmoving, though the feeling I get when I look into his eyes is that I have already seen him somewhere before.

“It is nice here, comfortable, and I see that you have fit in, even your external appearance is become more like the exterior of the Indian streets that has grown into your beard and your head, and that is barefoot and tattered. This is likely you, completely stripped down, like your soul. It is likely also in the same state,” he says.

“I think.... I don't know why I'm here. By chance. I'm just travelling,” I tell the sadhu, while still standing by the door. He stands next to me, as though he has no plans to move until he has heard my entire story.

“You are no longer travelling. You are now only moving in an unknown direction. Travellers do not sleep in the temple. There have been many like you. They were before me, and there are many today. Some come in search of their lost soul, others come for adventure, other still just take a walk. I don't know which kind you are, but you are not just a traveller, because travellers do not seek out a home in the temple. You seem instead to me to be a seeker, but a lost seeker.”

I stand deep in thought, while a little, brown monkey appears between my legs, bearing his sharp teeth, and scampering around my leg, first here, then there.

“Look at him! He fits in perfectly. I'll tell you what your eyes tell me. Monkeys are by nature mischievous, they hop from one branch to another, swaying as they wish. Just as you cannot contain the north wind in a cage, nor can you keep a monkey in one place, unless you tie it down. It is the same with the spirit. A monkey scampers, the spirit wanders. You can contain it if you know how. That is you – a swaying wanderer. I have been a sadhu for decades and I have learned to watch people and meditate, it is not difficult for me to see human pain. And unlike those here, lying around us, I only smoke ganja on rare occasions, and not just because Shiva smoked it somewhere in the Himalayas. I use it sometimes when I meditate, but I intend to keep my mind clear.”

I become serious and threw my backpack down on the ground, and I sit between two sadhus sleeping a sleep deeper than death, and inhale. My thoughts are filled with short flashes, like black and white photographs that I watched long ago and have since forgotten. The images appearing before my eyes are those of men in suits, and some in robes who look like Indians. Only for a moment, too short for me to capture them and analyse them. My head starts to hurt again.

“I believe that in this backpack you must have some sort of meditation guide. Is that so?” he asks me.

He slowly bends down and sits next to the lingam. His orange lungi folds and hugs his body as he places one foot over the other and caresses his long beard.

“Now you will give me your guide and together we will burn it on the fire. You don't need such nonsense!” I hand it to him, and he begins to leaf through it.

“Oh, the fairy tales in here,” he chuckles. “It's no surprise all you Westerners have gone mad, they can sell you anything. This guide, except for the instructions on how to sit and breathe properly, there is nothing, absolutely nothing! You need to give in, leave everything behind you, and move forward pure and clean! That is the most important rule. You are very lucky, because tomorrow I am leaving for Mathur, and after Mathur, I am heading further east. You are coming with me! You have nothing better to do anyway. Perhaps you have collected your courage, perhaps you have budded in the wisdom of an honest relationship with your environment, but it is time to move on. If you wish, that is.

Your other option is to return to where you came from. The third is to stay here with these who lie eternally, and spend your days and nights smoking hashish with them.”

I agree because, just as he said, I have nothing better to do, and I don't want to return home.

“My name is Shankara,” he says, taking a bow.

“I'm Slaven,” I say.

“You were Slaven, now you are someone else, a man without a name lugging behind him old luggage to be cast off, and I don't mean this backpack. As for clothing, wear what you like, I don't care. My concern is for people, to show you or someone else the way, a possible way out, or a possible way into something new. The last person was a stray boy who decided to come with me. Before him, it was a poor, elderly villager who could barely walk. And now it's you. Get some sleep, we leave in the morning!”

*

SHANKARA is unburdened and beautiful, he is decisive and strong. Though his light body gives no inclination of his strength, his toughness seems to be inherent. I watch him make his way through the crowd at the train station. I can almost hear the sound of his footsteps as he moves one foot and then the next, slow as eternity. People of all colours, heights and professions swarm around him, carrying various bags, packages, boxes and bags. The noise is unbearable, but it is as though he cannot hear it; he continues to walk along his imaginary line. His robe dances around him like a piece of a ripped sail on a mast. Here and there, a passerby bumps into him, which is completely normal in these crowds, but he does not stray a millimetre from his course. He continues on his route.

We move through the train station, to the train that will take us to Mathur. Because sadhus have free transport, Shankara hopes that we will both pass for free, regardless of the remnants from the West, as he calls them, that are still visible on me. I follow right behind, because I don't know what else to do with myself.

We board the train, which is just like any and all other trains in India, heading in all directions, packed full from the floor to the ceiling. It is about 200 kilometres to Mathura, and the crowdedness is unbearable and tiresome. We take our places in the lowest, third class section. We have no luck with seats, so we sit on the floor next to a few young Indians, maybe 16 years old at best, carrying their things beside them in large tied cloth bags. Each is heading in his own direction, and for their own reasons. Nearby is an armless man with a terrible ulcer on his left cheek, it looks like a crater. The children are yelling so loud the glass breaks on the window, their mothers do not scold them, and the

fathers smoke their cigarettes in the aisles. Some chew paan, spitting out thick red saliva, red as blood, that leave traces on their teeth. Everyone is squeezed together, scrambled, sweat dripping off their faces as the yellow ball in the sky slowly reveals its silhouette as the train leaves the city, through the membrane of the smog ensconcing New Delhi.

“This is nothing, you get used to this, even to the point where an absence of this noise becomes boring. You want to have all this diversity with you at every moment. That is what some call life,” Shankara says to me.

We sit pressed together on the floor, between two benches upon which a large Indian family is squirming, throwing the shells of sunflower seeds that they snap open between their strong teeth.

The train captures the distance, rolling along the iron road and storming past villages and hamlets, and past men as they hit their oxen on paths winding near the green rice fields that stretch out so far that they finally end in a kiss with the blue sky.

“How is it that you are the way you are? Wandering through India, living from alms, bathed in the sunshine of life?” I ask him. I nod, and can feel the weight of my beard, and its long hairs that scratch my chest.

He looks at me with mild, but focused eyes, and gives me an answer that reminds me of some biblical elder. “I have been living this life for a very long time, much longer than you have been living yours. I have seen people come and go, seen them kill and love, seen them spin round in a circle without stopping, seen them jump and find joy, fall and cry. I have almost forgotten my former life, but it is still there in the traces in my memory. Because, what is life if not putting together pieces of the puzzle, of constant connections and moving in a circle? Now I am doing the same, only aware and conscious, decisive and without any restraint,” he says. “Here and there, someone like me comes along, and it's on my way to guide him. Just relax.”

His clear and simple words hide no dark secrets or motives that would lead me away, like an invisible hand, into the abyss. This is but a mere coincidence, one of those that constantly happens when you have nothing left to lose. Likely only then you notice the little pluses of each day, which seem to be gifts from the heavens.

A boy in tatters passes through the car, carrying a platter of hot beverages. His voice is raspy as he calls out “Tea... garam”. He takes a few steps, and again calls out “Tea... garam”. As his spent vocal cords penetrate the space in the crowded railcar, the train continues to slice through the lowland, the car rocks left and right, and a variety of male and female smells reach the nostrils.

I would love to eat some rice. A little rice with hot sauce, with chilli, and maybe some fava beans. Or a fried samosa? Maybe some lentils with paan? In this whirlwind of olfactory stimuli, the smells of

food also reach me, probably from some better railcars that are inaccessible to us. My stomach gives me no peace.

“You will eat when someone gives us something, there is no other way? Where would we get if you kept still thinking of food? Wasting time preparing various dishes? No. We will eat when someone gives us something,” states my humble companion.

Food is a certain but incidental stop, something that happens before or after, but is always happening. Why despair? Some kind hand will appear to through a holy man a few grains of rice into his mouth, nourishing him to the next meeting. Enjoy the ride!

“I see that you have been through much already. What have you experienced on your journey?” he asks me.

“I have seen so many different things. I have seen that plans always, absolutely always, fall through, and what happens can be much better than you anticipated, but also much worse,” I told him.

“You must have seen thousands of people and their strange daily lives and the routines they stick to blindly.”

“I have,” I respond, unsure of where this is going.

“You saw many silly rituals, those blind to the world, and those like zombies before you set off on your journey, before you, as you now think, experienced something?”

“It would appear that way, that's why I started. I always wanted to, but that daily life, that monotonous daily life that just has to be that way, it began to smother me. As this train rocks my body, I no longer feel that pressure in my chest,” I tell him.

“You must have seen people with opposing views of the way of the world, of the Almighty, of the birds, the worms, the ants?”

“I've seen so many things! And at every step I found someone, a helping hand, who turned in my direction, regardless of the circumstance,” I confess.

Shankara turns towards me, smoothly pulls his hand out from under his folded legs, and stretches.

“The human principles are the same everywhere in the world, and they are completely the same. Each of us, when we are born, takes a breath. That oxygen that we pull in through our lungs keeps us alive until the very end, until we exhale for the last time. It is the same everywhere. You have seen this, and there is no great wisdom behind it. There is no great wisdom. Only little ones. Another thing that you have certainly seen is that people are doomed to love, and to hate. That is the same everywhere,

regardless of the longitude and latitude, regardless of the elevation. People must eat, they must drink water, that holiness that pours down from the sky to quench our bodies. In order to understand that, you could have stayed home, but you slipped and went off into adventure. You wanted something more, but didn't know what. Now that you have cleansed your senses, just as you clean your sinuses by diving into the sea and inhaling in a little sea water, you are finally seeing things more clearly. You can see that alongside those simple principles that bind all the human beings in this world together, that there are complicated laws and customs that make people debate, wage wars, fight and argue. They fight over whose customs are better, they call one another unbelievers, and they proclaim 'their god' to be the greatest and best. They have prophets they bow down to, they have great temples and massive buildings in which 'their god' comes down to live amongst them. If you haven't realised it yet, allow me to tell you, there are no prophets, no holy men or anything like that, there are no angels who fly with you around the world at night while you sleep, nor are Heaven and Hell places on the geographic map. Everything I've said about people, about being born, about breathing air, about love and hate is all real, but there is also a great uncertainty and inclination to complicate even the simplest of things that is also real. Wars are waged over the human conceptions of something that is so simple, and is called respect and love. These take the place of all the great and shiny temples, all the fragrant robes of the false prophets, and they eliminate war and pain. Some believe that Christ was the Messiah, others believe he was only a prophet, some do not recognise him, others have no idea who he is, while others yet privatise him, and at the end of it all, everyone is fighting over nonsense, and it is difficult for them to understand that perhaps he was just a conscientious man who opened his heart to others, thus becoming equal to all those who did the same, regardless of what side of the planet they were on. Are you listening to me?", he called out, raising his voice, before continuing. "Here in India, in some places, they still burn the wife when her husband dies. Do you think that is good? Nonsense! Superstition, stupidity and ignorance. That is what I think about that. Inflicting pain due to some damn tradition that people thought up and hold onto as though it is the ground beneath their feet is pure demagoguery, and keeping people in fear of something that doesn't really exist. You have seen people fasting, forced to do something that doesn't suit them, but in the end they give in and lie to themselves, hiding and stuffing pieces of cooked chicken into their mouths."

After hearing Shakara's words, my mind settles, and in the rocking of the train, my mind seems to finally find its place.

My thoughts begin to jump around my head, from my warm home in Croatia, to my memories of Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. One long and winding road, upon which everything changed with each passing step, and the old memories melted into the mud upon which another traveller would soon walk, stepping on the same path, pounding it deeper into the earth, shaking off his shoes, and moving on.

It is better to know what we have done, to recognise, to perceive each step and each relationship, even the incidental ones, and to try to figure out what we have gained from it, and what we have lost.

Shankara probably thought this when he said that now, like before, he is still going round in a circle, though aware and without any hesitation, fully clear. He is probably moving firmly forwards. But where did he come from?

Somewhere far ahead, the locomotive sounds its whistle. The people begin to stir, collect their things and crowd forward, in a competition of who can exit the train first. They jump one over another, some through the large windows. They pull their possessions behind them, and fresh air takes their place.

We stand and look through the window. Before the train is the force of people, each heading in their own imaginary direction. The smell of humidity hangs in the air, as nearby, the Jamun River runs. The goods sellers with the wooden carts and those selling small bites to eat, the beggars, sadhus, and women in purple, blue and red saris. Families with ten children, several cows, monkeys, Chinese produced motorcycles that roar, and the distance, the pounding of the hitting of bells in the temples.

We get off the train. We walk surely towards the city. He is much more brazen, as though his every step represents new life during which he dies, and then, with the lifting of the other foot, is born again.

We try to penetrate through the crowds.

“Follow me, pay no attention to the people. You will see many more, too many,” he says.

We pass an ugly, yellow building that looks like barracks. Above the building is a blue clock with black hands. To its right, a sign says “Mathura Junction”.