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An Area of Darkness

V. S. NAIPAUL



V. S. Naipaul

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V. S. Naipaul was born in Trinidad in 1932. He went to England on a scholarship in 1950. After four years at Oxford he began to write, and since then he has followed no other profession. He is the author of more than twenty books of fiction and nonfiction and the recipient of numerous honors, including the Nobel Prize in 2001, the Booker Prize in 1971, and a knighthood for services to literature in 1990. He lives in Wiltshire, England.

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*Published in an omnibus edition entitled *The Nightwatchman's Occurrence Book*

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Traveller's Prelude: A Little Paperwork

AS SOON AS our quarantine flag came down and the last of the barefooted, blue-uniformed policemen of the Bombay Port Health Authority had left the ship, Coelho the Goan came aboard and, luring me with a long beckoning finger into the saloon, whispered, 'You have any cheese?'

Coelho had been sent by the travel agency to help me through the customs. He was tall and thin and shabby and nervous, and I imagined he was speaking of some type of contraband. He was. He required cheese. It was a delicacy in India. Imports were restricted, and the Indians had not yet learned how to make cheese, just as they had not yet learned how to bleach newsprint. But I couldn't help Coelho. The cheese on this Greek freighter was not good. Throughout the three-week journey from Alexandria I had been complaining about it to the impassive chief steward, and I didn't feel I could ask him now for some to take ashore.

'All right, all right,' Coelho said, not believing me and not willing to waste time listening to my excuses. He left the saloon and began prowling light-footedly down a corridor, assessing the names above doors.

I went down to my cabin. I opened a new bottle of Scotch and took a sip. Then I opened a bottle of Metaxas and took a sip of that. These were the two bottles of spirits I was hoping to take into prohibition-dry Bombay, and this was the precaution my friend in the Indian Tourist Department had advised: full bottles would be confiscated.

Coelho and I met later in the dining-room. He had lost a little of his nervousness. He was carrying a very large Greek doll, its folk costume gaudy against his own shabby trousers and shirt, its rosy cheeks and unblinking blue eyes serene beside the restless melancholy of his long thin face. He saw my opened bottles and nervousness returned to him.

'Open. But why?'

'Isn't that the law?'

'Hide them.'

'The Metaxas is too tall to hide.'

'Put it flat.'

'I don't trust the cork. But don't they allow you to take in two bottles?'

'I don't know, I don't know. Just hold this dolly for me. Carry it in your hand. Save it as a souvenir. You have your Tourist Introduction Card? Good. Very valuable document. With a document like that they wouldn't search you. Why don't you hide the bottles?'

He clapped his hands and at once a barefooted man, stunted and bony, appeared and began to take our suitcases away. He had been waiting, unseen, unheard, ever since Coelho came aboard. Carrying only the doll and the bag containing the bottles, we climbed down into the launch. Coelho's man stowed away the suitcases. Then he squatted on the floor, as though to squeeze himself into the smallest possible space, as though to apologize for his presence, even

at the exposed stern, in the launch in which his master was travelling. The master, on occasionally glancing at the doll in my lap, stared ahead, his face full of foreboding.

*

For me the East had begun weeks before. Even in Greece I had felt Europe falling away. There was the East in the food, the emphasis on sweets, some of which I knew from my childhood; in the posters for Indian films with the actress Nargis, a favourite, I was told, of Greek audiences; in the instantaneous friendships, the invitations to meals and homes. Greece was a preparation for Egypt: Alexandria at sunset, a wide shining arc in the winter sea beyond the breakwaters, a glimpse through fine rain of the ex-king's white yacht; the ship's engine cut off; then abruptly, as at a signal, a roar from the quay, shouting and quarrelling and jabbering from men in grubby jibbabs who in an instant overran the already crowded ship and kept on running through it. And it was clear that here, and not in Greece, the East began: in this chaos of uneconomical movement, the self-stimulated din, the sudden feeling of insecurity, the conviction that all men were not brothers and that luggage was in danger.

Here was to be learned the importance of the guide, the man who knew local customs, the fixer to whom badly printed illiterate forms held no mysteries. 'Write here,' my guide said at the customs house, aswirl with porters and guides and officials and idlers and policemen and travellers and a Greek refugee whispering in my ear, 'Let me warn you. They are stealing tonight.' 'Write here. One Kodak.' He, the guide, indicated the dotted line marked *date*. 'And here,' pointing to *signature*, 'write no gold, ornaments or precious stones.' I objected. He said 'Write.' He pronounced it like an Arabic word. He was tall, grave, Hollywood-sinister; he wore a fez and lightly tapped his thigh with a cane. I wrote. And it worked. 'And now,' he said, exchanging the fez marked *Travel Agent* for one marked *Hotel X*, 'let us go to the hotel.'

Thereafter, feature by feature, the East, known only from books, continued to reveal itself and each recognition was a discovery, as much as it had been a revelation to see the jibbah, a garment made almost mythical by countless photographs and descriptions, on the backs of real people. In the faded hotel, full, one felt, of memories of the Raj, there was a foreshadowing of the caste system. The old French waiter only served; he had his runner and sad-eyed silent Negroes in fezzes and cummerbunds, who fetched and cleared away. In the lobby there were innumerable Negro pages, picturesquely attired. And in the streets there was the East one had expected: the children, the dirt, the disease, the undernourishment, the cries of *bakshish*, the hawkers, the touts, the glimpses of minarets. There were the reminders of imperialisms that had withdrawn in the dark, glass-cased European-style shops, wilting for lack of patronage; in the sad whispering of the French hairdresser that French perfumes could no longer be obtained and that one had to make do with heavy Egyptian scents; in the disparaging references of the Lebanese businessman to 'natives', all of whom he distrusted except for his assistant, who, quietly to me, spoke of the day when all the Lebanese and Europeans would be driven out of the country.

Feature by feature, the East one had read about. On the train to Cairo the man across the aisle hawked twice, with an expert tongue rolled the phlegm into a ball, plucked the ball out of his mouth with thumb and forefinger, considered it, and then rubbed it away between his palms. He was wearing a three-piece suit, and his transistor played loudly. Cairo revealed the

meaning of the bazaar: narrow streets encrusted with filth, stinking even on this winter's day; tiny shops full of shoddy goods; crowds; the din, already barely supportable, made worse by the steady blaring of motor-car horns; medieval buildings partly collapsed, others rising out of old rubble, with here and there sections of tiles, turquoise and royal blue, hinting at a past of order and beauty, crystal fountains and amorous adventures, as perhaps in the no less disordered past they always had done.

And in this bazaar, a cobbler. With white skullcap, lined face, steel-rimmed spectacles and a white beard, he might have posed for a photograph in the *National Geographic Magazine*: the skilled and patient Oriental craftsman. My sole was flapping. Could he repair it? Sitting almost flat on the pavement, bowed over his work, he squinted at my shoes, my trousers, my raincoat. 'Fifty piastres.' I said: 'Four.' He nodded, pulled the shoe off my foot and with a carpenter's hammer began hammering in a one-inch nail. I grabbed the shoe; he, smiling, hammer raised, held on to it. I pulled; he let go.

The Pyramids, whose function as a public latrine no guide book mentions, were made inaccessible by guides, 'watchmen', camel-drivers and by boys whose donkeys were all called Whisky-and-soda. *Bakshish! Bakshish!* 'Come and have a cup of coffee. I don't want you to buy anything. I just want to have a little intelligent conversation. Mr Nehru is a great man. Let us exchange ideas. I am a graduate of the university.' I took the desert bus back to Alexandria and, two days before the appointed time, retreated to the Greek freighter.

Then came the tedium of the African ports. Little clearings, one felt them, at the edge of the vast continent; and here one knew that Egypt, for all its Negroes, was not Africa, and for all its minarets and jibbahs, not the East: it was the last of Europe. At Jeddah the jibbahs were cleaner, the American automobiles new and numerous and driven with great style. We were not permitted to land and could see only the life of the port. Camels and goats were being unloaded by cranes and slings from dingy tramp steamers on to the piers; they were to be slaughtered for the ritual feast that marks the end of Ramadan. Swung aloft, the camels splayed out their suddenly useless legs; touching earth, lightly or with a bump, they crouched; then they ran to their fellows and rubbed against them. A fire broke out in the launch; our freighter sounded the alarm and within minutes the fire engines arrived. 'Autocracy has its charms,' the young Pakistani student said.

We had touched Africa, and four of the passengers had not been inoculated against yellow fever. A Pakistan-fed smallpox epidemic was raging in Britain and we feared stringency in Karachi. The Pakistani officials came aboard, drank a good deal, and our quarantine was waived. At Bombay, though, the Indian officials refused alcohol and didn't even finish the Coca-Cola they were offered. They were sorry, but the four passengers would have to go to the isolation hospital at Santa Cruz; either that or the ship would have to stay out in the stream. Two of the passengers without inoculations were the captain's parents. We stayed out in the stream.

It had been a slow journey, its impressions varied and superficial. But it had been a preparation for the East. After the bazaar of Cairo the bazaar of Karachi was no surprise; and *bakshish* was the same in both languages. The change from the Mediterranean winter to the sticky high summer of the Red Sea had been swift. But other changes had been slower. From Athens to Bombay another idea of man had defined itself by degrees, a new type of authority

and subservience. The physique of Europe had melted away first into that of Africa and then through Semitic Arabia, into Aryan Asia. Men had been diminished and deformed; they begged and whined. Hysteria had been my reaction, and a brutality dictated by a new awareness of myself as a whole human being and a determination, touched with fear, to remain what I was. It mattered little through whose eyes I was seeing the East; there had as yet been no time for this type of self-assessment.

Superficial impressions, intemperate reactions. But one memory had stayed with me, and I had tried to hold it close during that day out in the stream at Bombay, when I had seen the sun set behind the Taj Mahal Hotel and had wished that Bombay was only another port such as those we had touched on the journey, a port that the freighter passenger might explore or reject.

*

It was at Alexandria. Here we had been pestered most by horsecabs. The horses were ribbed, the coachwork as tattered as the garments of the drivers. The drivers hailed you; they drove their cabs beside you and left you only when another likely fare appeared. It had been good to get away from them, and from the security of the ship to watch them make their assault on others. It was like watching a silent film: the victim sighted, the racing cab, the victim engaged, gesticulations, the cab moving beside the victim and matching his pace, at first brisk, then exaggeratedly slow, then steady.

Then one morning the desert vastness of the dock was quickened with activity, and it was as if the silent film had become a silent epic. Long rows of two-toned taxicabs were drawn up outside the terminal building; scattered all over the dock area, as though awaiting a director's call to action, were black little clusters of horsecabs; and steadily, through the dock gates, from the right, more taxis and cabs came rolling in. The horses galloped, the drivers' whip hands worked. It was a brief exaltation. Soon enough for each cab came repose, at the edge of the cab-cluster. The cause of the excitement was presently seen: a large white liner, possibly carrying tourists, possibly carrying ten-pound immigrants to Australia. Slowly, silently, she idled in. And more taxis came pelting through the gates, and more cabs, racing in feverish haste to an anticlimax of nosebags and grass.

The liner docked early in the morning. It was not until noon that the first passengers came out of the terminal building into the wasteland of the dock area. This was like the director's call. Grass was snatched from the asphalt and thrust into boxes below the drivers' seats; and every passenger became the target of several converging attacks. Pink, inexperienced, timid and vulnerable these passengers appeared to us. They carried baskets and cameras; they wore straw hats and bright cotton shirts for the Egyptian winter (a bitter wind was blowing from the sea). But our sympathies had shifted; we were on the side of the Alexandrians. They had waited all morning; they had arrived with high panache and zeal; we wanted them to engage, conquer and drive away with their victims through the dock gates.

But this was not to be. Just when the passengers had been penned by cabs and taxis, and gestures of remonstrance had given way to stillness, so that it seemed escape was impossible and capture certain, two shiny motor-coaches came through the dock gates. From the shadows they looked like expensive toys. They cleared a way through taxis and cabs, which closed

again and then opened out to permit the coaches to make a slow, wide turn; and when before there had been tourists in gay cottons there was now only asphalt. The cabs, as though unwilling to accept the finality of this disappearance, backed and moved forward as if in pursuit. Then without haste they made their way back to their respective stations, where the horses retrieved from the asphalt what grass had escaped the hurried snatch of the drivers.

All through the afternoon the cabs and taxis remained, waiting for passengers who had not gone on the coaches. These passengers were few; they came out in ones and twos; and they appeared to prefer the taxis. But the enthusiasm of the horsecabs did not wane. Still, when a passenger appeared, the drivers jumped on to their seats, lashed their thin horses into action and rattled away to engage, transformed from idlers in old overcoats and scarves into figures of skill and purpose. Sometimes they engaged; often then there were disputes between drivers and the passengers withdrew. Sometimes a cab accompanied a passenger to the verandah gates. Sometimes at that point we saw the tiny walker halt; and then, with triumph and relief, we saw him climb into the cab. But this was rare.

The light faded. The cabs no longer galloped to engage. They wheeled and went at walking pace. The wind became keener; the dock grew dark; lights appeared. But the cabs remained. It was only later, when the liner blazed with lights, even its smoke-stack illuminated, and all hope had been altogether extinguished, that they went away one by one, leaving behind shreds of grass and horse-droppings where they had stood.

Later that night I went up to the deck. Not far away, below a lamp standard, stood a lone cab. It had been there since the late afternoon; it had withdrawn early from the turmoil around the terminal. It had had no fares, and there could be no fares for it now. The cab-lamp burned low; the horse was eating grass from a shallow pile on the road. The driver, wrapped against the wind, was polishing the dully gleaming hood of his cab with a large rag. The polishing over, he dusted; then he gave the horse a brief, brisk rub down. Less than a minute later he was out of his cab again, polishing, dusting, brushing. He went in; he came out. His actions were compulsive. The animal chewed; his coat shone; the cab gleamed. And there were no fares. And next morning the liner had gone, and the dock was deserted again.

Now, sitting in the launch about to tie up at the Bombay pier where the names on cranes and buildings were, so oddly, English; feeling unease at the thought of the mute animal crouching on the floor at his master's back, and a similar unease at the sight of figures – none of romance, as the first figures seen on a foreign shore ought to be – on the pier, their frailty and raggedness contrasting with the stone buildings and metal cranes; now I tried to remember that in Bombay, as in Alexandria, there could be no pride in power, and that to give way to anger and contempt was to know a later self-disgust.

*

And of course Coelho, guide, fixer, knower of government forms, was right. Bombay was rigorously dry, and my two opened bottles of spirit were seized by the customs officers. A white, who summoned a depressed-looking man in blue to seal them 'in my presence'. The man in blue worked at this manual and therefore degrading labour with slow relish; his manner proclaimed him an established civil servant, however degraded. I was given a receipt, and told that I could get the bottles back when I got a liquor permit. Coelho wasn't so sur

these seized bottles, he said, had a habit of breaking. But his own worries were over. There had been no general search; his Greek doll had passed without query. He took it and his fee and disappeared into Bombay; I never saw him again.

To be in Bombay was to be exhausted. The moist heat sapped energy and will, and some days passed before I decided to recover my bottles. I decided in the morning; I started in the afternoon. I stood in the shade of Churchgate Station and debated whether I had it in me to cross the exposed street to the Tourist Office. Debate languished into daydream; it was minutes before I made the crossing. A flight of steps remained. I sat below a fan and rested. The lure greater than a liquor permit roused me: the office upstairs was air-conditioned. There India was an ordered, even luxurious country. The design was contemporary; the walls were hung with maps and coloured photographs; and there were little wooden racks of leaflets and booklets. Too soon my turn came; my idleness was over. I filled in my form. The clerk filled in his, three to my one, made entries in various ledgers and presented me with a sheaf of foolscap papers: my liquor permit. He had been prompt and courteous. I thanked him. There was no need, he said; it was only a little paperwork.

One step a day: this was my rule. And it was not until the following afternoon that I took my taxi back to the docks. The customs officers in white and the degraded man in blue were surprised to see me.

‘Did you leave something here?’

‘I left two bottles of liquor.’

‘You didn’t. We seized two bottles from you. They were sealed in your presence.’

‘That’s what I meant. I’ve come to get them back.’

‘But we don’t keep seized liquor here. Everything we seize and seal is sent off at once to the New Customs House.’

My taxi was searched on the way out.

The New Customs House was a large, two-storeyed PWD building, governmentally gloomy, and it was as thronged as a court-house. There were people in the drive, in the galleries, on the steps, in the corridors. ‘Liquor, liquor,’ I said, and was led from office to office, each full of shrunken, bespectacled young men in white shirts sitting at desks shaggily stacked with paper. Someone sent me upstairs. On the landing I came upon a barefooted group seated on the stone floor. At first I thought they were playing cards: it was a popular Bombay pavement pastime. But they were sorting parcels. Their spokesman told me I had been misdirected; I needed the building at the back. This building, from the quantity of ragged clothing seen in one of the lower rooms, appeared to be a tenement; and then, from the number of broken chairs and dusty pieces of useless furniture seen in another room, appeared to be a junk-shop. But it was the place for unclaimed baggage and was therefore the place I wanted. Upstairs I stood in a slow queue, at the end of which I discovered only an accountant.

‘You don’t want me. You want that officer in the white pants. Over there. He is a nice fellow.’

I went to him.

‘You have your liquor permit?’

I showed him the stamped and signed foolscap sheaf.

‘You have your transport permit?’

It was the first I had heard of this permit.

‘You must have a transport permit.’

I was exhausted, sweating, and when I opened my mouth to speak I found I was on the verge of tears. ‘But they *told* me.’

He was sympathetic. ‘We have told them many times.’

I thrust all the papers I had at him: my liquor permit, my customs receipt, my passport, my receipt for wharfage charges, my Tourist Introduction Card.

Dutifully he looked through what I offered. ‘No. I would have known at once whether you had a transport permit. By the colour of the paper. A sort of buff.’

‘But what is a transport permit? Why didn’t they give it to me? Why do I need one?’

‘I must have it before I can surrender anything.’

‘Please.’

‘Sorry.’

‘I am going to write to the papers about this.’

‘I wish you would. I keep telling them they must tell people about this transport permit. Not only for you. We had an American here yesterday who said he was going to break the bottle as soon as he got it.’

‘Help me. Where can I get this transport permit?’

‘The people who gave you the receipt should also give you the transport permit.’

‘But I’ve just come from them.’

‘I don’t know. We keep on telling them.’

‘Back to the Old Customs,’ I said to the taxi-driver.

This time the police at the gates recognized us and didn’t search the car. This dock had been my own gateway to India. Only a few days before everything in it had been new: the sticky black asphalt, the money-changers’ booths, the stalls, the people in white, khaki or blue: everything had been studied for what it portended of India beyond the gates. Now already I had ceased to see or care. My stupor, though, was tempered by the thought of the small triumph that awaited me: I had trapped those customs officers in white and the degraded man in blue.

They didn’t look trapped.

‘Transport permit?’ one said. ‘Are you sure?’

‘Did you tell them you were leaving Bombay?’ asked a second.

‘*Transport* permit?’ said a third and, walking away to a fourth, asked, ‘Transport permit? ever hear of *transport* permit?’

He had. ‘They’ve been writing us about it.’

A transport permit was required to transport liquor from the customs to a hotel or house.

‘Please give me a transport permit.’

‘We don’t issue transport permits. You have to go to —’ He looked up at me and his manner softened. ‘Here, let me write it down for you. And look, I will also give you your code-number. That will help them out at the New Customs.’

The taxi-driver had so far been calm; and it seemed now that my journeys had fallen into a pattern that was familiar to him. I began to read out the address that had been given me. He cut me short and without another word buzzed through the thickening afternoon traffic to a large brick building hung with black-and-white government boards.

‘You go,’ he said sympathetically. ‘I wait.’

Outside every office there was a little crowd.

‘Transport permit, transport permit.’

Some Sikhs directed me round to the back to a low shed next to a gate marked *Prohibited Area*, out of which workers came, one after the other, raising their hands while armed soldiers frisked them.

‘Transport permit, transport permit.’

I entered a long corridor and found myself among some Sikhs. They were lorry-drivers.

‘Liquor permit, liquor permit.’

And at last I reached the office. It was a long low room at ground level, hidden from the scorching sun and as dark as a London basement, but warm and dusty with the smell of old paper, which was everywhere, on shelves rising to the grey ceiling, on desks, on chairs, in the hands of clerks, in the hands of khaki-clad messengers. Folders had grown dog-eared, the edges limp with reverential handling; and to many were attached pink slips, equally faded and equally limp, marked URGENT, VERY URGENT, or IMMEDIATE. Between these mounds and columns and buttresses of paper, clerks were scattered about unimportantly, men and women, milk-white featured, Indian-pallid, high-shouldered; paper was their perfect camouflage. An elderly bespectacled man sat at a desk in one corner, his face slightly puffy and dyspeptic. Tremulous control of the paper-filled room was his: at his disappearance the clerks might be altogether overwhelmed.

‘Transport permit?’

He looked up slowly. He showed no surprise, no displeasure at being disturbed. Paper and pink-slipped, were spread all over his desk. A table fan, nicely poised, blew over them without disturbance.

‘Transport permit.’ He spoke the words mildly, as though they were rare words but words which, after searching for only a second in the files of his mind, he had traced. ‘Write an application. Only one is necessary.’

‘Do you have the form?’

‘No forms have been issued. Write a letter. Here, have a sheet of paper. Sit down and write. To the Collector, Excise and Prohibition, Bombay. Do you have your passport? Put down the number. Oh, and you have a Tourist Introduction Card. Put down that number too. I will expedite matters.’

And while I wrote, noting down the number of my Tourist Introduction Card, TIO (L) 15 he, expediting matters, passed my documents over to a woman clerk, saying, 'Miss Desai could you start making out a transport permit?' I thought I detected an odd pride in his voice. He was like a man still after many years discovering the richness and variety of his work and subduing an excitement which he nevertheless wished to communicate to his subordinates.

I was finding it hard to spell and to frame simple sentences. I crumpled up the sheet of paper.

The head clerk looked up at me in gentle reproof. 'Only one application is necessary.'

At my back Miss Desai filled in forms with that blunt, indelible, illegible pencil which government offices throughout the former Empire use, less for the sake of what is written than for the sake of the copies required.

I managed to complete my application.

And at this point my companion slumped forward on her chair, hung her head between her knees and fainted.

'Water,' I said to Miss Desai.

She barely paused in her writing and pointed to an empty dusty glass on a shelf.

The head clerk, already frowningly preoccupied with other papers, regarded the figure slumped in front of him.

'Not feeling well?' His voice was as mild and even as before. 'Let her rest.' He turned the table fan away from him.

'Where is the water?'

Giggles came from women clerks, hidden behind paper.

'Water!' I cried to a male clerk.

He rose, saying nothing, walked to the end of the room and vanished.

Miss Desai finished her writing. Giving me a glance as of terror, she brought her tabloated pad to the head clerk.

'The transport permit is ready,' he said. 'As soon as you are free you can sign for it.'

The male clerk returned, waterless, and sat down at his desk.

'Where is the water?'

His eyes distastefully acknowledged my impatience. He neither shrugged nor spoke; he went on with his papers.

It was worse than impatience. It was ill-breeding and ingratitude. For presently, sporting his uniform as proudly as any officer, a messenger appeared. He carried a tray and on the tray stood a glass of water. I should have known better. A clerk was a clerk; a messenger was a messenger.

The crisis passed.

I signed three times and received my permit.

The head clerk opened another folder.

'Nadkarni,' he called softly to a clerk. 'I don't understand this memo.'

I had been forgotten already.

It was suffocatingly hot in the taxi, the seats scorching. We drove to the flat of a friend and stayed there until it was dark.

A friend of our friend came in.

‘What’s wrong?’

‘We went to get a transport permit and she fainted.’ I did not wish to sound critical. I added, ‘Perhaps it’s the heat.’

‘It isn’t the heat at all. Always the heat or the water with you people from outside. There’s nothing wrong with her. You make up your minds about India before coming to the country. You’ve been reading the wrong books.’

*

The officer who had sent me on the track of the transport permit was pleased to see me back. But the transport permit wasn’t enough. I had to go to Mr Kulkarni to find out about the warehouse charges. When I had settled what the charges were I was to come back to the clerk over there, with the blue shirt; then I had to go to the cashier, to pay the warehouse charges; then I had to go back to Mr Kulkarni to get my bottles.

I couldn’t find Mr Kulkarni. My papers were in my hand. Someone tried to take them. I knew he was expressing only his kindness and curiosity. I pulled the papers back. He looked at me; I looked at him. I yielded. He went through my papers and said with authority that I had come to the wrong building.

I screamed: ‘*Mr Kulkarni!*’

Everyone around me was startled. Someone came up to me, calmed me down and led me to the adjoining room where Mr Kulkarni had been all along. I rushed to the head of the queue and began to shout at Mr Kulkarni, waving my papers at him. He got hold of them as I waved and began to read. Some Sikhs in the queue complained. Mr Kulkarni replied that he was in a hurry, that I was a person of importance, and that in any case I was younger. Curiously, they were pacified.

Mr Kulkarni called for ledgers. They were brought to him. Turning the crisp pages, not looking up, he made a loose-wristed gesture of indefinable elegance with his yellow pencil. The Sikhs at once separated into two broken lines. Mr Kulkarni put on his spectacles, studied the calendar on the far wall, counted on his fingers, took off his spectacles and returned to his ledgers. He made another abstracted gesture with his pencil and the Sikhs fell into line again, obscuring the calendar.

Upstairs again. The clerk with the blue shirt stamped on Mr Kulkarni’s sheet of paper and made entries in two ledgers. The cashier added his own stamp. I paid him and he made entries in two more ledgers.

‘It’s all right,’ the officer said, scanning the twice-stamped and thrice-signed sheet of paper. He added his own signature. ‘You’re safe now. Go down to Mr Kulkarni. And be quick. The door might be closing any minute.’

PART ONE

1. A Resting-Place for the Imagination

These Antipodes call to one's mind old recollections of childish doubt and wonder. Only the other day I looked forward to this airy barrier as a definite point in our journey homewards; but now I find it, and all such resting-places for the imagination, are like shadows, which a man moving onwards cannot catch.

Charles Darwin: *Voyage of the Beagle*

YOU'VE BEEN READING the wrong books, the businessman said. But he did me an injustice. I had read any number of the books which he would have considered right. And India had in a special way been the background of my childhood. It was the country from which my grandfather came, a country never physically described and therefore never real, a country out in the void beyond the dot of Trinidad; and from it our journey had been final. It was a country suspended in time; it could not be related to the country, discovered later, which was the subject of the many correct books issued by Mr Gollancz and Messrs Allen and Unwin and was the source of agency dispatches in the *Trinidad Guardian*. It remained a special, isolated area of ground which had produced my grandfather and others I knew who had been born in India and had come to Trinidad as indentured labourers, though that past too had fallen in the void into which India had fallen, for they carried no mark of indenture, no mark even of having been labourers.

There was an old lady, a friend of my mother's family. She was jewelled, fair and white-haired; she was very grand. She spoke only Hindi. The elegance of her manner and the grand handsomeness of her husband, with his thick white moustache, his spotless Indian dress and his silence, which compensated for his wife's bustling authority, impressed them early upon me as a couple who, though so friendly and close – they ran a tiny shop not far from my grandmother's establishment – as to be considered almost relations, were already foreigners. They came from India; this gave them glamour, but the glamour was itself a barrier. They not so much ignored Trinidad as denied it; they made no attempt even to learn English, which was what the children spoke. The lady had two or three gold teeth and was called by everyone Gold Teeth Nanee, Gold Teeth Grandmother, the mixture of English and Hindi revealing to what extent the world to which she belonged was receding. Gold Teeth was childless. This probably accounted for her briskness and her desire to share my grandmother's authority over the children. It did not make her better liked. But she had a flaw. She was as greedy as a child; she was a great uninvited eater, whom it was easy to trap with a square of laxative chocolate. One day she noticed a tumbler of what looked like coconut milk. She tasted, she drank to the end, and fell ill; and in her distress made a confession which was like a reproach. She had drunk a tumbler of blanco fluid. It was astonishing that she should have drunk to the end; but in matters of food she was, unusually for an Indian, experimental and pertinacious. She was to carry the disgrace till her death. So one India crashed; and as we grew older, living now in the town, Gold Teeth dwindled to a rustic oddity with whom there could be no converse. So remote her world seemed then, so dead; yet how little time

separated her from us!

Then there was Babu. Moustached, as grave and silent as Gold Teeth's husband, he occupied a curious position in my grandmother's household. He too was born in India; and why he should have lived alone in one room at the back of the kitchen I never understood. It is an indication of the narrowness of the world in which we lived as children that all I knew about Babu was that he was a *kshatriya*, one of the warrior caste: this solitary man who, squatting in his dark-room at the end of the day, prepared his own simple food, kneading flour, cutting vegetables and doing other things which I had always thought of as woman's work. Could this man from the warrior caste have been a labourer? Inconceivable then; but later, alas, when such disillusionment meant little, to be proved true. We had moved. My grandmother required someone to dig a well. It was Babu who came, from that back room where he had continued to live. The well deepened; Babu was let down in a hammock, which presently brought up the earth he had excavated. One day no more earth came up. Babu had struck rock. He came up on the hammock for the last time and went away back into that void from which he had come. I never saw him again and had of him as a reminder only that deep hole at the edge of the cricket ground. The hole was planked over, but it remained in my imagination a standing nightmare peril to energetic fielders chasing a boundary hit.

More than in people, India lay about us in things: in a string bed or two, grimy, tattered and no longer serving any function, never repaired because there was no one with this caste skill in Trinidad, yet still permitted to take up room; in plaited straw mats; in innumerable brass vessels; in wooden printing blocks, never used because printed cotton was abundant and cheap and because the secret of the dyes had been forgotten, no dyer being at hand; in books with the sheets large, coarse and brittle, the ink thick and oily; in drums and one ruined harmonium; in brightly coloured pictures of deities on pink lotus or radiant against Himalayan snow; and in all the paraphernalia of the prayer-room: the brass bells and gongs, and camphor-burners like Roman lamps, the slender-handled spoon for the doling out of the consecrated 'nectar' (peasant's nectar: on ordinary days brown sugar and water, with some shreds of the tulsi leaf, sweetened milk on high days), the images, the smooth pebbles, the stick of sandalwood.

The journey had been final. And it was only on this trip to India that I was to see how complete a transference had been made from eastern Uttar Pradesh to Trinidad, and that many days when the village was some hours' walk from the nearest branch-line railway station, the station more than a day's journey from the port, and that anything up to three months' sailing from Trinidad. In its artefacts India existed whole in Trinidad. But our community, though seemingly self-contained, was imperfect. Sweepers we had quickly learned to do without. Others supplied the skills of carpenters, masons and cobblers. But we were also without weavers and dyers, workers in brass and makers of string beds. Many of the things in my grandmother's house were therefore irreplaceable. They were cherished because they came from India, but they continued to be used and no regret attached to their disintegration. It was an Indian attitude, as I was to recognize. Customs are to be maintained because they are felt to be ancient. This is continuity enough; it does not need to be supported by a cultivation of the past, and the old, however hallowed, be it a Gupta image or a string bed, is to be used until it can be used no more.

To me as a child the India that had produced so many of the persons and things around me was featureless, and I thought of the time when the transference was made as a period of darkness, darkness which also extended to the land, as darkness surrounds a hut at evening though for a little way around the hut there is still light. The light was the area of my experience, in time and place. And even now, though time has widened, though space has contracted and I have travelled lucidly over that area which was to me the area of darkness something of darkness remains, in those attitudes, those ways of thinking and seeing, which are no longer mine. My grandfather had made a difficult and courageous journey. It must have brought him into collision with startling sights, even like the sea, several hundred miles from his village; yet I cannot help feeling that as soon as he had left his village he ceased to see. When he went back to India it was to return with more things of India. When he built his house he ignored every colonial style he might have found in Trinidad and put up a heavy, flat-roofed oddity, whose image I was to see again and again in the small ramshackle towns of Uttar Pradesh. He had abandoned India; and, like Gold Teeth, he denied Trinidad. Yet he walked on solid earth. Nothing beyond his village had stirred him; nothing had forced him out of himself; he carried his village with him. A few reassuring relationships, a strip of land and he could satisfyingly re-create an eastern Uttar Pradesh village in central Trinidad as if in the vastness of India.

We who came after could not deny Trinidad. The house we lived in was distinctive, but not more distinctive than many. It was easy to accept that we lived on an island where there were all sorts of people and all sorts of houses. Doubtless they too had their own things. We ate certain food, performed certain ceremonies and had certain taboos; we expected others to have their own. We did not wish to share theirs; we did not expect them to share ours. They were what they were; we were what we were. We were never instructed in this. To our condition as Indians in a multi-racial society we gave no thought. Criticism from others there was, as I now realize, but it never penetrated the walls of our house, and I cannot as a child remember hearing any discussion about race. Though permeated with the sense of difference in racial matters, oddly, I remained an innocent for long. At school I was puzzled by the kinky hair of a teacher I liked; I came to the conclusion that he was still, like me, growing and that when he had grown a little more his hair would grow straighter and longer. Race was never discussed; but at an early age I understood that Muslims were somewhat more different than others. They were not to be trusted; they would always do you down; an example was given to this by the presence close to my grandmother's house of a Muslim, whose cap and grey beard, avowals of his especial difference, lay every sort of threat. For this difference we saw as the attribute of every group outside our own was more easily discernible in other Indians and more discernible yet in other Hindus. Racial awareness was to come; in the meantime – and until how recently – for the social antagonisms that give savour to life we relied on the old, Indian divisions, meaningless though these had become.

Everything beyond our family had this quality of difference. This was to be accepted when we went abroad and perhaps even forgotten, as for instance at school. But the moment an intercourse threatened, we scented violation and withdrew. I remember – and this was late after this family life had broken up – being taken to visit one family. They were not related. This made the visit unusual; and because it became fixed in my mind, no doubt from something that had been said, that they were Muslims, everything about them had

heightened difference. I saw it in their appearance, their house, their dress and presently, as had been fearing, in their food. We were offered some vermicelli done in milk. I believed to be associated with some unknown and distasteful ritual; I could not eat it. They were fact Hindus; our families were later joined by marriage.

Inevitably this family life shrank, and the process was accelerated by our removal to the capital, where there were few Indians. The outside world intruded more. We became secretive. But once we made an open assault on the city. My grandmother wished to have *kattha* said, and she wished to have it said under a pipal tree. There was only one pipal tree on the island; it was in the Botanical Gardens. Permission was applied for. To my amazement it was given; and one Sunday morning we all sat under the pipal tree, botanically labelled, and the pundit read. The crackling sacrificial fire was scented with pitch-pine, brown sugar and ghee; bells were rung, gongs struck, conch-shells blown. We attracted the silent interest of a small mixed crowd of morning strollers and the proselytizing attentions of a Seventh Day Adventist. It was a scene of pure pastoral: aryan ritual, of another continent and age, a few hundred yards from the governor's house. But this is a later appreciation. For those of us at school at the time the public ceremony had been a strain. We were becoming self-conscious and self-assessing: our secret world was shrinking fast. Still, very occasionally, some devoted Hindu of the few in Port of Spain might wish to feed some brahmins. We were at hand. We went; we were fed; we received gifts of cloth and money. We never questioned our luck. Luck indeed it seemed, for immediately afterwards, walking back home in trousers and shirts, we became ordinary boys again.

To me this luck was touched with fraudulence. I came of a family that abounded with pundits. But I had been born an unbeliever. I took no pleasure in religious ceremonies. They were too long, and the food came only at the end. I did not understand the language – it was as if our elders expected that our understanding would be instinctive – and no one explained the prayers or the ritual. One ceremony was like another. The images didn't interest me; I never sought to learn their significance. With my lack of belief and distaste for ritual there also went a metaphysical incapacity, this again a betrayal of heredity, for my father's appetite for Hindu speculation was great. So it happened that, though growing up in an orthodox family, I remained almost totally ignorant of Hinduism. What, then, survived of Hinduism in me? Perhaps I had received a certain supporting philosophy. I cannot say; my uncle often put it to me that my denial was an admissible type of Hinduism. Examining myself, I found only that sense of the difference of people, which I have tried to explain, a vaguer sense of caste, and a horror of the unclean.

It still horrifies me that people should put out food for animals on plates that they themselves use; as it horrified me at school to see boys sharing Popsicles and Palates, local iced lollies; as it horrifies me to see women sipping from ladles with which they stir the pots. This was more than difference; this was the uncleanness we had to guard against. From all food restrictions sweets were, curiously, exempt. We bought cassava pone from street stalls; but black pudding and souse, favourite street-corner and sports-ground dishes of the Negro proletariat, were regarded by us with fascinated horror. This might suggest that our food remained what it always had been. But this was not so. It is not easy to understand just how communication occurred, but we were steadily adopting the food styles of others: the Portuguese stew of tomato and onions, in which almost anything might be done, the Negro

way with yams, plantains, breadfruit and bananas. Everything we adopted became our own. The outside was still to be dreaded, and my prejudices were so strong that when I left Trinidad, shortly before my eighteenth birthday, I had eaten in restaurants only three times. The day of my swift transportation to New York was a day of misery. I spent a frightened, hungry day in that city; and on the ship to Southampton I ate mainly the sweets, which encouraged the steward to say when I tipped him, 'The others made pigs of themselves. But you sure do like ice-cream.'

Food was one thing. Caste was another. Though I had quickly grown to see it as only part of our private play, it was capable on occasion of influencing my attitude to others. A distant relation was married; it was rumoured that her husband was of the *chamar*, or leather worker, caste. The man was rich and travelled; he was successful in his profession and was later to hold a position of some responsibility. But he was a *chamar*. The rumour was perhaps unfounded – few marriages are not attended by disparagement of this sort – but the thought still occurs whenever we meet and that initial sniffing for difference is now involuntary. He was the only person thus coloured for me; the marriage took place when I was very young. In India people were also to be tainted by their caste, especially when this was announced beforehand, approvingly or disapprovingly. But caste in India was not what it had been to me in Trinidad. In Trinidad caste had no meaning in our day-to-day life; the caste we occasionally played at was no more than an acknowledgement of latent qualities; the assurance it offered was such as might have been offered by a palmist or a reader of handwriting. In India it implied a brutal division of labour; and at its centre, as I had never realized, lay the degradation of the latrine-cleaner. In India caste was unpleasant; I never wished to know what a man's caste was.

I had no belief; I disliked religious ritual; and I had a sense of the ridiculous. I refused to go through the *janaywa*, or thread ceremony of the newborn, with some of my cousins. The ceremony ends with the initiate, his head shaved, his thread new and obvious, taking up his staff and bundle – as he might have done in an Indian village two thousand years ago – and announcing his intention of going to Kasi-Banaras to study. His mother weeps and begs him not to go; the initiate insists that he must; a senior member of the family is summoned to plead with the initiate, who at length yields and lays down his staff and bundle. It was a pleasing piece of theatre. But I knew that we were in Trinidad, an island separated by only ten miles from the South American coast, and that the appearance in a Port of Spain street of my cousin, perhaps of no great academic attainment, in the garb of a Hindu mendicant scholar bound for Banaras, would have attracted unwelcome attention. So I refused; though now this ancient drama, absurdly surviving in a Trinidad yard, seems to me touching and attractive.

I had contracted out. Yet there is a balancing memory. In the science class at school one day we were doing an experiment with siphons, to an end which I have now forgotten. At one stage a beaker and a length of tube were passed from boy to boy, so that we might succeed and observe the effects. I let the beaker pass me. I thought I hadn't been seen, but an Indian boy in the row behind, a Port of Spain boy, a recognized class tough, whispered, 'Re brahmin.' His tone was approving. I was surprised at his knowledge, having assumed him, a Port of Spain boy, to be ignorant of these things; at the unexpected tenderness of his voice and also at the bringing out into public of that other, secret life. But I was also pleased. And

with this pleasure there came a new tenderness for that boy, and a sadness for our common loss: mine, which he did not suspect, the result of my own decision or temperament, his which by his behaviour he openly acknowledged, the result of history and environment: a feeling which was to come to me again more strongly and much later, in entirely different circumstances, when the loss was complete, in London.

I have been rebuked by writers from the West Indies, and notably George Lamming, for not paying sufficient attention in my books to non-Indian groups. The confrontation of different communities, he said, was the fundamental West Indian experience. So indeed it is and increasingly. But to see the attenuation of the culture of my childhood as the result of a dramatic confrontation of opposed worlds would be to distort the reality. To me the worlds were juxtaposed and mutually exclusive. One gradually contracted. It had to; it fed only on memories and its completeness was only apparent. It was yielding not to attack but to a type of seepage from the other. I can speak only out of my own experience. The family life I have been describing began to dissolve when I was six or seven; when I was fourteen it had ceased to exist. Between my brother, twelve years younger than myself, and me there is more than a generation of difference. He can have no memory of that private world which survived with such apparent solidity up to only twenty-five years ago, a world which had lengthened out its energy of inertia steadily weakening, from the featureless area of darkness which was India.

That this world should have existed at all, even in the consciousness of a child, is to me a marvel; as it is a marvel that we should have accepted the separateness of our two worlds and seen no incongruity in their juxtaposition. In one world we existed as if in blinkers, as if seeing no more than my grandfather's village; outside, we were totally self-aware. And in India I was to see that so many of the things which the newer and now perhaps truer side of my nature kicked against – the smugness, as it seemed to me, the imperviousness to criticism, the refusal to *see*, the double-talk and double-think – had an answer in that side of myself which I had thought buried and which India revived as a faint memory. I understood better than I admitted. And to me it is an additional marvel that an upbringing of the kind I have described, cut short and rendered invalid so soon, should have left so deep an impression. Indians are an old people, and it might be that they continue to belong to the old world. The Indian reverence for the established and ancient, however awkward, however indefensible, however little understood: it is part of the serious buffoonery of Ancient Rome, an aspect of the Roman *pietas*. I had rejected tradition; yet how can I explain my feeling of outrage when I heard that in Bombay they used candles and electric bulbs for the Diwali festival, and not the rustic clay lamps, of immemorial design, which in Trinidad we still used? I had been born an unbeliever. Yet the thought of the decay of the old customs and reverences saddened me when the boy whispered 'Real brahmin', and when, many years later, in London, I heard that Ramon was dead.

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He was perhaps twenty-four. He died in a car crash. It was fitting. Motor-cars were all that mattered to him, and it was to continue to handle them that he came to London, abandoning mother and father, wife and children. I met him almost as soon as he had arrived. It was in

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