INDIAN MADE FOREIGN LIQUOR

PART I.

I.

Troop 60 of New Delhi, India was based out of the American Club. We camped on the grounds of fine hotels and toured the countryside in air-conditioned coaches. There were ten of us that day in Agra, two columns of five, marching in domino formation. A full-uniform trot to the Taj Mahal was a "sign of high respect" to our mustachioed Scoutmaster, who thought India's colonial past was as benign and distant as America's. He wanted a picture for *Boy's Life* magazine. That this was a gesture akin to dropkicking a bald eagle never occurred to the man.

We assembled on the mall. Clustered around a bench, became two beige stripes before the blazing white marble dome. We thrust our standard into the air. A sweat droplet luged down the channel beside my spine. Our colors unfurled. Red, white, and rude blue scorched the colorless sky. The heat became terrific. The crowd of feral children following us elbowed for a better look. The Scoutmaster bent over his tripod and squinted through the viewfinder, but the

Agra Flying Squad rushed the frame, kicked the tripod over, grabbed his shoulders and dragged him up before he got off his shot. They cracked the Scoutmaster's Nikon open and yanked the film out like a flat black intestine.

Time slowed to a trickle.

I saw him shoved backwards over a rose bush, while a third man tore his patches off, flinging them sideways like skeet traps. Another stuffed our flag down the front of his trousers, and mocked us in Hindi. They let the Scoutmaster fall and he belly-flopped into the dust. He looked absurd lying there in his shorts. He flopped over. A Senior Constable trotted up, belly fat swinging over his gun belt, and stooped over the prone Scoutmaster, stooped over, and let a long gelatinous string of phlegm fall onto his face. Spit oozed into the Scoutmaster's grey moustache as the policeman menaced him. I was frozen in place and my comrades were too. We muttered to one another with sublingual squeaks. A tufted Myna bird strutted past, a bolt of crisp clean color against the ruddy dust, croaking fragments of Hindi and chuckling. The constable swiped at it with his *lathi* stick. I giggled; I had to, I couldn't stop myself as the silly thing took flight. The Scoutmaster pulled himself up and gave me a nasty look as he dusted off and wiped a wad of spit from his mustache.

But Scouts do not give up after a single setback, no matter how humiliating. We had a snack and proceeded with our itinerary.

Next up was a glucose biscuit factory on the outskirts of the city, owned by one R.K. Govinda and Son, a client of my father's, whose son, Arjun, was

supposed to show us around in exchange for a ride back to New Delhi. “You ought to befriend him,” my father had told me as he saw me off, “Arjun’s odd but a good kid and I am trying to cultivate a relationship with his father.”

That I wasn’t the sort of person who could see friendship as an active thing never occurred to him.

The plant manager was excited to meet us. He was a crony of R.K’s. One of those types of who only exist in the Orient, and absolutely idolize the west. Islamic terrorists them “Dogwashers,” dogs being a categorically foul thing to both Hindus and Muslims. They tend to be killed before anyone else in Delhi’s occasional upwellings of sectarian violence.

He welcomed us into his office and sent a little boy off for scalding shot glasses of tea. I steeped in the air-conditioning and studied his walls, while the adults spoke. He had escaped the Subcontinent on a fellowship of some sort and attended an international scouting jamboree in Costa Mesa, California, at least if the shellacked plaque stuck to his office wall was to be believed, and at the end of his introductory speech he presented our troop with ginger snaps, which he referred to as “a reasonable facsimile of graham crackers… to be consumed in the characteristic scouting manner: in sandwich form with an American marshmallow mashed between the biscuits with the help of heat from a campfire.” We saluted and presented him with a ribbon from our befouled flag. A camera flash (not the scoutmaster’s) recorded the event for posterity, and we stashed our

cellophane-wrapped souvenirs on our scout knapsacks. Hard hats were distributed.

My molars vibrated. Distant machinery rumbled.

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I was nauseous with anxiety about meeting young Arjun, and vowed to rebel, and walked onto the factory floor quivering with malice. The mills made an enormous racket, and the smell, well, you know a western outfit have been pristine, but this was mediaeval, jets of scorched fat spattering from machines, plumes of spilled flour billowed up from the conveyors; little mustachioed brown men in wrap-around diapers clambered over it all, tapping gauges, throwing levers, sucking at leaf cigarettes, fishing handfuls of slop from their gleaming tiffin tins; my sinuses plugged immediately from the sensory assault. I began to feel panicky, couldn't breath, and thought if I could only climb higher, away from the allergens, I might be able to break through the clot of scum forming behind my face. I grabbed a rung and pushed off the ground and hauled myself higher and higher, my lungs swelling like balloons until I emerged on a swaying gangway, trapped just beneath the ceiling, gasping for air that just wasn't there, high above a canyon of shaking machinery, a cast iron chasm throbbing with movement as chains and black rubber belts were yanked through its walls, shivering and creaking, as rings of pistons huffed steam and toothed gears dragged the paddles that churned the tumbling powders and oils into a river of orange sludge that ran far beneath me.

The clot melted. Clean air rushed my lungs. I inhaled like a glutton. Silver sparks blistered my vision. The oxygen became toxic. I staggered and sat down hard on my bottom and lay back, staring at the ceiling. There was something written beneath the accumulations of fat and flour, I couldn't read it all, but could tell it was a long English last name, a surname resplendent with Os and Us and muscular consonants and I couldn't bear the idea of this place that had once been ours handed over to these savages who had humiliated us in such in such a disgusting manner, and I sat up and leaned over the chain rail and let a long string of my own phlegm-laced spit dangle and fall into the vat.

A hand grasped the chain beside mine. A brown hand. I screamed but couldn't even hear it over the machines. Arjun: he was much, much bigger than I was, and I cringed, expecting a blow or at least a holler of anger, but he clutched the swinging rail beside mine, leaned out as far as he could and brought up a mouthful of mucous himself, and let a snotty knot of his own plunge into the churning dough beneath us. I looked at his bespectacled, flour-dusted face, and he smiled at mine and said something to me that was swallowed by the mills and he followed me down, wiping his lips on the sleeve of his striped baker's uniform.

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He wouldn't leave my side.

We skulked behind the others during the tour. He was too bashful to talk, especially given that he was supposed to be showing us around, but we seemed to

communicate fairly well through gesture, and our pantomime evolved into slapstick as he forgot about communication and instead tried to pry smiles from me, committing amusing minor acts of vandalism throughout the facility and palmed things, including a black felt tip pen, which he used to scrawl leprous spots on incongruous items: a safety sign, a lunch pail, a hasty spiral drawn on one of the furnace boys' foreheads. Frankly I detested my fellow Scouts, particularly the patrol leaders, and if this Arjun character could see things my way, react against his own father's revolting product, well, I reasoned, maybe there was hope for the place after all; and I let him take the window seat beside mine on the ride home and even loaned him a precious green Pilot pen which he used to mark up his arms with weird coils like a tattooed savage.

Clearly I was projecting my own feelings on to his, we never discussed why he choose to spit in the vat, but at the time our relationship felt fragile and the thought of undermining the tiny glimmer of feeling between us actually smarted. Like an emotional runner's cramp. But besides, all evidence indicated that his interests aligned with mine. It made no sense to jeopardize them.

The tour concluded. We boarded the clanging aluminum steps of the coach.

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They started the engine, and the scoutmaster strolled the aisle, handing out marshmallows. The real, unattainable, precious American thing. Bags of it were distributed, the scoutmaster saying that we could only use them once we returned

home to make souvenirs with. Arjun plucked one from the bag and held it under his nose and took a deep sniff one and then actually spoke to me in well-modulated, barely accented English.

"Inedible," he said, "plus this stuff is made of skin and shins and cartilage and all those stiff bits you cannot reasonably eat. Who ever would eat this is eating worse than the pig it's made from."

And he hurled his marshmallow out the window and it bounced off the head of a Brahman bull grazing beside the road, and I just… something inside of me just dissolved and I just started gulping for breath because I was laughing so hard and from then on the marshmallows became missiles. And we pelted passersby. Soft volleys of white dots erupted from our tinted windows and ricocheted off the pale chartreuse, green, beige and brown landscape of hardscrabble Uttar Pradesh. And then we entered a town. And our game became rough.

Skill shots – the ornate center "O" of a *Be Gentle on My Curves* roadway sign, an underhanded lob dropping a marshmallow down the plastic throat of a water-pot-*wallah*'s wares – became cruel as supplies ran low.

Beggars cringed as volleys hurtled toward them. At a stoplight my Arjun reached down from his window and balanced one on a Sikh cyclist's turban. The last marshmallow in the bag was mine. I plucked it from its powdery sleeve, and put it in my mouth, letting it soak until it turned tacky. The bus lurched forward. I dangled the cube in the sun to let it dry. Arjun wobbled his head and rocked back and forth, murmuring in a grotesque parody of an Indian lady doing her

puja. A beggar approached us, gazing up, hunting for our eyes, moaning for "baksheesh," for a "school pen," for "one rupee." He had one arm, the other, was a flaking stump the color of a dangling cigarette ash. He spotted me. I nodded at him. He winked and thrust his hand into his cloth diaper and began to tug. I drew my arm back and flung at him. The wet marshmallow flew true, smacked him on the forehead and stuck. He staggered for a moment, feeling for the white mass protruding from his face. He pulled his hand out and seized the mass, pulled it off, sniffed it, popped it in his own mouth and ate it, never breaking eye contact. Arjun giggled and threw a full can of Coke at him, a product unavailable in India at the time, and it exploded beside the beggar, drenching him in caramel foam, and at that moment Arjun became my friend, the only one I ever had during that long lonely decade in the Subcontinent; though like all friendships that begin with a shared act of revenge, it eventually curdled into something more sinister.

II.

Catherine, Kitten, my cat, as I tell you this, please don't think of my time in India as unmitigated horror. There was a clowder of exceedingly intelligent feral cats that took over after we chased the colony of monkeys off our property. And I became very attached to one of them. And taking care of them was an act of mercy. Because Indians catch cats for their tail fur, which they turn into paintbrush bristles, and for their guts which are still used in some places to make tennis racket strings. Oh, don't look at me that way. The monkeys had to go. They were aggressive. India is so crowded with creatures that you either find an equilibrium like we did with the cats – an occasional chicken breast was allowed to vanish from our table as we ate on a rat-less veranda – or you don't. Catherine, those monkeys, they broke the covenant. They were aggressive. We came home from dinner at Claridges once, and the leader of the pack, the piebald alpha male was standing in our doorway clutching his little scarlet prick and when we shouted at him to move, he bared his teeth and stood there staring us down on our staircase and the idiot guard just stood there leaning on his cane. So dad took it from him and rushed the thing, meaning to chase it away, but it stood its ground, still clutching its bright red prick, sluicing a stream of piss all over our stairs and dad's trousers, so dad did what any dad would do and clobbered the thing, and we had the guard hang the carcass from a spike on the fence, and the monkeys didn't show up again until Diwali, and then I shot a bottle rocket into

their nest and it caught fire they didn't come back at all after that. But the cats did. A swarm of cats. But they saved us from the rats during the plague. So we liked the cats. So you could think of India as an overstuffed ecosystem, a watering hole in an arid landscape, but that squishy organic stuff is only a starting point, because there is so much more to India than that, my pet, an entire spooky layer of psychic detritus you have to contend with, millennia of ideas that have crawled off on their own and mated and cross-pollinated and gone septic and strange. I tell you, Kitten, at the time I saw myself as this man who belonged in the modern age and living in India, which back then was still embargoed and semi-socialist, I felt cut off from all my birthright, that being all the cool stuff I could have had were I in Birmingham or Brighton or Barstow or Brixton or Boston or anywhere else I considered within my bailiwick, and so I rebelled, turned my brain off to live there. Closed myself off to the possibility of anything Indian invading my subconscious. My singular achievement for having lived there for eleven years, at the time, because I was a militant little fucker, was to never, ever let one atom of the place get sucked into my substance. Mark my words, I told myself, not one corpuscle of me was Indian. And I was damned proud of that fact. Little did I know what a howling chasm of need was growing inside of me. What strange people I was attracting to myself. And I recall looking back after Arjun hurled the can of Coke and in the dying light, in the petrochemical fug Agra was ablaze, like a massive heliotrope or a signal flare screaming out a message that I just couldn't read and couldn't relay to someone who could.

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In any case, the “Marshmallow Affair” was soon forgiven. Not long after, my picture appeared in the local English-language paper, the one hawking skin lighteners that famously illustrated an expose of eve teasing with a close-up of a hand pinching a denim-clad bottom. The subject was exorcism. Expatriate life in New Delhi, even adolescent life, revolved around tedious parties. Absent the gangster financiers and film stars of Bombay, Delhi’s Embassies were the town’s most sought-after venues. Within them was a rigid hierarchy: The French threw the best parties, a vestige of the Ancien Régime. American parties were said to be lavish but lacked the grace of their European counterparts; the parties thrown at the High Commission of Australia were loutish affairs, their New Zealand equivalent peevish, while the British served plattered atrocities like sausage rolls and the guests were never sure whether to be offended by the jokes. Alternatives were sought. The international NGOs threw bashes that seemed fun until the doors were slammed shut and barred and the slideshows touting the miseries of starving brats began, and appeals for money and volunteer hours were made, and it all became so sanctimonious, so deadly boring… A few of the Eastern European embassies, namely the Hungarians, were so desperate for hard currency they opened a cash bar, but the bootleggers complained and anyway the respectable hard-moneyed set stayed away after a ‘Boar’s Blood’ hangover or two. Plus one of the American Embassy School girls was raped—she was fourteen, it was an ugly story I was never privy to. She vanished from class. Medevac’d home. Eventually we discovered the Regatta Club.

Though its finances were in fine fettle, the club was yacht-less. The cities sprouting on Delhi's periphery had filled the Yamuna with floating garbage, and by the 1970s club was forced to uproot itself from the old gymkhana and move inland. The staff that remained were a craven and stupid bunch. For more than a decade they had been bullied by a gang of predatory transsexuals who wrapped themselves in saris and demanded protection money lest an "ill fate descend upon your house." The Anglo-Indian board of directors appeased the *Hijra*, that's the India word for them, and forgive me here, because I am sure there are entire traditions and sacred histories involving the *Hijra* that I am ignorant of, and should feel ashamed for having ever been disgusted by, but goddamn if at the time they weren't the biggest, most disgusting nuisance imaginable for a reasonably red-blooded teenage male.

Every Saturday morning they called on us, and the ritual lodged deeper into Delhi's festering social fabric. What happened was this: at a quarter of ten precisely every Saturday morning, a ferocious clanging rang through the grounds. The club members set their forks and sticky tinned juice mimosas down and went out onto the veranda. A wrinkled crone in a green frock stood at the gates and glared, while the rest writhed around her like electric eels. No one knew whether the leader was female or not. From the veranda it was almost scenic, as en mass they were almost pretty, they blended into a single shape, metallic greens and blues all wriggling around a rigid green shaft. Like male a peacock showing his frills. And they sounded like a flock of peacocks in an uproar too. Shrill cries punctured with sulfurous threats. One of the servant boys, whomever was best at

evading pinches, was dispatched to listen to their demands and deliver the *baksheesh*.

A sum was set aside from the petty cash. Historically this had been a trivial amount, never more than a thousand rupees, which at the time was about ten to fifteen dollars U.S. But the influx of pale faces whet the *Hijra's* appetite and their demands grew ever more obnoxious.

Mother was elected chair not long after we joined, vowing to end the club's use of paper chits as a proxy currency and the increasingly frequent visits from this malodorous pack of lipsticked men who by now demanded gifts of Honeybee brandy and tins of Quality Street chocolate in addition to their usual stapled stacks of fraying soft currency.

On her first Saturday morning in office, Mother shooed the pinch-proof boy away and walked down to the gates herself. There was a standoff. Words were exchanged. Club staff refused to become involved. The pack leader lunged at Mother. Her hair was grabbed and a very nice dress torn badly, but Mother, you've met her, she being one of those stubborn German Americans whose distant relations built up the infrastructure of the United States with their bare hands, and a bit of a sanctimonious bully to boot, was quite impervious to the threat of this hissing sissy, and when challenged, she responded with a single rabbit punch directly to the leader's nose, and he or she or whatever stood there mouth agape then swiveled on his dainty foot and the entire group marched away empty-handed, shrieking curses at the Club.

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India is a superstitious place, crammed with witting and unwitting confederates. The following week things began to happen to the club. Geckos, which Indians insist are deadly poisonous, began to swarm the trees and scale the walls and drop squirming into bathtubs and tangled themselves in the servants' hair. The club ghost, a friendly chap who was said to live in the doorways and was blamed for minor, winsome mishaps, began to act up. Chits, said to be mother's mark on the prime material plane, at least where it bumped up against the Regatta Club, were found scattered all over the café. Milk went sour. Butter went rancid. Sewage backed up and flooded the servant quarters. The pinch-proof interlocutor caught meningitis and became palsied and several imported fuses blew. An emergency meeting was called, and when the board members came filing into the room clutching their cold drinks they found the staff, all seven of them, cringing beneath the oval table, swaddled with bedding to protect them from the drops of ectoplasm they swore to see seeping from the ceiling. The pinch-proof boy who was now the palsied boy knew a fragment or two of English: "This ghost," he croaked, "she cries with pains and pains and pains."

R.K. Govinda was on the club's board of visitors, which was partly why Dad decided to join in the first place, and he translated the rest of the boy's frantic jabbering for us: "These silly niggers want us to hire an enchanter. The ghost's gone off and it's all the fault of those goddamned Hijra. I say we pay."

An exorcist was surprisingly easy to source. The staff had a man in mind. Naturally we accused them of cheating us, and called them swindlers and hurled abuse at them but after a few days of this and pitiful antics from the serving staff we decided to give in and spring for it. A special tariff was added to everyone's monthly dues, and that evening we hung bunting from the veranda, hired a catering company to pitch a wedding tent in the courtyard and weave marigold garlands. A sitar and *tabla* duo squatted in a nook and plucked and thumb-drummed and warbled an appropriate ode to the occasion. Moti Mahal, the trustworthy local tandoori restaurant chain sent us a chef, and he set up tin tureens of bubbling *paneer tikka* the color of tang and gnarled tubes of lamb *seekh kabob*, garnished with steamed lime. The *naan* bread was prepared in advance and came wrapped in foil, and mother had to call up Moti Mahal and shout at the manager because the man was supposed to bake them on site and they were rubbery from the scooter ride in. The charge was removed from the invoice after a small quarrel. We were forced to yell at everyone constantly. India was an absolute nightmare of constant low-level quarreling. But you couldn't just let it go even once, because letting go was like cracking an egg shell; letting go, meant exposing yourself to the grasping madness of the place and letting it infest you and feast upon you, and in any case, letting go simply was not done. Those who did were Medevac'd home.

The evening sky turned a Martian shade of dusty rose pale. The club filled with people. The atmosphere felt as if some celestial somebody were sitting at celestial

control panel twisting a celestial rheostat and goosing the electric current coursing through the atmosphere. You wanted to shiver.

First to arrive were the club members. Men and women in pastels and khaki, clutching cocktails, mostly gimlets, poured by our man, Gollywog (whose face was mottled with a dark port-wine stain). The sun slipped beneath a smudge of cloud and disintegrated into a glow the color of a bad bruise. Darkness fell, the bonfire was set and the deep rumble of a generator soon joined its crackling pop. The band played along. Moaning *swaras*, stirring strange sounds that mingled with the clink of highball glasses and cocktail chatter into something quiet sinister.

Petrol fumes wafted through the air. The spotlights lit. The band shifted from evening ragas to a hooting squall faintly reminiscent of the *Jaw*'s theme and then the *Hijra* whirled in, looking quiet fabulous, I had to say, all in matching evening pink, their glass bangles and bits of mirror flashing, and as they circled the fire they dipped and stomped, their belled anklets jangling out of step with the pops of the tabla drum. The leader clapped once and they froze in place, each with a single foot raised from the floor like a flock of pink flamingos. She clapped again and they dropped to sit cross-legged between the food and the fire, eyeing the buffet, sniffing the air like wolves. Their lips gleamed brown by the fire. The gate swung open. I turned away, not wanting to indulge the profound silliness of India's mystical side, not wanting to see for myself what evil miasma might billow in to appease the strange fellows stealing our supper.

The club loomed in the smoky dark above our party like a steamship docked for the night, all skinny pylons and forged iron rails casting spooky shapes against the orange sky.

I heard the tinkle, tinkle, of ice cubes colliding in a highball glass.

R.K. Govinda said put an arm around my shoulder, grazing my face with his chilly glass. “Julian, you are looking in the wrong direction. The gate is that way. ” He didn’t let go. I felt his buttons pressing against my neck. “A very special someone is about to cross our threshold. This is the tense moment. When forces are about to come into conflict. Good no owl has hooted at us from the trees,” he said. “That would be the vilest omen of all.”

I squirmed free and kept staring into the flat black dark lying beyond the access road, outside our gate. The gate bugged me, every fiber of my being screamed at me to swing it shut. And then somebody walked in. A guest, some old Indian aristocrat, I thought, but he couldn’t have been a guest because guests always drove, and as he stepped into the light I could tell he was no aristocrat. He looked more like a teacher, a middle-aged man in a shabby sport-coat and peaked Kashmiri cap taking slow, careful steps across the asphalt drive. R.K. Govinda shouted that the “the time has come that we must cover our heads,” and Gollywog distributed cloth napkins, and with a tipsy shuffle we did our best to accommodate.

The drab enchanter did nothing to acknowledge our presence. He walked past us up the steps to the clubhouse and yanked the main door open and them

slammed it shut. We heard him scurry up the stairs; caught glimpses of him dart past different windows. Then a pair of shutters burst open on the top floor, and he jammed his body out and clambered onto the ledge, screaming and flinging handfuls of petals onto the crowd as he leapt from ledge to ledge, scurrying along a rim that barely jutted out from the wall.

The *Hijra* jumped to their feet and stomped and clapped for him. A petal floated down and glued itself to my forehead. I peeled it off. He clambered back in through a window. Then ran from the house. He raced past us, holding something as far away from his body as possible, and stopped before the fire and hurled a satchel into the flames. The fire blazed bright purple, flared higher than the treetops then died completely. Then the sitar stopped. The air felt as if something had been plucked from it but the haunting didn't feel over. Still, I tried telling myself that whatever foul fate I had stirred by disrupting India's most sacred site had been exorcised and yet I couldn't quite convince myself, didn't quite feel purged. And then I saw a disturbance in the crowd, like a stone in a river, and I braced myself for something horrible, and a dark figure shouldered his way through the crowd and raised something to his face and the world was suddenly rinsed in cold blue light.

The snapper from the English-language daily had taken my picture.