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TRAVELING

WITH

SPIRITS

VALERIE MINER

LIVINGSTON PRESS
THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST ALABAMA

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isbn 13: 978-1-60489-118-8, hardcover
isbn 13: 978-1-60489-119-5, trade paper
isbn: 1-60489-118-1, hardcover
isbn: 1-60489-119-X, trade paper
Library of Congress Control Number 2013944734
Printed on acid-free paper.
Printed in the United States of America by
United Graphics

Hardcover binding by: Heckman Bindery
Typesetting and page layout: Joe Taylor
Proofreading: Gonil Gveiro, Joe Taylor, Jovel Queirolo
Cover art, design, and layout: David Schorr

The quote on page 77 comes from Thomas Merton's
The Seven Storey Mountain, Mariner Books.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance
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Livingston Press is part of The University of West Alabama,
and thereby has non-profit status.
Donations are tax-deductible.

first edition
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This book is dedicated to Marcia Dillon with gratitude

The Guest House

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival....

Welcome and entertain them all! Even if
they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently
sweep your house empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out for
some new delight....

Be grateful for whoever comes, because
each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

By Jelaluddin Rumi,

Translated by Coleman Barks with John Moyne, *The Essential Rumi*

San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995



ONE

January, 2001, New Delhi

Crowds of savvy people weave confidently through the thick, smoky atmosphere of Indira Gandhi International Airport. Monica is as startled as a body can be at 11:30 p.m., after 19 hours of travel. Desperate for air and space after the marathon flight in her small, stuffy seat, she's overwhelmed by the viscous, jostling environment of the vast terminal. Muslim men in succinct knitted caps bustle past Sikhs in the urgent baggage room turmoil. Women hurry, too, looking astonishingly fresh in vivid saris and salwar kameezes: pulsing blue, alarming chartreuse, beaming yellow. In contrast, the few Westerners appear pretty ragged—the denim backpackers and the suited executives—with tousled hair and grey faces.

Momentarily dazed, Monica leans on a wall. Everyone else in this enormous cold, damp, room has grabbed a trolley or staked out a position at the baggage carousel. Ashok Nair, the cordial professor who flew in the aisle seat next to her, snatches his battered brown leather suitcase and strides toward the exit. He doesn't bother to wave good-bye. Ridiculous to feel abandoned. Of course he's not her guardian angel. And he has invited her to lunch this week.

Magically, her three blue bags arrive together. She readies herself to heave them from the carousel, then grasping the first one, strains at its weight.

"Ma'am, these are belonging to you as well?" inquires a sturdy Sikh man in his fifties.

Panic rises—at the sight of this tall, strong man gripping her luggage—and falls at the sound of his kind, courteous tone.

"Yes, Sir, thank you," she manages as he removes the second bag. She tugs off the third.

"You are most welcome." His voice lowers. "If I may offer some advice?"

His skin has been pocked by some childhood infection. "Please do."

"Pre-paid taxi. Go to the booth outside this customs area. Accept no other transportation."

“Thank you.” She smiles as they both load bags on the trolley. “Thank you very much.”

Powder blue bags. She didn't want her luggage confused with a stranger's. How many weeks will the color last in India? She tries not to think how long she will last.

“Pre-paid taxi. Pre-paid taxi.” She repeats the phrase silently, steering the wobbly trolley. “Pre-paid taxi,” Father Koreth has emailed her. “Pre-paid taxi,” Professor Nair advised over their miniature dinners on the flight. “Pre-paid taxi,” she repeats over and over to calm herself through customs. Of course she has nothing to declare. (Nothing except: she's thrilled, terrified, dazed to be here, to be so far from home.) Father Koreth and others have explained that Indian immigration is watchful of doctors working for Catholic missions. “They regard us as religious proselytizers, if you can imagine!” he wrote. “One must arrive with a single entry visa and strictly obey regulations.” So far she's been very obedient. Still, she's nervous as hell and can smell the sweat rising from beneath her tired deodorant.

“Nothing to Declare” lines are nerve-wracking. She tries to forget that last trip to Ireland where she splurged on Waterford crystal bowls and Belleek vases for Mom. Definitely over the customs limit then. Perhaps she's over all kinds of limits here. The limits of her flexibility, courage, forbearance.

“Pre-paid taxi,” the mantra steadies her as indifferent customs agents flip through her documents.

Outside. Finally. The night is surprisingly cool. No, not night, early morning now. She peers through the thick soup of fog and smog for Taxi 1451. All around people are pushing and shouting.

“Hilton?” asks one young man.

“Intercontinental?” A hipper guy.

“Good price anywhere Madame goes.” A third driver seduces.

“No, thank you,” she answers each one. Her voice jars with broad American syllables.

At last. Number 1451 license plate. Gripping the trolley with one hand, she waves frantically to the driver with the other.

A legless man slides his wheeled platform close to her shoes. “*Namaste ji,*” he calls upward.

Too ashamed to be surprised by her recklessness, she steps away

from the beggar, directly into the chaos of honking and darting cars. Taxi 1451 screeches to a halt.

The cabbie stuffs her bags in the small trunk.

Monica summons the address of Mission House from her muddled brain.

He looks puzzled.

Maybe it's her accent. She has to get used to having an accent. Slowly, she repeats the address.

A blank stare.

"Near the Bengali Market." The synapses are reconnecting.

He nods vaguely.

As they withdraw from the airport melee, she breathes a huge sigh of relief. *Pre-paid taxi. Pre-paid taxi.* The chant rattles through her sleepy head.

Bumpy road.

Utter darkness.

"Headlights?" she asks.

"Not necessary."

"Please switch on your headlights." Her friendly, but firm, physician's tone.

"Wearing down battery. Safe driving. Don't worry," the driver states with finality.

Monica is in his taxi, in a strange city, half a world away from home.

Her exasperated, anxious moan morphs into a cough. She replaces *Pre-paid taxi* with *Jesus guide us*. Same number of syllables, same soothing rhythm, and a more useful chant at the moment.

Eyes adjusting to the night, she sees, or thinks she sees, an elephant lumbering along the road. The city air is heavy with smoke and an odd, pleasantly sour smell. Parked near a brightly-lit intersection in a turquoise truck, vibrantly painted with flowers, a god she can't identify and large, red stenciled letters. "My India is Great."

"You are a priestess?"

The driver's sudden curiosity startles her. "Pardon?" She leans forward to catch his words.

"Madame is a holy woman, a priestess? A nun?"

"No," she grins, "no." She imagines what her sister would say about her. Wicked Witch of the West, more likely.

"No?"

Monica answers his lilting question with her strangely thickened Minnesota accent, "I am a doctor."

"Ah," he readjusts the plastic statue on his dashboard.

Krishna, she's fairly certain. An avatar of Vishnu and one of the most popular Hindu deities. Brain continuing to return. Positive sign.

"We have our own religions in India," he objects quietly.

"Oh, yes."

She wants to tell him she's studied Indian spiritual traditions. Wants to ask, do you know that Catholicism is one of those practices? That six million of your citizens are Catholic? St. Thomas brought Christ's teaching here centuries before they reached Ireland. Rather, she says, "Indeed, you have a wealth of religious paths."

"We also have excellent Indian medicine," he asserts more vigorously now. "Madame has heard of Ayurvedic health care?"

"Certainly." She's irritated by the pointless tension between them. "I received Ayurvedic massages at home."

"Home?" His musical voice lightens. "Where would your good home be?"

"Minneapolis." Monica glances out the window, spotting three more elephants being led on a rope. Quite docile. This isn't the Serengeti; she reminds herself not to gape.

"The Minnesota Twins!" he proclaims.

She laughs.

"Do you know Torii Hunter?"

She racks her brain for players' names, strangely compelled to please.

The taxi slows in front of a large block of flats.

"104 Wills Road," he announces.

"Yes, yes," she shakes her head and rummages through her purse.

Pre-paid taxi, the words float through her drowsy brain.

He holds open the door.

Surely he'll help her with the heavy luggage. Surely.

Surely there's so much about this country Monica has yet to imagine.

TWO

January, 2001, New Delhi

“Coming. Coming.”

A flashlight slices through the cold dark.

“Welcome, Ma’am, rather,” the stout middle-aged man corrects himself, “Welcome Dr. Murphy.” He shivers slightly in sandals and a rumpled beige uniform.

Clearly she’s wakened the poor guy.

“Mr. Alexander?” Monica suddenly recalls his name from Father’s letter.

“Yes, yes. Welcome. Welcome. Come in before you will be freezing to death.”

He hoists the heaviest two suitcases on his shoulders before she can protest, leaving her the manageable roller bag and briefcase.

He’s right about the cold. Frigid night air pierces her airplane numbness. “Sorry, sorry. The lift is broken. But only three flights.”

“Yes, of course.” She can’t get more tired.

Astonishingly nimble, Mr. Alexander scurries up the zigzag stairs and she scrambles after him. He sets the luggage down and opens a door to her “suite.”

As he flips the switch, an overhead bulb glows dimly. Once he turns on the table lamp, these large, tiled rooms appear dingier. “In here is the bath. You ignite the inverter for hot water.”

She’s grateful for the sit-down toilet. Looking forward to a bath in that tub. Hot water, the very thought revives.

“And here...” He’s disappeared.

Monica trails him into a tiny kitchen.

“Bottled water. Please dispense water from the cistern. Do not drink from the tap,” he cautions, rubbing his stomach vigorously in explanation.

She’s about to laugh. Monica won’t explain she specializes in gastro-intestinal infections. That she took a special international health course this fall to brush up on tropical diarrheal diseases, shigellosis and cholera-typhoid fever. She remembers the cabbie, tells herself that this is Mr. Alexander’s country. “Yes,” she nods. “Thank you.”

“The cooker—please watch how you start it.”

Monica blinks. She expected meals with colleagues during orientation week here in Delhi. Is this another American presumption? Do they want her to shop and cook for herself? She knows a few words. *Sabzi mandi*, is “vegetable market.” She can ask for *sag, aloo, gobi*.

He twists knobs, points to burners. “Cooker is for making toast and tea. Here are the provisions. Meals are served in the refectory.”

She grins.

“Ma’am, they wouldn’t bring you all the way to India to cook!”

Exhausted, she glances at the gloomy bedroom.

“A long journey. You must be tired,” he says kindly.

Perhaps everyone at Mission House is suffused with charity. Monica hopes to recover hers by morning. Only one side of Mr. Alexander’s shirt is tucked in his trousers. His left sandal strap is torn.

“Yes, thank you. We’ll both feel better after a good night’s sleep.”

“*Namaste, ji,*” he bows over tented palms.

She dodges a memory of the legless man. “Yes, good night and God bless, Mr. Alexander.”

The place is damp, so she plugs in a space heater which looks—and smells—as if it predates independence.

Brushing her teeth with bottled water, Monica sees a strange woman in the mottled mirror: stringy red hair and blotchy freckles. What did Mr. Alexander make of his crumpled, honorable guest?

Clammy, ugh, the towel is so damp. India is twenty degrees closer to the equator, but she feels colder tonight than in Minnesota, cold in her bones. Sister Margaret did write about the lack of central heating. Who needs heating in the Indian plains, she thought. She hears her mother’s complaints about the deadly dank of Dublin.

Monica imagines Mom walking with her back to the cavernous bedroom within range of the heater’s small province of comfort. “I would have been with you in the last days, if Jeanne had called,” she wants to say.

Enough, and off to bed with you, Mom insists.

She races into a nightgown and crawls beneath the damp sheets. Tomorrow will be better. Tomorrow. Later today. Who knows what time it is? This is only the beginning of the journey. Let go. Let God.

The knocking is tentative. Light taps. She could ignore the noise, roll over and return to sleep, to that strange dream about her neighbor stealing the tree. Maybe he'll return it. She's always loved the Japanese maple.

Another light rap on the door.

Worn out, but pathologically polite, Monica sits up. "Coming."

2:30 on her watch. Does this mean 2:30 a.m. here? 2:30 p.m. in Minneapolis? Daylight outside. How long has she slept?

"Coming," she calls louder, slipping on a robe. The chill rises from her toes straight up her legs, gripping her stomach with something like panic.

Outside the door, she finds a small, dark-skinned woman in a crisp black and white habit.

"Good afternoon," she extends a delicate hand. "I am Sister Margaret. We've been corresponding for so long, I feel as if I know you, Doctor. I'm happy to be among the first to welcome you to Mission House."

Afternoon? How has she slept so long in this strange, new place? And who is this woman impersonating Sister Margaret, whom she's always imagined to be the twin of her first grade teacher, with big bosom, ruddy face and ageing blue eyes?

Sister Margaret laughs. A friendly, pleasing trill.

Monica joins in.

"Pardon my attire, Sister. You can see I haven't caught up with the time."

"Indeed," the young nun grins. "You must acclimate yourself. Do sleep more if you like. But some of our newcomers like to be alerted to the time."

It's 2 p.m., Monica realizes. Delhi is 11 ½ hours ahead of Minneapolis.

"I wondered if you'd care to take an early evening tea with me at Nathu's?"

"Nathu's?" Almost awake now, Monica sees a nun in her late twenties, not much younger than herself, just fresher, familiar with the surroundings.

"A local café." Sister Margaret studies her guest. "In the Bengali Market."

Bengali Market. Prepaid taxi. It's all coming back.

"Yes, thanks. I'd enjoy that."



Sister Margaret shakes her head from side to side, an Indian gesture for agreement, Monica remembers.

Overcome with remorse, she splutters, “Oh, dear, friends were phoning.”

“Yes, Professor Nair said he will ring again tomorrow. And Dr. Nelson, from your Embassy clinic, has left her mobile number.”

Monica takes a long breath of relief, anticipation. How astonishing that Tina Nelson is working in Delhi. She didn’t think she’d have a friend here until Beata visited. And now she has two, well one-and-a-half, with Ashok Nair.

“Sorry to be a bother.”

“Hardly a bother.” The young nun waves her fine-boned fingers.

Why does she seem young? Innocence? No purity perhaps. Sister Margaret exudes a kind of serenity. Monica understands she, herself is the innocent here.

“Shall we meet in the foyer about 6 p.m.?”

“I look forward to it.”

“A light lunch awaits you in the refectory, whenever you fancy it.”

“Thank you, Sister.”

Craving a latte, Monica pokes around the kitchen for tea bags. While the water boils, she opens her suitcases, digs out woollens.

The first bureau drawer is discouraging. The second even riper in mildew. Maybe she’ll leave the bags packed and withdraw things day by day. She’ll only be at Mission House a week before traveling up to Moorty Hospital.

Walking downstairs to the lobby, Monica notices the windows on each landing have been removed. (Broken? Shot out? Never installed?) No wonder the place is freezing. She shivers in her black wool sweater and skirt, then sees the nun.

Sister Margaret rises from a bench by the chapel, smiling. “The refectory is this way.”

Outside in the early evening dark, crowds rush along the raised sidewalks. The sidewalk is a good nine inches higher than the street, how many sprains, how many broken ankles per week?

Noises begin to penetrate. Honking. Grinding. Whistling. Screech-

