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# A SECRET PASSAGE TO INDIA

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The worst thing was that the Air India clerk in Chennai accused me of making up my claim that I had personally presented my now missing suitcase at the check-in counter in Bombay, tags clearly marked, including the crucial destination tag to Chennai; personally placed the bag on the slats and waved it a silent good-bye, good luck.

--But it never arrived here, she insisted.

--Yes, I know that. That's why I'm reporting the loss.

--You have no paper to prove a loss. I again showed her my boarding pass.

--No, you have no stamp.

True. --I guess they forgot to put on the stamp.

--Go check with Air France, she replied. If the bag exists they probably forgot to load it from Paris to Bombay.

First implication: the suitcase does not exist; it's a phantom. Second implication: Air France, which I had flown from Washington, D.C. to Bombay-- not Air India-- would be liable for any losses or damages. I argued. Even pointed out that according to her logic, by extension I myself did not exist. Like the missing suitcase I was a phantom.

I began to think about Beckett and Sartre.

--Come maybe next flight from Paris to Bombay. Then next flight here to Chennai. We deliver.

I said I was only going to be in Chennai briefly. The tour I had joined would be leaving in less than 48 hours. --No problem. We fix. Be happy.

Reluctantly I made my way out of the airport past crowds of brightly dressed families carrying huge suitcases, boarded the group limo to the Chennai hotel. A couple of tour-mates urged me to use "positive energy." Thanks. Another said it had probably been stolen. I should call the police. A woman twice my weight offered to lend me clothes. No, thanks. Upon arrival at the hotel I excused myself from the group, threw myself on the bed. Almost at once there began a series of vivid dreams suggesting that I was indeed back in Paris, with or without the bag.

In the first episode, I walked rapidly through a series of mazes, hassled by kids pleading for candy, pens, cash. Just like parts of India. So France has finally been dethroned! At least it was still attracting tourists, thanks to the burgeoning Asian economies. I continued to push my way past families with enormous suitcases and boxes, the ladies wearing gold

ornaments and vivid green saris that never came loose even when they soothed whining babies, the men smartly dressed in business suits, ordering any frolicsome children to get back in tow. Which they did. With far more grace than I as I kept tripping on skirts and bumping into luggage carts. Sorry. Sorry. I have a lunch rendezvous at Le Deux Magots.

Then Samuel Beckett appeared from a bar with a large bottle of Kingfisher Beer. --You are in both Paris and Chennai at the same time. Waiting, like my Vladimir and Estragon, those fools, for a god that doesn't exist. Just go.

--Yes, Sartre added, his face buried in a copy of the Hindu Times. --The Being to which Nothingness comes in the world must be its own Nothingness.

--Thank you. Merci.

But when I found my way out of the airport, nothing in the least resembled the Paris I had known. Not a hint of the Eiffel Tower in the chaos of taxis, motorized rickshaws, buses with shrieking brakes bent on knocking over anything in or out of sight.

I woke briefly, my semiconscious mind repeating the word "flexibility." Wasn't that the heart of travel? Of life itself, a series of hellos and goodbyes? It was indeed possible that while I had zoned out on my flights, a major change had taken place. Chennai, once known as Madras, had traded places with Paris because of global warming along with the effects of a global economy. As I drifted back into dreams, I thought why else the sultry air and mounds of

rubble along what was once the Champs Elysee? The boisterous night market awaft with incense and cardamon, tin stalls selling jars of dark powders, where once the five star restaurant Le Taillevent had reigned? The mango trees in front of Notre Dame. . .

At least this version of Paris was cheap. Two rupees for a curried croissant, three for a litre of Bordeaux with cardamon and cloves. I couldn't find a soul who spoke French so made up a macaronic stew of tongues, some Spanish, German, Italian, English, even a touch of Hindi, but my attempts to ask directions were drowned out by drum and accordion bands playing God Bless America along the banks of the Seine. I slept on a bench despite the noise.

At least a day later, I woke to a message on my hotel phone from Ravi, the tour leader, to return at once by taxi to the Chennai airport and claim the bag that had mysteriously arrived just in time: there had been a change in the tour schedule and the group would be departing soon for another city. If didn't do so, I would have to travel for two weeks with only my carry-on pants and t-shirt. So I'd been in Chennai all along, Paris a mere phantom. Paris, that is, not, as the clerk had implied, myself or my suitcase. So off I went to claim my loyal travel companion, bearer of my clothes, books, plans, medicine arsenals without once complaining. But neither Ravi nor any of his helpers could enter the Chennai airport with me since they didn't have boarding passes.

After two hours in the over 100 degree heat searching for the reborn bag in a maze of corridors, I found it, after showing my passport, several papers, and signing my name at least 15 times. A label with someone else's name suggested the bag had been sent to JFK and rushed back, but that seemed unlikely. Where it had gone, how much it had suffered, what clandestine adventures it had enjoyed I would never know. Anyway I greeted my old travel companion, rolled it to the nearest taxi which jolted forward so abruptly my suitcase was nearly ejected from the gently locked door. And rejoined the tour group to a round of applause, which I thought was totally undeserved since I had done nothing since the loss except dream my way back to Paris.

--Quick. On the bus, Ravi said. It was about to leave for Pondicherry, many miles south. When my tour mates asked about the retrieval of the suitcase, I said oh, it was nothing, like falling off a log. And nearly asked if anyone would like a profiterole or fresh croissant, but refrained lest they tossed me out on grounds of madness.

Moral: Don't lose your suitcase in Chennai unless you're seeking a long and convoluted passage to India via Paris--or vice-versa.

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**Barbara F. Lefcowitz** has published nine collections of poetry, including *The Blue Train to America*, which came out in 2007. She has also published poetry, fiction, and essays in over 500 journals, has won fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller Foundation, among others. She lives in Bethesda, Maryland, when not travelling to exotic places.