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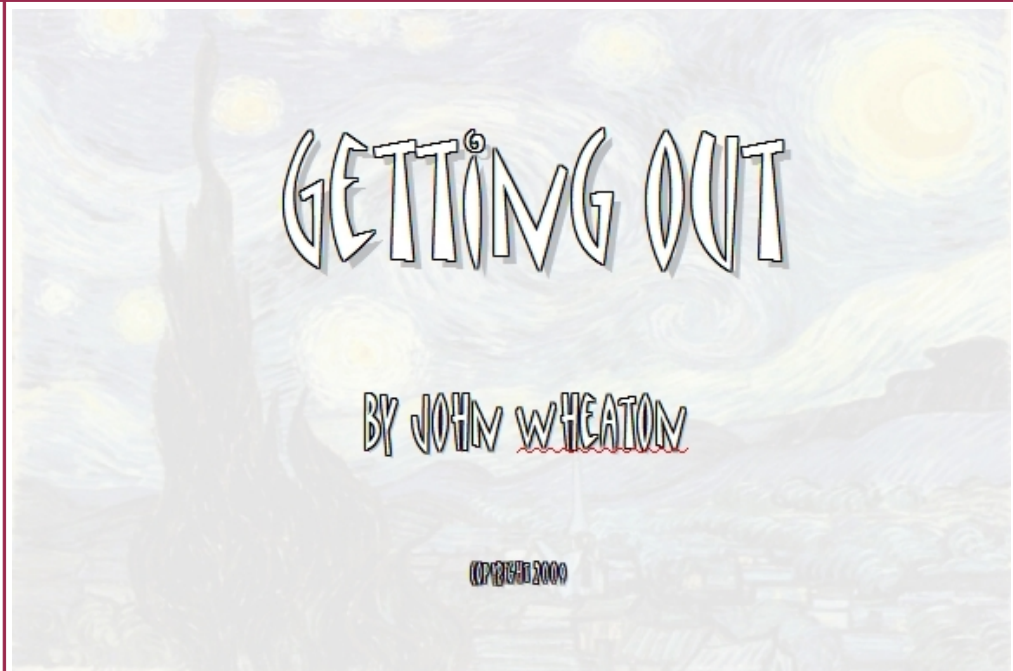
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"Keep your arms in the car or they might get hit," our driver warned as we swerved through a lazy herd of cows on a road south of Delhi. The dilapidated concrete dwellings drifted by our windows like indiscreet on-lookers. A child sat on a small sidewalk, running a toy car over the cracks between the stones.

It was our third day in India and Krista and I were quietly reeling from the late afternoon heat. My stomach churned with the malady known as "Delhi belly," and our driver's proclivity for gunning the engine on the weather-wracked curves wasn't helping. We were driving toward the Taj Mahal and had planned a stop on the way—a famous bird sanctuary nestled against a quiet village known for its Sunday market. Our driver, a jovial older man named Vinay, spoke in lilting Indian tones:

"My wife is a very beautiful woman. In the town where I come from, every man wanted badly to marry her."

"How did you meet?" Krista asked.

"She was a teacher in a school for young children—I met her when I walked my little nephew up the steps. We married soon after and came to Delhi to be as far as possible from my wife's family." He chuckled—the high, staccato notes trailing off.

When we arrived at the bird sanctuary, we were startled to find the road blocked off by a shoddy, barbed-wire-clad fence. A large white sign posted on the center of the fence offered a scrawl of Hindi and a line of smaller English letters that read "Closed Due to Environmental Concerns." A squirrel scuttled along the top of the fence, leaping carelessly through each ring of barbed wire. Inside, a bird mocked us with a shrill *squawk*.

Turning away, we decided to spend our time exploring the streets of the nearby town. We left Vinay to his own devices and started down the narrow road leading to the town center, where a crumbling building loomed like a tired mirage. The dust kicked up behind us in a small cloud. A small man leaning against the side of a bicycle rickshaw called out to us in English—"600 rupees for town tour!" The rickshaw had a makeshift cover lined with pristine red stripes and wheels crusted with dust and sand.

"Should we do it?" I asked Krista. She hopped playfully onto the passenger seat.

"Hi, hi," the driver called.

The driver pedaled furiously as we rode along the fractured side roads, passing houses and children playing cricket in the streets. We slowed near a market, where women in black headscarves stood over lines of clothing and trinkets. "Muslim market," our driver mumbled. The clothing passed quickly from hand to hand. Circles of women crowded around men who pointed gloved hands at items adorning the display tables.

Suddenly, shouting arose in the midst of the market. A line of men in long brown shirts pushed their way through the crowd, shoving aside the women. A little girl scurried behind her mother. One of the men seized the edge of a table, screaming in Hindi as he flipped it on end. The bracelets and necklaces soared through the air—a brief shower of beads and pounded metal. The other men followed in turn, hoisting tables up high before sending them crashing down to the pavement. An old man, red with anger, slapped at one of the assailants with the back of his hand; the attacker grabbed him by his arm and hurled him to the ground.

The assault upon the market ended as quickly as it had begun—the men filed out past the last huddle of women and disappeared around the corner. The stand owners sifted through piles of beads and polished wood.

"What was that all about?" I murmured under my breath.

"The Muslims and Hindus are always fighting," the rickshaw driver said.

When we returned to the car, we found Vinay asleep in the driver's seat. His snoring, a subtle drone, drifted through the open window. He woke with a startle when I touched his arm, and we climbed in and set out upon the road toward the Taj Mahal. The sand encased the car in a thick haze through which the occasional red or yellow sari peaked. A trace of red dust lined the hem of my jeans; its hue reminded me of the barren Martian landscapes I had seen in photographs. Krista stared vacantly out her window, a hint of weariness creeping into her eyes.

We arrived in Agra at about 8:00 in the evening. The town seemed strangely unequal to the task of hosting one of the most visited sites in the world. A few hole-in-the-wall restaurants lined the side of the road—signs with bold red lettering advertised chicken masala and paneer tikka. After a quick bite to eat, we checked into our hotel and I splayed my weary body out on the cheap, springy mattress. I fell into a deep sleep, waking only once to the sound of water rushing through the plumbing above our room.

* * *

After breakfast the next day, Vinay drove us down the road that wound its way around to the Taj Mahal. He pulled to the curb and told us to meet him back at the car in a couple of hours—an encore of snores erupted before we could even close the doors. As we walked down along a bend in the road, a long line of people came into view; there must have been close to two hundred in total, most of them white and carrying light backpacks or purses. Children sat between their parents' legs. At the front, ten Indian guards in grey uniforms stood in a line that ran perpendicular to the other, creating a tall "T" of human bodies. The guards' faces were expressionless but their irises flickered back and forth like the eyes of crocodiles poking out of river water. Behind the guards, a high red wall rose up from the cement, its shadow reaching halfway across the throng of people. The main dome of the Taj Mahal, with its crowning spire, glowed white in the morning sun.

We walked to the end of the line and asked the nearest person, a tall woman with tattoos

covering her arms, what was going on.

"You haven't heard?" she said. "Some hotels and other places in Mumbai were attacked by terrorists last night—they walked right into the Taj Mahal Hotel and started killing the guests. The guards up there are keeping everybody out—it looks like some of the places being hit are tourist spots, and I guess they don't want to take any chances." I stood in shock. We were scheduled to fly to Mumbai the next day.

We walked back toward the car to decide what to do. When we got there, we were surprised to find Vinay awake and listening intently to the radio. The broadcast was in Hindi, but I could hear the urgency in the newscasters' voices. "There were eight attacks in South Mumbai," Vinay told us. "They think an Islamic terrorist group from Pakistan might be responsible." The buzz of static cut through the broadcast like a sputtering saw.

After talking it over with Vinay, we decided not to go back to the Taj Mahal. We drove back to the hotel and sat facing each other on the wicker chairs that were assembled in a huddle in the check-in area. "Jesus, eight attacks," Krista said. My eyes drifted to a crack that traversed the brown plaster wall from the ceiling to the floorboards.

Around mid-morning I walked to a payphone to call home. I knew my parents would be worried as hell. My mom answered on the first ring.

"John?"

"Yeah, it's me Mom."

"Oh, thank God you're all right."

"Yeah, we're okay. A little spooked, that's all."

I could hear TV in the background, intermixed with our parakeet's occasional *cheep*.

"Where are you?"

"We just came from the Taj Mahal. They wouldn't let us in, so we came back to our hotel."

"Listen, you need to get out of India now. You should see the things they're showing on the news."

"We'll be careful whatever we do, Mom."

"No, listen John, you need to leave *now!*" Her words flew out with a piercing shrillness I'd never heard.

After reassuring her that we were all right, I said goodbye and walked back to the hotel. Vinay had gone for a walk, and Krista was reading a book in our room. The light filtered dimly through the curtains—Krista was holding the book close to her face to make out the text. I pulled back a curtain and the daylight washed like a wave over the room.

"Did you get a hold of them?" she asked.

"Yeah. My mom thinks we should get the hell out of India."

"Well...I've been thinking...maybe she's right."

I lay down across the still-rumpled sheets of my bed.

That afternoon, we called the airlines and changed our flight plan so that we were going straight on to Istanbul rather than flying to Mumbai first. We spent the evening in our hotel room and at a nearby restaurant, where we ate colossal dosas that draped over the outer lips of the plates. The waitress shuffled back and forth in a long skirt that dusted the floor lightly behind her. From time to time she walked over to peer solemnly out the window, her skirt clinging to her coffee-brown legs.

When we set out on the road back to Delhi the following morning, the clouds had settled in over the endless expanses of desert. The sun was an old lemon in a grey paper bag. Looking back, I could see the Taj Mahal, its white dome dim on the horizon.

At the airport, we weaved through the beggars toward the terminal—a child clutched her mother's dirt-caked shoulder. The baggage line consumed the greater part of an hour. "Gate C3," the woman said without looking up from her computer.

"I'm gonna go get a candy bar. You want anything?" Krista asked.

"Nah," I said.

I sat down on a black, fake-leather terminal chair. Across the aisle, a Muslim couple sat with their child between them. The boy tried to squirm away and the mother place her hand firmly on his knee to hold him back—she dozed against the armrest and frowned almost imperceptibly when he moved. The father napped with his chin on his chest, his long beard draping down in a tangle of black.

When our flight was called, we got up sleepily and stumbled to the line of passengers. The crowd was a mixture of dark-suited businessmen and dreadlocked globe-trotters. The Indian man in front of me turned to his wife: "It's a good thing those Muslim pigs aren't on our flight." The Indian Air attendant fed our tickets through the machine; it spit them out the other side with a mechanical *vrriuump*. As we stepped onto the jetway, I looked back to see the Muslim boy sprawled out like a snoozing housecat on his mother's lap.

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John Wheaton studied poetry and physics at Stanford University and is currently a law student at the University of Washington. His work has appeared in *Bricolage* and *Glossolalia*. In his free time, Wheaton enjoys swimming, playing chess, and writing. He is particularly interested in the crossover between fiction and poetry, especially with regard to flash fiction and other blended forms. Wheaton hopes to someday become a lawyer who spends his free time gallivanting around the world in search of poetic inspiration. (He hopes that someday such a legal position conjures itself into existence. He remains cautiously optimistic.)

