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Journey to the West

From the top floor of the Shibaozhai Temple, looking out to the Yangtze River (Chang Jiang), 12 floors high, and even higher on ganja, I stood dizzily on the verge of my own greatness. Some things you can only see when you're this high.

Wave after wave of terraced green flew outwards from me towards the rest of China, interrupted by the powerful river, but only momentarily. I envisioned the whole river, all 6,400 kilometres of it, its immensity incommensurate with tiny me. Here gigantic dams sliced across incomparable rivers, forcing lakes to fan out of nowhere, drowning villages and jungles, while agriculture clung with bloodied fingers to mighty mountains. One million people had been displaced further upstream by the damn dam, the population of my Mauritius. What could I possibly mean here?

I was in Hubei province, having boarded the ship a week earlier at Shanghai, a good few provinces east. I was heading upstream towards East Tibet. It wasn't a ship really, more a low-cost transport craft, a riverboat.

This is how I describe myself: 43, elegant, an adventurer at heart. My name's Marco, one of the most common names among Mauritian Christians my age. I am of Black African origin spiked with some French here and there. I was brought up a Catholic but am now as lapsed as can be. My wife, Lakshmi, is Mauritian Hindu.

From the top floor of the Shibaozhai, my head suddenly started spinning and the world with it, as a vocal group of ladies, with bad teeth wearing men's dinner suits over cheap delicately embroidered blouses climbed up.

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Two years earlier, I was Managing Director of my own small company in Mauritius but the late recession brought it to its knees and like many of my country I left, hoping for a better life. I was about to take up a position as Managing Director of the Nanjing Zhong lu branch of the Zhong Guo Finance Company in Shanghai; my life was set for years to come. My wife in Shanghai was with child. I had just attended a meeting of the Africa-China Forum. But I was desperate for a break from everything. So I took a cheap boat and a book and headed west.

I wanted to say goodbye to the old skin, to the old soul, to the jolly good fellow within, to the particular era that started with University days in Paris, with the alcohol, the dope, the girls, the blur. It was some sort of death that I knew I ought to prepare for, like great spiritual Masters do. I wanted an end to allow a new birth. I wanted to link up a final time to the beginning of the particular cycle.

To further concentrate the mind on my trip up the river, I had bought some ganja from a German man I met in a bar in Puxi, in Shanghai. Ganja no longer tastes the same however. Something is just different. I seem to resist it deep down unlike in the old days when my friends and I were sitting stoned and pissed out of our minds at my old university in France, and we imagined ourselves going off to the East and connecting with the source of our transcendence. I was surprised to find hardly any hemp anymore in China.

If there is a country that should understand the idea of the opium of the people, it is surely China. Have any other people known wars in the name of drugs like the Chinese?

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We stopped in Yichang almost a day before we reached the Shibaozhai Temple. I spotted two blonde women sitting in a tiny teashop. Well, I was thirsty, so I went in, and found a table next to them. I heard them speak French and joined in. It seemed churlish not to; we were after all the only patrons.

The women were travelling together – Maja Lotta was Swedish and Marie-Charlotte French. They both taught English in Hangzhou in Zhejiang Province.

For a while, we were silent as we watched the jasmine flowers slowly sinking to the bottom of our clear tea glasses, opening their flowers ever so gradually. The owner of the teashop, a small, greasy man with eager eyes came up, announced himself as Mr. Ma, and asked us in Mandarin the oldest human question to break the ice.

“I am from France”

“France, yes, yes.”

“And I’m from Sweden”

“Nali?”

“Swe-den.”

“I don’t know.”

“Europe. North Europe.”

“Europe, yes. You?”

He turned to me. I hesitated. A man who did not know Sweden would surely not know where Mauritius was.

“I am from Africa.”

“That’s not true.”

I guess I wasn’t dark-skinned enough for him. Too much French blood?

“Really. I am from Africa.”

“No, you are not.”

“But I am.”

This could go on for a while...

“You are from Africa?” Mr. Ma tilted his head, less adamant. “Aah! North Africa! You are from North Africa.”

The mixture of Afro-Mauritian and Franco-Mauritian makes me appear North African; Arab-like, with my rather fair skin and frizzy hair which make me a target in airports across the Western world where I am stopped, checked and occasionally strip-searched.

“No, I am from Southern Africa.”

“No, you are not.”

“I am from Mauritius, a small island in Southern Africa.”

“Eh?”

“*Maoliqusi*.”

“Ah! Mauritius? That’s impossible! 2000 rupees a visa! I know! I know!”

A man who doesn’t know Sweden knows Mauritius? And its currency! And the cost for a visa (which I myself did not know – it sounded overpriced and probably included middleman money)! Maja Lotta and Marie-Charlotte were no less surprised. So Maja Lotta asked of Mr. Ma’s *lao jia*. Was he from Hubei? Mr. Ma was from Anhui province.

It suddenly made sense. Many of the recent immigrant workers to Mauritius originated from Anhui, downstream, where we had stopped earlier. These were especially young women, dotting every town and big village of Mauritius in mismatched flashy cardigans and Mao-style trousers and stiletto shoes. They were generally treated well by the local population but quite badly exploited by the industrialists who employed them, many of Chinese origin themselves.

As we stood to leave, Mr. Ma rushed to me:

“Mr. Mauritius. Can you send my message?”

“Hein?”

“I have a message for your people, for the *Maoliqusi-ren*. Ask them to be kinder to our girls. Please.”

I hid my embarrassment behind a quick acquiescence. He knew more about Mauritius than I cared for.

As we poured onto the streets of Yichang, Marie-Charlotte asked playfully what my “people” did to those girls.

“Same as the French do to Mauritian migrants with menial jobs.”

The women were heading west and since they had boarded a bigger riverboat in Shanghai, they speeded ahead of me on to the Three Gorges and, although we exchanged cards and promised to meet in Hangzhou or in Shanghai (as people do), it is safe to assume they disappeared from my life forever.

* * *

For five hours that day we crossed the immense Three Gorges Dam, quite simply the world’s biggest dam. Further along, we were required to lock our windows at night securely. “Because of pirates,” the loud loudspeaker had informed us. Would locked windows be sufficient to stop them I wondered? It was exciting, like being a boy again. Piracy was, after all, my first career interest. Is it too late to switch?

The potential presence of pirates outside made us feel even more intimate inside. Although I was the only one of three non-Chinese persons onboard I was welcomed by everyone without much curiosity. The Yangtze, much like China, was a magnet for all sort of folk, but most foreigners preferred ships bigger than mine, even cruise ships.

Since I boarded in Shanghai, I was having dinner with a different group of travellers every night. They were all interesting. Dr. Hsien from Nanjing was lecturing on insects at Jiao Tong University in Shanghai. She was in her early fifties and was travelling with five other equally erudite women of the same age-group.

“Why do these people spit, and why do they eat so noisily? And why do they talk while they eat and spray food particles everywhere? Why do they leave their bones on the table-cloth? Why...?”

“Why do you blow your nose at the dinner-table? Why do you kiss on the mouth? With the tongue? Why?”

Dr. Hsien stopped to look at me. She raised a glass of Tsingtao and I raised mine to hers.

In the small corridors of the boat, while chatting with one of the hostesses, I saw a man whom I had never noticed before. I invited him to my cabin and offered him some whisky. I assumed he was Chinese. In fact, Tajalli was a Sufi Muslim from Tajikistan. Alcohol would interfere with his inner harmony, he said. So I offered him some Pu'er tea. He was a tall, big man, with a thin, silken Chinese beard streaming from his chin. He looked to me like West China's Uighur people, but that could be just my ignorance of Central Asia's ethnic groups. He was on a quest, he said, to remember everything, to remember that everything was divine.

He was particularly concerned about what you put in your body.

“Are you vegetarian then, Mr. Tajalli?”

“There is no difference between the suffering of animals and that of plants,” he argued. “It isn't the presence of face, of eyes, of similarity to the human that denotes being and therefore suffering. That is prejudice. We have a responsibility to remember, to remember all the suffering of the tonnes and tonnes of animal and plant that keep any one human alive. This implies responsibility. We forget our responsibility to everything else.”

Vegetarianism, he argued, was a decoy, a form of reassurance that missed the point: we need to use the energy we are loaned to engage in the positive.

He lost me there, and I am not even sure I'm reporting him correctly.

“What's Sufi? Is it a Buddhist sect?”

“It is the hidden face of Islam.”

“Islam?!”

I must have sounded, in my incredulity, like Mr. Ma of Yichang. Intolerant men with militant expressions and long beards, repressed women in swathes of cloth and veils, that was my idea of Islam. Tajalli seemed to me to be a major exception.

On my second night on the boat I discovered the bar. Amazing that it had taken me that long. But there was also a karaoke machine there. The night I met Tajalli, I was sitting in the bar in the company of newly-made friends from Henan and from Xi'an, when suddenly they all nudged me forward to sing and their clapping encouragement spread to the entire bar. They managed to make it an issue of hospitality and breach of hospitality. So I had no choice but to get up and swallow my dignity. What awaited me was so unexpected I am still bowled over by it – French songs from the 60s and 70s, the very sounds to which I grew up! In the middle of the Yangtze, surrounded by jungles and mountains, while pirates were presumably circling the boat. It was too much of a coincidence, like my own childhood

chasing me. So I plunged in and sang words in French that weren't there and was referred to as *Ying guo ren*, the Englishman. If you relaxed and didn't take yourself too seriously it all went well.

A while after my triumph, a small man approached me and asked if he could have a word with me in private. Was he a musical agent, and was my talent finally recognised? I considered the dance-floor full of swirling aunties dancing with each other and beckoning to me amid a drunken roar and asked the man if he fancied a walk on the deck, deciding to try my luck with the pirates instead.

While we proceeded downstairs, the man presented himself as Shinichi and explained with a particular gleam that he had heard me sing in French and could afford to reveal his true identity as a Japanese to an international man like me. He had been masquerading as a Manchu from Dalian. Indeed his Mandarin was faultless. The Japanese weren't very popular in China these days and it made life easier to pretend to be Chinese if one could.

Shinichi was cursing the world. He was looking for a mythical alcoholic drink. It is a drink to make you forget all other drinks, a drink to make you forget. So you can start anew, start afresh. I asked for the name and he said it but to this day I cannot remember it, although it is in fact not very far from my mind. Very frustrating!

Had I heard of such a drink? No, I hadn't. It was but a moment's disappointment on his face, and soon enough Shinichi was bowing and thanking me and going back up. He stopped, pushed his card in my hand. If I ever heard of the drink during my travels, could I please call him? Of course.

Shinichi's surreal quest was for the greatest gift of all no less – the ability to forget. So you can start anew, start afresh. “Forget what? Nanjing?” I thought as I started taking in the fresh air how increasingly politically incorrect I was becoming the further away I was getting from Shanghai. Something inside me was emerging, something that had always been there, lurking under the veneer, perhaps akin to what had occasionally emerged when I got fed up with the wife. It was a sort of savagery over which I had little control.

The deck was fresh, the boat was casting a warm light on the river. Down below deck, the ship's crew could be heard moving reassuringly. Beyond these domestic touches lay an immense darkness. Looming even darker were silent peaks, unmistakably Chinese in their conical shapes, and at their feet layered black bushes. The surrounding silence was oppressive and was made worse by the buzz of the ship's motor. This had the feel of a more sombre side to “everything is possible”. I shuddered – it was quite nippy.

I decided to return to my cabin. The mixture of alcohol and the ship's cadence and the singing – was making me feel queasy.

* * *

When I slept my dreams were feverish. Valentin Enomwoyi, an old drinking University pal in France from Benin, appeared, exhorting: “reality is an illusion caused by lack of alcohol or ganja”. Sometimes he was the Valentin Enomwoyi of my memories, other times he was Tajalli, and sometimes Shinichi. And then, a smell, a smell, the familiar whiff of vanilla and coconut that is part of the Mauritian unconscious.

The next morning, I decided to abandon ship at Zhongtian, pulled as I was by the extraordinary mountains I had been seeing. I headed generally towards Yongfengchang, but was never to reach it. I passed through landscapes with colours so bright they looked like they had been touched up for a postcard. Mountains like fjords dipping down to the river and its dwarfed ships and bridges.

I was faintly conscious at this stage that if I slipped and fell, no one would know where I'd been, who I'd been, and there was strange comfort in that potential oblivion. The two dearest heartbeats waiting for me beyond this ancient river inhabited another dimension.

I got lost, and I am not certain why but it was either my inadequate map or the Sichuan dialect which was often no match for my Mandarin peppered with Shanghainese or my strange state of mind. Who knows what directs our paths? Then who knows who misdirects it? And how to tell between direction and misdirection?

I arrived at a village whose name I cannot remember – it was just a group of huts. I climbed up to seek the villagers. I spotted the women first, working in one group at drying peppers. I could hardly get a word in: they were busy teasing me, complimenting my eyes, with just the right mixture of bashfulness and shamelessness to make one feel embarrassed and warm. There was no doubt I looked exotic. When they started commenting my imagined intimate girth while laughing knowingly to each other, however, I began to feel uncomfortable. At this stage I thought I would try meeting the men. They were sitting outside the meeting-house, drinking rice wine.

“Hello! I am a *lao wai* (a somewhat silly foreigner)! Can I sit with you for a while?”

The men all laughed for a while: a *lao wai* doesn't often refer to himself as a *lao wai*! When the dust settled, so much drink was forced upon me it's a miracle I managed to move my tongue to ask them if I could visit the village.

This is when I met with an old man and his hunchback daughter. They were boiling the pods of peas (they couldn't afford actual peas) to have with their noodles. These were times of peace, times of plenty. What of times of war, times of famine, I thought?

While we were visiting the village, the villagers were busy preparing a surprise fit for a *lao wai* – pizzas! Isolated as it could be, nowadays no place is safe from pizzas! Two pizzas, sliced into 32 each, are lifted up with chopsticks to their mouths - China's final revenge on Italian gastronomic theft? I am offered three slices. I am the guest. So far from everywhere else, a human being is offered a plateful of empathy by fellow human beings. And would they have offered the same to the old man and his hunchback daughter? Just like back home in Mauritius – preference to foreigners...

In my semi-drunkenness, I surmised how the wheel of the whole world is now being turned by the sweat of the ordinary Chinese; directly or indirectly the worldwide logic is being altered by the cheapness and efficiency of Chinese labour.

What new responsibilities will eating of that bread give?

* * *

I joined another ship – only to stop a couple of hours later at Fengdu for another inland trip to a group of temples, home of Tianzi, the King of the Dead. Some boats moor in midstream in case of supernatural attacks, but ours was obviously manned by the pragmatic.

After the climb under a stubborn sun, I was in the strangest state of mind – I was disposed to be sceptical. When I learnt that until recently, one could purchase a “passport to Heaven” for 1 USD, stamped by the local magistrate and the abbot, my scepticism even lost its coating of ironical humour. They ain’t getting my dollar, that’s for sure. If they ask for it, I’ll say eat shit. If they ask me why, I’ll say well, billions of flies do it, so eat shit!

Beyond Fengdu, the city of Shetan beckoned, which sounded no less fearsome. The Temple on Ming Shan did have an arcane feel. It had isolated little courtyards dotted with fierce looking statues and somehow being on high ground, I felt heady and this made me petulant to the various gods and statues. A priest advised me as I was crossing the bridge back to the world of the living to recite “Wo hui lei le!” (I have returned!) to make sure I did not carry unwanted spirits back with me. And, of course when crossing the bridge I sauntered across and sang the formula to the tune of “The Flower Duet” from *Lakmé*. I am not very proud of myself - I was behaving like the worst of the *lao wai*.

Once the gigantic Three Gorges Dam, which has displaced one million persons, becomes fully operational and once the enormous lake floods it all, the town of Fengdu will finally live up fully to the destiny of its nickname as the Ghost town since it will be completely submerged. Only a couple of years before it had been a bustling city. Now Fengdu, wedged between one of the world’s mythical rivers, and the enormous toes of the two mountains Ming Shan and Shuang Gui where demons and ghosts live, was already in its last throes.

In the Three Gorges region, we visit already dead banks, ghostly banks whose imminent condemnation is also what gives to the tourists, perhaps a fleeting sense in many of their own passing, this blurry vision of a dark and sorry river from a Roman imagination, the despairingly dismal Styx. In it all at once the sense that things change and things die, or worse, the sense that it does not matter ultimately if the lives of a hundred years are effaced, nor even the temples and palaces of a thousand years.

Even Immortals cannot resist Progress.

There was also a time when there was no China and Shanghai was marshland. There was a time when the Chinese lived by a river in Africa and we all shared the same body.

* * *

That night, I had a vision of China, like some strange beast from its own imagination, gobbling itself up to become stronger. East China colonising West China, then colonising itself. The government colonising its own people. For its own good. Future digesting past and belching. The marshes reclaimed in Shanghai, the Dam flooding Hubei. Yin and Yang. The silver road of the Yangtze, man-made, like the shiny Yanaan highway that cuts Shanghai through and through, the Maglev train that slices down below. New Towers of Babel, New

Rivers of Siddharta. Hearts of Darkness. Mystical glimpses into the future. Past, present and future were running like a continuous river.

I felt nauseous. I was throwing up all over the cabin. I am pregnant, I thought. I am Lakshmi and I am pregnant. With myself? I saw myself dancing on the bridge between the living and the dead, singing “The Flower Duet” in *Lakmé*. I was dancing like Shiva. I was about to give birth to the new and creation cannot happen without destruction.

It was time to see a doctor. I didn’t care if they found traces of ganja in my blood. I was clearly going crazy.

The copper sun was finally rising like an old coin over the ancient land. Coming up majestically to the ship was a big city. I took my bags and left, determined to board another ship afterwards to continue onwards to Tibet.

I climbed the bank steps wearily to the city and took a taxi. I had hardly heard of Chongqing before and I ought to have – it was quite simply the world’s largest municipality, with just under 35 million inhabitants! At the junction of the Yangtze and Jialing rivers, Chongqing, like an overfed, overgrown only child being bicycled around by his tiny bird-like mother, had once been the capital of Sichuan, and had outgrown his mother. As big as Beijing and Shanghai lumped together, it sat heavily next to huge Tibet’s miserly 3 millions, surrounded by jungles, in the middle of China.

I was brought to an extremely large hospital. It was big, beautiful, modern. It was all whiteness. I took a couple of steps into the hospital, and then died.

* * *

I was a ghost, for I was still aware of things, though in a vague, haphazard sense. Temporarily, the world came to an end. And then was reborn. The doctor smiled, somewhat perfunctorily:

“You were saying you were dead. You see, you aren’t.”

“I am not physically sick. I am haunted.”

A few hot tears fell onto the pillow:

“I don’t want to die so far from my homeland! I want to get back to Shanghai.”

“Die, Mr. Marco?”

He chuckled freely.

“You only have a stomach bug. Avoid spicy food. Have a Polo, Mr. Marco.”

He offered me a peppermint Polo sweet. It felt like an old coin on my tongue.

“I need to get to Tibet.”

“Go back to Shanghai.”

The new China. Simple, direct, no-nonsense. Practical.

‘Avoid spicy food’! Huh! Try finding mild sauces in Sichuan!

The metallic taste of Sichuan peppercorns beckoned everywhere, like a coin in your mouth for good old Charon when crossing that other river. Sichuan cuisine is *ma la*; it makes your mouth feel spicy hot and numb from the pepper.

I took the next regional flight to Shanghai where my six-month pregnant wife was waiting for me, my sweet Laksmi. I hadn't told her about anything and probably never will. At the airport, I got me a jade sculpture talisman of Yu-huang just in case. I was going to have a child after all. I returned to the city of silver streets and promise, my new *laojia*, my new homeland in the new world.

The final Chongqing–Tibet leg will wait – someday I'll be ready.
“Wo hui lei le!”

* * *

Alhambra

They all saw her beauty,
Could they hear her loneliness?

Decked like a bride,
Marbled in white lace
Like Taj, her distant cousin,
In bejewelled solitude.

Decked like a bride,
For whom does she wait thus?
They all saw her beauty,
Could they hear her sighs?

Sighs echoing through
A stagger of columns,
Exploding bouquets of arabesques,
An opera of fountains.

Rich in red
Delicate in white
Beauty so beauteous
We cry we know not why,

She cannot hear the brag
Of the raucous present.
Thankfully: she listens for eternity
To the past.

Decked like a bride,
For whom does she thus wait?

The Embroidered Chaddar

23 May 2014

My dearest Mother-in-law,

I am writing to apologise for breaking off the wedding with your daughter Khadija only a week before the date. I realise the commotion this created and cannot find words enough to beg for forgiveness. I write this so – if not forgiveness – I can aspire to a degree of understanding - so you can understand how I am entirely to blame.

I left Mauritius last month and I am sure you remember just how happy I was. But I wished to offer Khadija a beautiful chaddar, a chaddar with a conference of colourful birds. She has such a laugh, her eyes fluttering like birds about to take their flight. I myself felt as content as a bird that had landed on his favourite branch. After a life of flying, of never finding a place where to rest my wing: I had finally reached home. Home was in the shape of Khadija, felt like a mother's womb, a place of answers after a lifetime of hooked, crooked punctuations. She was shade after a lifetime of burning suns; Paradise, Paridayda, the Persian garden, after sundry Hells.

“You and I are the same,” Khadija had said to me. “We cannot afford to both go to India. You could and you choose my clothes for me.”

“You and I are one. This will be a spiritual journey, a journey into me, a journey into us.” I quoted the *Qur'an*: “The man is the garment of the woman; the woman is the garment of the man.”

“I shall buy your clothes and you will buy mine. We'll be as pure as Aadam and Hawwa.”
Dear mother, it was beautiful.

You know, don't you that I became an orphan very early? Father died before I was born. Well, I never told anyone what it is I remember most about my mother: that she used to run to cross the motorway.

We lived in Cassis. My mother used to sell *putu* near Caudan, next to where McDonald's is today. I remember my mother crossing the road near the Caudan roundabout between the *kovil* and the pagoda. Morning and afternoon: twice a day. Mother to my dying day will be this tiny, frail woman, with a huge *deksi* of *putu* on her head. Her large *horni* virtually wrapped her whole body up. She always clenched a piece of it between her teeth except when she was saying how much the *putu* was. She was as small as a tiny bird, yet she was a woman who would try to make herself even smaller and even more inconspicuous than was physically possible. In a large *horni*, my mother would bundle herself up into nothingness, forever afraid of disturbing others by her own existence, by her own being. When she

crossed the road, she would hold my hand in hers, and in her pulse beating I read her tension, her fear of crossing the road, of running across the motorway.

It wasn't so much the fear of death on the road that made her run. It was more the fear of the embarrassment hitting one of the rich people's cars would occasion. She was worried she might disturb; she was forever the servant of the rich man's home. She was worried that if a car hit her she would be splattered under it and was embarrassed that she would be unable to clean up after.

So she held my hand, her heart racing faster than what I then saw as the big cars and their arrogant drivers on the motorway (now I own a big car myself). Yet she was standing by a zebra crossing. It was her right to cross, and they would have to wait. But she was afraid of disturbing, afraid of offending, afraid of causing, afraid of being. She was afraid of breathing. Forever the pariah.

In my mind, she is forever running across zebra crossings. She couldn't face the angry looks of motorists, who had had to stop their cars, to let her pass. She ran and ran. She ran with guilt. Holding me with one hand, steadying the huge *deksi* of *putu* with the other. Running across the zebra crossing on the motorway.

One day Mother was hit in mid flight on the zebra crossing. She blushed all over. Even the *putu* blushed red, looking pathetic all over tarmac. Mother had reached the place where *putu* grew on trees, where you didn't need to carry them in a huge *deksi* over your head, across busy motorways, pleading to be allowed to cross.

As you know, in the end, I was brought up by my Uncle in Curepipe. He had a hardware shop and got others to run across main roads with long pipes and heavy washbasins for him. He was exceedingly kind to me and I was allowed to enjoy myself, to study and to make something of myself. I was now of respectable society. You could say Mother had planned it all, in her bashfulness, even her death on the motorway.

Now I drive a big car; I am an arrogant driver. I realise that I am of those who make the economy turn. I realise how important time is, how terrible when you are slowed down by a stupid woman with her *deksi* of *putu* on her head. Now I hoot and swear and flash and scream get-out-of-my-way-you-stupid-bastard-you-silly-cow.

As I grew older, I eventually developed nesting instincts. When Khadija introduced me to you, I adopted you right away. I needed a mother and you were the quintessence of the mother. Indeed, Khadija was also something of a mother to me. I started thinking about belonging. In my mind, I had found a branch.

Then I flew to India to buy Khadija's bridal clothes. I wanted Benarsi sarees and a touch of the Persian embroidery of that ethereal city, Banaras, built more of colour and shades than of bricks and mortar. Only the best will do for my Khadija. She was the only true branch I had

perched on. It felt more like a caravan trip to a faraway land to deserve my beloved. I felt this was a journey into us, into Khadija and I.

Banaras the city that blurs everything: life, death, land, river, rich, poor, Hindu, Muslim, music, silence, profit, spirit; Banaras the city built of shades and colours. In Banaras the Muslim weavers, new hands weaving old patterns, abolishing time. Deft hands, fingers like fabled birds, working through the cloth, making it translucent, injecting colours into the luminosity of silk. Hands like birds of Paradise melting solid into liquid. Transformation of the base into the sublime. Alchemy. The material poverty of such magicians part of a very Indian Universe of the Absurd.

In Banaras, I was paying others to weave my nest for me, in gold and silver thread repeating gestures so natural they seemed genetically learnt.

By the time I left Banaras and reached Delhi for my return plane to Mauritius, I felt I was getting transformed too. Some deft fingers were working through my being, turning solid into liquid. I found I couldn't focus and had gone elsewhere, into some other world. Things of certainty were beginning to seem blurred.

I hadn't realised that the trip back would be a trip into myself.

Dear Mother, an air pocket is a local region of low pressure that causes a plane to lose height suddenly. My plane was crossing the black waters of the Indian Ocean. The aeroplane was going as steadily as a good heart when all of a sudden the absolute erupted out of nowhere and took over.

One moment the aeroplane was full of politeness, solicitude, manners, would-you-like-anything-else-sir, and the next it was full of screaming, praying, scratches, peeing in pants, get-the-fuck-out-of-my-way. The aeroplane had suddenly entered an air pocket. It dropped. All of it, as we were to later learn, lasted one minute. We were projected towards the roof of the plane suddenly. Breathing aids dropped towards the passengers, bags falling off onto them. We had learnt to tame the unnatural, lulled ourselves into believing that the floor of an aeroplane, despite flying at inhuman altitudes, was a sort of earth. That 'unnatural' was returning and attacking us, waking up old and terrible nightmares. Were we ever meant to fly? Hadn't it been too long since we last had wings growing on our shoulder blades? Was it unnatural?

We fell. From the world of insouciance we were pulled by gravity.

When I recall all this, I get the sense of a split in myself. One aspect of me was hurtling to the ground at breakneck speed, while the other was living within time stilled, or rather slowed down considerably. It was both fearful and delicious. It was fearful because it was new, and

delicious because I could watch and study everything I did. While my body was scrambling desperately for a branch, my soul was soaring above. Are there two of us?

It felt strange: it felt like a chaddar falling off my face, lasciviously. I pulled lazily at the loose threads of the chaddar and all the beauty unfurled right in front of my eyes. I sat up to watch all the complex decorations reduced to long coloured cotton, silent calligraphy. The green fell off the yellow, fell off the ochre. Did I have time to feel that or is that a trick of memory? Or was it the soul, falling leisurely, like a lazy feather, while the heavy body thudded downwards with the aeroplane.

I saw a desert of white light with three swirling figures in black robes. In the middle, a mosque, all translucent blue, like a drop of ocean, with fountains of glass running clear water in the middle, liquefied nothing. Amid the cool freshness, people praying, bowing standing, and prostrating. Men and women, old and young, each lost in his self. Yet, there was no one to lead the prayers. There was no niche, no Imam, no baton. Was that what gave freshness, or was it the water from the fountains singing its own inner music?

At one point, a nanosecond before the plane was stabilised and we were all jerked back into a horizontal view of things, my 'soul' jumped back into my body. Yet somehow it seems it didn't fit back into its socket too tightly. There was a space of discomfort left.

Aeroplanes are alchemical machines of transformation. You walk in, agree to being suspended for a while in a sanitised world of sanitised smiles and sanitised food. When you walk out of it, your world has changed; your time has altered. In my own case, I had altered.

When my soul straightened its aquiline wings and flew back into my body I realised something too horrible for words. I will try to force it into language all the same. I found myself holding on to the seat in front as we stopped falling. I was clawing it: it was my branch. I saw a woman in my gripe. She was occupying the seat in front. I was holding the seat, but also, indifferently, her. I had lost all respect during the fall, even for a woman. We were mighty embarrassed.

Then I realised – backwards, a terrible truth. It rose like the smell of death on my breath. I realised something had died in me and couldn't at first quite put my finger on it. It looked at me from afar, an ectoplasm truth and I couldn't quite place the face. And then suddenly, recognition, as of some old face: my true face. I had realised the awful truth that while I fell, I had rather it was anyone else in my place. I realised I had rather it was you, I had rather it was my mother, and I had rather it was Khadija than myself on the plane at that moment. My survival instinct had taken the shape of a most horrid selfishness. I loathed myself. It was as if I had been born a rat and suffered from suriphobia myself.

Ever since my return, I haven't been the same man. I cannot find it in my heart to trust anyone since I cannot trust myself anymore. Lost in a desert of water, a sudden thirst for air, a thirst more liquid, less physical, more spirit, less patient. I seek breath. Now. Now. Now.

In my mind, I am now forever running across zebra-crossings, black-white, black-white, black-white, red-amber-green, red-amber-green, red-amber-green with my *deksi* of *putu* on my head, running lest the cars of the powerful hit me, knowing one will someday. But what can I do, a man's got to live. Simultaneously, I am now running the car of the powerful, forever running, lest I hit someone with a *deksi* of *putu*, worried I might hit me. How does one link all those worlds? Which the shade and which the light?

How would the eyes, your very own physical eyes, those frozen drops of salted ocean, see Paradise, what would they reflect in their waters? Would they make sense of it, would they be lost? Would they melt away, all tears all at once? How to teach them to see so differently without turning their waters into fires?

The caterpillar opens its twin embroidered chaddars and flies, morphed forever, beautiful for all to see. It weaves its beauty into the larger picture of the Duniya and looks into the eye of the patterned future. Did you ask how it must feel, inside its new gossamer diaphanosity, knowing it cannot return? Lost or Found?

With such knowledge I cannot marry your daughter.

Please understand: I wish to protect Khadijah from me.

Ever your son,

Saadi.

P.S: Please find herewith the embroidered chaddar. I found the one I was seeking for in Banaras. Could you make sure Khadija gets it?