



Chapter 5. Part One. Inside.

“Don’t worry, everything’s going to be alright,” Psyu rattles like an exploding firecracker, handing me a bag with toothpaste and soap through the bars. “I’ll help you find the best lawyer; here is your toothpaste, towel and a book called “The Unbearable Lightness of Being” by Milan Kundera. At least you’ll have something to do in your spare time. I have already informed the embassy and called your family. Your wife will arrive soon, I’ve told her everything. What happened to you? Tell me quickly, we’ve only got two minutes.”

“To cut a long story short, I didn’t touch anybody, I was at home. The cops came to my place, arrested me, didn’t find anything, said I was a drug dealer and locked me up here.”

“Alright, that’s enough. I will try to find out the details through my connections in the police department. I’ll come back tomorrow at the same time and tell you everything. Hang in there, I’m off. Kisses.”

Having watched the blonde disappear, I go back to counting paces around my cell. Psyu’s words, even though she is a certified crazy junkie, give me a little hope. Her husband is a long-term cocaine dealer with a reputation. Hopefully, she knows how to get people out of jail in such situations. Three years ago Murtinian, her husband, was arrested with a kilogram of cocaine and three hundred grams of MDMA. Having served only one month, he was released after bribing the authorities with thirty thousand dollars. Maybe I can get out that way, too. Sure enough, I don’t have thirty grand, but I am no Murtinian either.

The damn Sun is setting, finally. On a beach down by the ocean, you think of the Sun in a very different way. Sitting on the warm sand, enjoying the beautiful show, watching the huge ball of fire slowly sink into the water below the horizon, it wouldn’t occur to anybody to refer to the Sun like that. Now it is as if it’s mocking me, as it hides behind the tops of the trees. No matter what, today it has failed to nuke my brain. It becomes cooler and all of the scents become sharper. Ah there, it has finally disappeared behind the horizon. It smells of mold and shit in the cell. The stench of exhaust fumes coming from the street acts like a deodorant, masking the odor of human feces.

Chapter 5. Part Two. Outside.

Every country has its own inimitable smell. It is felt more acutely if you arrive in a new place by air. Every time I land in a new place, right after coming out of the plane I take a few seconds to inhale the new unfamiliar smell, so that it stays in my memory. My brain interprets it as foreign for only a few hours. Then it gets used to it and stops noticing the difference. Stepping onto the runway, I immediately feel the smell of this country. It smells of shit, exhaust fumes, incense and spices. The air is so hot and humid that it makes me cough.

“Well, hello, India!”

I need to take a cab and find a hotel. One week before my departure, I spent the whole evening sitting in my house in Russia with Alex Nicaragua, listening to the stories about his incredible adventures in India. As a result, I made a very important conclusion – you cannot trust anybody in this wonderful country. Looking at a crowd of cab drivers at the airport exit, I immediately recall the story about his first experience of getting around India. “Upon arrival, be sure to only take the government cabs,” Alex told me, making a very serious face, as if somebody could kidnap me. “Otherwise they will take

you miles away to visit their distant relatives who have a couple of vacant rooms. They can put a ‘Hotel’ sign on any booth and rent it out.” “No, it won’t happen to me,” I thought then, laughing at Alex’s adventures. Nevertheless, I took notes of the hotel names, districts, cities and various pieces of advice from the experienced traveler, Nicaragua. Coming out of the big glass doors, I realize that I have made my first mistake. All the government-owned companies providing cab services are located inside the airport, the area I have just left behind me. Well, well, Alex, thanks a lot for your advice, but it looks like I will have to make my path on Indian soil. No sooner have I stopped for a couple of moments to think it over, than a crowd of Indians gathers around me, making a lot of noise and grabbing me by my sleeves. “Hare Rama hotel, Hare Rama,” I hear a familiar name that Alex had mentioned. “Hare Rama, Main Bazaar,” a Muslim, terrorist-looking cab driver shouted loudly.

“Hare Rama, how much?”

“Five hundred.”

Hearing this, all of the surrounding cab drivers, like a bunch of parrots, start to shout “Hare Rama” and “five hundred.”

“OK,” I say, pointing my finger at the bearded Muslim, who is wearing a white cap that somehow sticks to his head. In a moment, the crowd surrounding me becomes silent and I am no longer of interest to them.

“It won’t fall apart, will it?” I ask the driver in Russian, pointing at a big rusty hole by the passenger seat.

“Don’t worry, sit down please. Welcome to India.”

Driving around Delhi at night reminds me of a scene from a horror movie, with the main character landing in a city where all the people are zombies. The Full Moon, mist crawling along the ground, a suspicious looking cab driver with red half-closed eyes, and people outside the window, moving slowly like zombies. The exhaust fumes make my throat itch. People wrapped in newspapers and dilapidated clothes are to be seen on most of the sidewalks. The piles of trash make me think that the city doesn’t have any street cleaners. Only the sleepy cows wandering about destroy the harmony of this scene of urban collapse. How did they get here? What do they eat? A city with a population of twenty-five million people. It is hard to imagine cows wandering around Moscow at night. According to my friend, we should have reached the hotel within fifteen minutes, yet we have been driving for half an hour along suspicious narrow streets surrounded by Indian slums.

“Hey, monster, where is Hare Rama hotel?” I reach for the driver’s shoulder in panic, suspecting him of some sort of trick.

“Don’t worry, five minutes,” the Bin Laden look-alike driver mutters, rubbing his red eyes with his fists.

In a few minutes the driver stops the car at a strange building, on which ‘Mohammed Hotel’ is written roughly in English on a grimy wall.

“Very good hotel, toilet, hot water, good quality, cheap,” the driver says in an Indian accent, giving me a smile that exposes his mouth full of rotten teeth, pointing at a door that hangs off its hinges.

“What do you mean, Mohammed hotel? You bastard, take me to Hare Rama, right now!”

“Don’t worry, this is my brother’s hotel, good quality. Hare Rama bad, no room in Hare Rama.”

Immediately he dials a number on his cell phone, handing it to me with the explanation: “This is the number of the Hare Rama hotel, you can ask them

yourself, they will confirm that they don't have any vacant rooms." I take the cell phone and hear someone telling me some bullshit in Hindi.

"What the hell is going on, you bastard? Where have you taken me? Take me to Hare Rama right now, or else I will call the police."

"No police, sir, I will take you right to Hare Rama. It is nearby, only a fifteen-minute drive."

The Hare Rama hotel proves to be even scarier than the Mohammed hotel. My friend must have played a joke on me, sending me to this hole, I think, getting out of the rusty car. I should pay him back next time I see him. The hotel, if you could call it such, is situated on a street that was about a yard-wide. I have to drag my stuff down the dark street for another hundred yards from the place where the car stopped. Alright, well, I'll have to spend the night here. According to Alex, this is the place where all travelers stay at the beginning of their Indian trip. Observing the degree of cleanliness and general level of feng shui in the foyer, I conclude that people traveling around India are ascetic and not very demanding. The walls in the hotel must have been painted once in a hundred years, with the paint chosen by name rather than by color. Judging by the mold and chunks of paint falling off the walls, it has not been redecorated in at least fifty years. I give the receptionist five dollars and receive a key to a room with unwashed bed sheets with holes in them, and a noisy fan above the bed. It's a good thing there is water. I need to take a shower and get a bite to eat. "Hot water must be a luxury here," I think as I turn on the only tap, with water that is barely warm. Having taken a shower, I go downstairs in order to find out whether a foreign tourist can get any food at one am. The receptionist is lying in a chair, sleeping peacefully.

"Excuse me. Hey, dude, wake up! Eat, eat, is there anything I can eat here at this hour?" I say to the sleepy man, who stares back at me.

The Indian, who is only wearing an old shirt with holes and underwear, regains consciousness and starts trying to work out what I want. I have to explain it to him using mime. At last, the Indian laughs and shakes his head from side to side.

"Yes, yes, go up," he points his finger at the roof of the hotel. "We have a restaurant there; if the cooks are not asleep, they will feed you."

What I find on the roof reminds me of the hole-in-the-wall places from the pre-Perestroika era, which were never swept or mopped. It must be generally accepted in this country to only remove trash when it blocks the way, I think, moving empty bottles from the nearest table. The place is empty. Stepping toward the passage leading to the kitchen, I see several characters in oily clothes with holes, lying down on the tables preparing to go to sleep. Usually every time I travel abroad I manage to explain everything I need to people using my bad English. Here, for the second time in one night, I have to demonstrate my skills in mime to get my message across. This time it lasts twice as long as the conversation with the receptionist. The kitchen zombies refuse to understand what I am demanding, or pretend not to understand me, enjoying the free midnight performance. They must take me for somebody else! Russians don't give up so easily. Trying my hardest not to touch the oily kitchenware, I squeeze through the door and point my finger at a huge black pan with fried rice and vegetables: "For me, one." A fat Indian realizes there is no escape, spits his chewing tobacco onto the floor and starts to warm up some food for me. God, where the hell am I!? The fried rice with vegetables is completely devoid of taste. The only thing I can feel is hot chili with an odor of rancid oil. "How can they eat this?" I think, chasing each spoonful with water. "Or did they put so much chili in on purpose, so that I wouldn't bother them again at night?" I decide to find a good place to eat first thing in the morning. And buy some hashish, too. I can only accept this type of reality if I'm high. Just like any other kind of reality. Hundreds of flies buzzing in a cloud over my plate try to get into my mouth. After force-feeding myself half of the dish, I proceed straight to my room to escape the pesky flies and smiling cooks watching me eat. I need to go to sleep. I've got a new interesting day ahead of me. Hopefully, this nightmare will end when I leave the hotel building.