

## **Trains and boats and planes are passing by They mean a trip to ... India (no boats)**

Confucius is supposed to have said that 'A trip of a thousand miles begins with a single step.' Maybe so, but then things were simpler in those days. The trip Deirdre, my wife, and I made to India to meet up with our daughter, Zoe, in February 2009 began with the realisation that we would be travelling to Heathrow Terminal 3 on Friday 13th at the peak of the rush hour. That meant that one third of the population of London would be travelling on the underground at the same time as us and doing its damndest not to relinquish space to our overstuffed bags. That was when we discovered that locked deep inside each of us is the reincarnation of a warrior pilgrim, ready to slay anyone who stands in the way of our progress.

One thousand years ago – in warrior-pilgrim's first incarnation – it was necessary to achieve grace and spiritual enlightenment through suffering. These days spiritual enlightenment does not enter into the equation but the suffering sure as Hell does. And when once it was God who saw all men and women as equal now it's the flat toned airline staff with their corporate, wipe on, wipe off smiles who will instruct you in the ways of humility.

At the airport the baggage check in lady asks: 'Did you pack your own bag?' in tones that suggest that at any moment she might slap me and call me a liar, forcing me to fess up to all kinds of heinous crimes and I'll swear as she looks up she can read in a thought bubble above my head: No, three retired glamour models supervised by my butler did it, but I say 'Yes,' and am stamped through. Then on to be searched and tested for exploding devices and metal objects before having my shoes removed and x-rayed. All are subjected to the same indignities. All have their shoes removed and are scanned and searched, even the toddler who cannot have been walking for more than six weeks and the old woman in a wheel chair.

At each stage we are tested and found worthy to pass to the next level. We are allowed to travel the 5,900 miles to Delhi where our papers are subjected to even closer scrutiny than we are and my handwriting is corrected by an official who clearly believes that bad Ss and Es should be grounds for refusing entry to his country. But he reluctantly stamps us through so that we can travel another 1,500 miles to Darjeeling.

## **Some thirty inches from my nose The frontier of my person goes**

Outside, Delhi is a city of unmarked roads, so potholed and pitted that cars have to swerve around them to protect their suspension. It's a place where brightly sari-ed women ride side saddle on motorbikes carrying whole families. (Coming out of the airport I marvel at the sight of Dad driving a small engine bike, Mum sits behind, a child is positioned on the luggage rack – that's three – then a small boy, pretending to drive sits in front of his father, Mum holds a baby and another sits on a lap. No one wears a crash helmet.) This is a city in which right of way goes to the biggest and the strongest, a place where size matters. A lifetime of pictures and reports may have prepared me for the begging and the poverty but nothing, nothing on this earth, could have prepared me for the shear, relentless, chaotic brutality of the place.

It is not that it's constantly in your face or even that complete strangers cross into your personal space. It's that there is no personal space. That sense of privacy I have always carried with me, as, I suspect, has everyone I have ever met, is simply not there, not even conceived of. A London boy, born and bred, who would rather visit Amsterdam, Rome, Paris, Milan, New York, Baltimore, Athens or Madrid than their countries beaches or picturesque nooks I thought I understood cities and their ways. I was wrong. The cities I know are places of order. Roads are marked, indicating conventions and rules about where people drive and which side of the road people drive on. It took me two days to realise that people are supposed to drive on the left and for me Delhi's lack of road markings of any kind quickly became indicative of a systemic anarchy.

There is, of course, the famous Indian liking for bureaucracy which is just the flip side of the same thing. Where else in the world do you have to turn up at a train station twenty four hours early at a train station to confirm your place has been bought and paid for? I ask you, what kind of madness is that? And when you do turn up the touts and cons will tell you that the ticket office has moved and that you should follow them. Don't even go there. We got lucky. An old hippy saviour rescued us and guided us up the right crappy staircase, past the sleeping pile of rags with the puddles of urine and we got to the right place.

## **The train I ride on is one hundred coaches long You can hear the whistle blow a hundred miles**

Fear of getting lost or not being able to find our train meant that we got to the station at 8.15 for a 9.30 departure and the biggest, longest train I have ever seen was already waiting. No lights on, no one getting on or off, it's empty except for the massive silence that only vast machines have when still. So we find a place down at the bottom end of the platform where we can sit relatively undisturbed and watch monkeys walk along the top of some high railings from which they survey the goings on while children move in and out through the railings below them. There are dogs too. These platform dogs are better fed than the mangy creatures we saw outside and have the snooty, high-stepping appearance of Egyptian pharaoh hounds from another great continent. The children run and chase. Sacks of food arrive and are piled up, handcarts, laden with bottled water and soft drinks are unloaded. We wait. Then the train goes.

We begin to run up the platform, dragging our bags after us. We have to catch it. If we don't we will not make it to Darjeeling and we will not meet up with Zoe and then what? Unhappy scenarios play out in our heads as people laugh and ask the running tourists where they are going. But we ignore them - no time, no time. Then we stop running as the train disappears. We want to cry. Then ... our train time is still up on the notices! So we wait again, walking the platform, heart in mouth until it shunts back again and people begin to board.

We had a sleeper for two to ourselves where we rested properly for the first time since leaving London. Periodically someone would come in with immense courtesy. First he brought a flower and a sweet. Then lunch, a vegetarian curry with yoghurt and a banana. There was tea and supper and bed tea and breakfast and after each serving someone came in and swept and disinfected the floor and door to our compartment – our own space.

Through the frame of the window we watched the slowly, very slowly changing scenery outside. Just beyond the ragged mess that backs onto every city in the world were fields in which men, all at some distance from each other, squatted. At first, spoilt innocent Westerners that we are, we didn't realise what they were doing until Deirdre complained that every time she looked out of the window a man in a field dropped his trousers. Later when I had the need to perform the same bodily function I went down the corridor and found two doors marked TOILET. One was labelled EUROPEAN STYLE. The pernickety journalist

in me, always ready to spot mistakes in other people's subbing, decided it meant kind. I noticed nothing stylish about that interior. I did, however, notice two knobs on the wall. One was labelled FLUSH. The other, like a mushroom cap as wide as my hand and painted fire-engine red was labelled EMERGENCY FLUSH. I was tempted to press it but refrained and still occasionally wonder what kind of emergency would justify its use.

Back in our compartment the rural India of a thousand familiar images continues to pass. Cows browse by the rails, there are villages of round huts made of straw, whole fields are spread with drying linen, acres and acres of it as we pass fields of white, saffron and purple. Then at 1.10 (PM) I wrote in my notebook that I had seen a tractor at a level crossing so presumed that we were passing into a more prosperous region. We passed wetlands where water buffalo wallowed amongst the reeds in which large, long legged birds stood motionless. Night came and went and we were brought bed tea and still the land was flat. We passed tented slums that looked picturesque in the bright light, rice fields, children who turned cow dung into bricks with their naked hands and queues of vast painted trucks backed up at the crossings as we passed. Everything was multiplied and repeated. Sitting by the window taking pictures I learned that if I missed one I would be able to take the same thing again soon. It was good for a slow witted photographer like me but it also occurred to me that perhaps it's not good when you feel that every image, every view and every person can be substituted for something, or someone, similar.

**And if this train runs me right  
I'll see my baby tonight  
Because I'm 900 miles from my home**

Our taxi had taken us from the train station to Darjeeling. In two and a half hours we had gone from flat lands where a cotton shirt was too hot to the Himalayan foothills where you were glad to have English woollies to put on. So now we waited in the semi-darkness of that first day for Zoe to arrive. We had been told where to wait and so we stood under a lamp post watching the big 4X4 Tatas coming in with their loads of gap year boys and girls squashed in and hanging off the backs and the roofs. We had been offered lifts and asked what we wanted and after we said that we were waiting for our daughter we were left in peace. (It wouldn't happen in Delhi – or London for that matter!) Then a text in Spanish. I don't speak Spanish but Zoe had done it for her GCSEs. 'What does it mean?' I asked Deirdre. 'I don't like it.' She said. That was bad. There was no good reason for her to be writing in Spanish,

a language that never gave her any pleasure. I still didn't understand what it meant.

It got dark quickly and then it seemed that the flow of taxis almost stopped altogether. We didn't know what to do. Zoe was on her way. We were sure of that but we did not know exactly where she was and could not know when she would get in so we waited and worried and looked at our mobiles, as if that would help, and we – or rather I – did a lot of pacing while the shopkeepers began to shut up shop, padlocking down shutters with padlocks as big as fists and the taxis began to drive away empty.

Then a porter appeared. He looked like the every Sherpa you have ever seen a picture of and said: 'You are looking for your baby?' 'Our daughter,' I said but daughter was not a word he knew. 'Your baby,' he said holding his hand out to indicate someone's height 'over here,' and he led us down the hill to where she was weighting then stood to one side as we hugged. I reached for Zoe's rucksack with one hand but was unprepared for its weight and almost dropped it but before it could reach the ground there was another hand above mine on the strap, stronger than mine and he looked at me and smiled. I nodded and he put it on his back, asked where we were staying – The Deckling – and powered away so that I had to almost run to keep up as we left Deirdre and Zoe a little way behind.

Going through the dark streets I suddenly wanted to cry but stopped myself. Something was wrong. Zoe was here but something was wrong. The we went up a steep hill and, arriving at our hotel, had to climb 100 steps to reception. The porter powered up them. I slogged behind, the other two following. Inside the hotel I asked him 'How much?' to which he replied 'One hundred rupees.' He looked surprised when I gave him R200 and repeated 'one hundred' so I pointed at a Zoe and said 'You found my daughter' at which he smiled like a man satisfied with the knowledge that he has a happy client and left.

Two days later Zoe was emailing friends and was sending an E to an old teacher of hers, Jeremy. 'Would you like to hear what I wrote she asked?' We both said yes and so she read and we heard of the fat monks she didn't want to talk to on the aeroplane from Nepal who took her bag and wouldn't give it back without a kiss, the stoned taxi driver, the policeman who twice beat him up for overcharging her and then made her get back in the same taxi telling her that if he tried anything she was to ring him on her mobile. She didn't tell him that it wasn't working. Then there was the long, too fast drive to Darjeeling where we were waiting, although the end was not in her story, which is as it should be.

Were I a different kind of father, a different kind of man, I would have gone looking for those men. Even now, when it's been a long day and alcohol and anger are washing through my veins I feel I should have hunted them down and... but then I would have been little better than the fat monks, the driver or any of them. The truth is that 21st century warrior pilgrim may be prepared to fight to the death for a few feet of space on a rush-hour tube but when it comes to my family it's the porter I still want to find. I looked for him every time I went outside for ten days but never saw him again.