

## India Syndrome by Umi Sinha

When Eleanor wakes, the door on the outside of the compartment is swinging open. She can hear banging metal and see dry rocky earth rattling past. For a few moments she lies looking at it, dazzled by the brilliant sunshine, first dreamy, then puzzled. Her mind moves sluggishly, dazed by the March heat, which is already intolerable. Her mouth feels furry and her T-shirt is sticking to her. She stumbles out of the bottom bunk and, holding tight to the leather strap that supports the upper bunk, leans out into the blasting heat and pulls the door shut.

'Graham?' She looks up at the top bunk. It's empty, just a crumpled sheet with his clothes neatly folded at the foot. Puzzled, Eleanor looks at the door to the corridor. It's still bolted from the inside; after the warnings they'd locked both doors last night before they went to sleep.

She runs back to the door she's just pulled shut, tears down the sliding pane in the top half and sticks her head out. Dry earth dotted with dusty scrub and jagged grey rocks stretches to the horizon. There is no living thing to be seen.

Her breath is accelerating, coming in gasps. She sits back down on her bunk and tries to be calm. *Think, just think: if he hasn't gone into the corridor - and he can't have gone into the corridor because the door's still locked from the inside - then he must have gone out through the other door....* Her mind rejects the possibility. She goes over it again. It makes no sense.

She gets up and - absurdly - looks under her bunk, as though he might be playing hide and seek. She gives a hysterical giggle. She's dreaming - *that's it, it's just a nightmare*. But she knows it isn't.

As she struggles not to panic, to think logically, the train begins to slow. She hears the commotion of people in nearby compartments shuffling to their feet, suitcases and bedrolls being dragged from under seats, children being roused. Red turbaned coolies run past the window shouting and jostling each other. She stands up and looks out. They're coming into a station.

The train stops and a small boy thrusts a basket heaped with fruit under her nose - 'Mangoes, sir? Very good. Guavas, papaya, very good sir. You buy? Yes plis?' She draws her head back. 'You want water sir? Give me money, I get for you.'

She looks down. The camping water bottles, which were standing on the shelf below the window, are missing. So are Graham's flip-flops. She checks his bunk again. He was sleeping in his underpants; his passport, credit cards and travellers cheques are still in the money belt attached to his trousers. His mobile is in the pocket.

*You silly cow! How could you have imagined that Graham would jump out of a moving train?* She remembers now that the train stopped several times during the night. At one of those stops he must have got out to fill the water bottles and the train started without him. She cannot help smiling at the picture of him, dressed only in his underpants, running down the platform after them.

'You want water sir?' The boy is impatient now.

'No, it's all right.' They never buy bottled water. Graham insisted that bottling water was depriving poor people and farmers of drinking water, that access to safe drinking water should be a basic human right. She smiles at the boy and hands him five rupees. He snatches it and runs off before she can change her mind.

She goes to find the guard. At the end of the carriage she sees him talking to the bearer.

'Bekfasht soon Madam,' the bearer says.

She says to the guard. 'My husband - he's gone, left behind.'

The guard looks puzzled. 'Gone?' he says, rolling the word in his mouth as though the taste is new to him.

'Gone... he's not on the train... he's missing. I think he got off at a station last night to get some water, and he must have missed the train...' She stops. They are looking at her blankly.

'Come.' She beckons them to follow. At the door to the compartment she points to Graham's bunk and makes the universal gesture of inquiry - palms upturned, fingers spread, accompanied by a frown. Then she points at the door to the outside. They look obediently from the bunk to the door and back at her.

'Look. This morning, I found the door open.'

'Door open,' the bearer says eagerly, recognising the words. 'You want open door?'

'No. The door was open this morning.' She tries again, 'In the morning, door open... no husband...' she points at the top bunk. 'Where is he?'

They look bewildered.

She remembers something she and Graham laughed at in yesterday's Times of India. An article about a murder had ended with a stock phrase they had encountered several times before in crime reports: 'The culprit is absconding.' It had become Graham's catchphrase. Wagging his head from side to side he would repeat the phrase in a Peter Seller's Indian accent.

The relief has made her lightheaded. She says firmly, 'I want the police.'

They look alarmed. 'Police?'

The bearer shakes his head. 'Here no police, madam. Police – Kolkata.'

They're right of course. It's where Graham will head for. He'll get on the next train and meet her there. She smiles, picturing him trying to explain to a bewildered guard why he has no clothes or money. He'll manage though - he's resourceful and he knows India. He's been several times before and even speaks a little Hindi. It's why he chose to honeymoon there, to show her the country he loves.

The bearer smiles back at her and exchanges a dubious glance with the guard. They obviously think this is some strange Western idea of a joke.

After they've gone she packs Graham's things into his rucksack, speaking aloud to him wherever he is. *It's all right, it'll be all right.*

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At Calcutta station she waits. She asks the advice of the stationmaster who tells her not to worry. He will put out an APB. If her husband is stuck on a station somewhere the staff there will wire Calcutta and be authorised to send him on without a ticket. 'Not to worry, Madam. Must be he is on his way already.'

She checks into the railway hotel but spends the day meeting every train that uses that line, wanting to be there to greet him when he arrives. She still feels panicky, her mind keeps returning to that moment when she realised that he was missing. If only he'd taken his mobile... if only he'd agreed to use bottled water he wouldn't have had to get off. She's forced to drink it now and much prefers the taste to water sterilised with tablets.

She looks around the station, welcoming the distracting bustle and noise: shouts and slamming doors echo round the concourse; red-turbaned porters push trolleys to and fro shouting warnings; businessmen with briefcases and paunches that bulge over their belts waddle on and off the trains; women in bright saris with splay-toed feet and covered heads squat on the platform beside their bags and cloth bundles; children run around screaming; passengers mob ticket inspectors. For twenty minutes before the departure of each train she witnesses an incipient riot, there are theatrical cries of protest and shrieks of rage; then, with just minutes to go, passengers mount the train, the luggage is stowed, the porters protest vociferously that they are being robbed but accept the notes they are offered, besieged inspectors emerge from the angry, arm-

waving crowd looking phlegmatic, the guard blows the whistle and the train departs on time. The process is repeated with the next train and the next. She suspects that in the midst of all the shouting and gesticulation no-one's adrenalin level has risen.

*It'll be all right, she repeats to herself over and over. It'll be all right.*

She's still there when it gets dark, watching people making their ablutions at the water fountains, unpacking their bedrolls and bedding down for the night. She's taken a room in the station hotel but she can't bear to go to it. Outside, in the dark streets, lanterns burn on the pavements; people sit around cooking their dinner on kerosene stoves, talking and laughing. They have no home but they don't seem unhappy.

A woman comes over to her proffering a freshly cooked pakora on a slotted spoon, while fanning it with her other hand to cool it. Eleanor takes it. It's hot, and when she bites into it the spicy oil floods her mouth. She's hungry and it's delicious. The woman signs to ask if she wants another. She shakes her head and says the Hindi word for 'thank you' that Graham taught her. The woman squeezes her arm sympathetically before turning away. She wonders if they think she's a beggar or just see her sadness.

Tearfully she returns to her dreary room, to a bare light bulb in which the orange filament glows dully, a dusty stone floor, a noisy fan and a lavatory that stinks. She feels lonely, marooned in this dreary room where time moves sluggishly. She envies the people in the street. They have each other and in the end that's all that matters. *I mustn't forget this. If... when... he comes back, I mustn't forget.*

Since they arrived in India her moods have swung from one extreme to the other: shock at the poverty and filth on the streets; awe at the beauty of the rock carvings and

temples; annoyance at the people who pester her to change money or buy carpets; pity and repulsion for the beggars and lepers and men with elephantiasis who squat on the pavements, exhibiting their sores and grotesquely swollen limbs; warmth for the ordinary people who smile and strike up conversations. Eleanor understands why Graham loves India, why he keeps returning to it. It is a place one cannot be indifferent to. The sights, sounds, smells, tastes, colours, the heat on her skin, has made her feel as though a membrane between her and the world has been ripped away, leaving her more exposed to both joy and pain.

She thinks back to the start of their honeymoon in Mumbai. Graham and she spent the first three nights at the Taj Hotel; they'd decided to treat themselves before Graham showed her 'the real India'. The old part of the hotel had an imposing staircase with elaborate wrought iron railings, topped with a dome painted with stars. Their old-fashioned room had mint green plaster walls and a four-poster bed raised on a dais in the middle of the room. On the balcony, which overlooked the swimming pool and the lawned garden, was a swinging seat suspended from the ceiling.

They'd felt the romance even though they knew that everything they were looking at had been lovingly restored after the terrorist attack in 2008. Part of the ground floor was still walled off, and they could hear hammering behind it as workmen repaired the damage caused by fire and bullets. The knowledge that people had died in those marble corridors, possibly even in the room they were in, made them feel lucky to be alive, and in that ridiculous Maharajah's bed they made love with an intensity and an urgency she had never experienced before.

Now in this hotel room terror alternates with hope as she imagines their reunion. Now she wishes for that membrane back, for some protection from these raw emotions.

She sleeps at last and dreams of Graham, of leaning through that carriage door into that rattling void and seeing him standing waving and calling to her, getting smaller and smaller as the train pulls away. He is telling her to jump, but she is too afraid. Shaking, she pulls herself back from the brink, wakes, cries, dozes off again and, as the sun warms the room, dreams of his hands on her body, of his lips on her skin, reaches out for him and wakes.

In the morning she returns to the station. When he has not arrived by noon, she goes to the police.

'And you did not have any argument with your boyfriend?' The police officer looks at her crumpled shorts and T-shirt with distaste, obviously marking her down for a hippie.

'My husband. No... we've only been married a few weeks. We're on our honeymoon.'

He shrugs. 'When he is ready he will come.'

'But he had no reason to go! We didn't have a quarrel and I've got everything - his passport, his wallet, his credit cards. He didn't even have any clothes with him - just his underpants and a pair of flip-flops.'

The police inspector shrugs. 'When people are smoking hashish...'

'Graham was not a drug addict! We're both teachers. Look, have you checked the stations we stopped at that night? I know he got off to get water. Is it possible that he's still stuck somewhere?'

'Indian Railways already checked. There is no foreigner.'

'But he can't just have disappeared. He wouldn't just have left me without saying anything. I know he wouldn't.' Her eyes fill with tears.

The policeman looks at her more kindly. 'Never mind, Madam. He will turn up, one hundred percent sure.'

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At the British Consulate the official, Oliver Ryan, is young and public school. She knows from the way he looks at her that he has been warned she is inclined to be hysterical.

'I can understand why you're worried, Mrs Marriott,' he says, 'but this is a relatively safe country for travellers. You'd be surprised how many people come to India and then disappear. It's a psychological condition called 'India syndrome'. They're usually just on a quest for enlightenment.'

'Why does everyone think he's run off? We've only just got married!'

'Look, Eleanor – can I call you Eleanor? All I'm saying is that we have no reason to think anything bad has happened to him. If he's - , ' he hesitates, ' - if anything serious had happened we'd know by now.'

She forces herself to ask. 'Have they searched the track along the route? I mean if he did fall out of the door?'

'It seems unlikely. I mean he didn't sleepwalk or anything?'

'No.'

'Indian Railways assure me they've searched the relevant stretch of track. They've found nothing. He's probably found shelter somewhere – people are really very hospitable. He's bound to turn up for the flight home; you've got his ticket after all.'

So she returns to Mumbai, although her parents urge her to come home. She can't afford to stay at the Taj but she tells reception where to find her and moves into the YWCA nearby. At the British Consulate, which she visits every day, they assure her that the Bengal police have thoroughly searched the track and are following several up several leads of Europeans being sighted in the area. He suggests that she call Graham's parents in England in case they've heard from him. They haven't, but their fear, added to hers, becomes almost unmanageable; she finds herself trying to reassure them, minimizing her anxiety, saying she's sure he's okay really. Faced with their terror, she understands how everyone she meets feels obliged to do the same for her.

By now she no longer knows what to think. She remembers the few disagreements they had - the time she was snappy at Elephanta when they ran out of water and he wouldn't buy a bottle so she'd bought her own. Had he got fed up with her and decided to go off on his own? But he wouldn't have left without taking anything, and surely he couldn't be cruel enough to let her worry like this? She imagines him hurt, dragging himself around that barren landscape with no food or shelter from the sun. He could be dying while nobody is taking her seriously.

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The day of their flight comes and Graham is still missing, so Eleanor flies home alone. Sitting on the plane with an empty seat beside her she remembers how, on the way out, they'd talked excitedly of all the things they'd do, the places they'd see. He'd wanted to visit Sikkim. They'd been on their way there when he disappeared.

Back in England she writes to her MP who takes up her case with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office but months pass and there's no news. She can't sleep and she's losing weight. She takes the rest of the summer term off from her teaching and her doctor prescribes Valium. At first people are sympathetic but as time passes she begins to feel like a nuisance. Her MP, the official at the Foreign Office dealing with the case, her doctor, even her friends start to seem irritated by her persistence. She feels as if she's rubbing their noses in their helplessness, their inability to do anything.

'There's really no point in you ringing me, Mrs Marriott. I promise we'll let you know if we hear anything,' the Foreign office man said the last time she phoned. She put down the phone and burst into tears.

She doesn't go back to work at the school they both taught at, gives up the flat she shared with Graham and moves back to live with her parents.

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It's three days after Christmas when she gets the call.

'It's the Foreign Office,' her mother says holding the phone out.

'What did they say?'

'He wouldn't tell me... insisted on speaking to you.'

She takes the phone. A voice tells her he is sorry but they've found the body of a European on the railway track on the route where Graham went missing. 'It seems you may have been right, Mrs Marriott. It looks as though your husband got off the train and it started before he could get back on. He must have grabbed hold of something on the carriage and hung on. Maybe he fell asleep or couldn't hold on any longer - it's impossible to say - but it looks as though he fell onto the tracks and the rest of the train passed over him. I can't tell you how sorry I am.'

She feels nothing. This must be shock, she thinks, as she fixes her eyes on a poinsettia in a china bowl on the hall table. *I'll never forget those flowers now, or that bowl.*

'But they said they'd searched the tracks.'

'India's a big country, Mrs Marriott. There are hundreds of miles between some stations and most of that is open country. His body could have rolled down into a gully or into bushes or been dragged off by wild animals. I should emphasise that we're not sure yet that it is your husband's body. It was being held in a local hospital morgue but it's on its way to Calcutta where the Consulate will arrange for DNA samples to be taken to compare with his parents'. So it isn't definite yet, but I thought I should let you know that there's a strong possibility that it's your husband.'

'I'll fly out tomorrow.'

'There's really no point, Mrs Mariott. After all this time identification would be difficult. If the DNA match is positive we'll ship your husband's body home.'

She books her flight the same day. It seems wrong that he should complete the train journey and not find her there. Still unable to cry, she feels closer to him than she has since he went missing. She can picture it now and, sad as it is, it's a connection between them that she felt she'd lost. She hasn't taken her Valium since she heard.

When she arrives at the Consulate she's kept waiting for a long time before anyone will see her. People she passes in the corridor look at her oddly and then away. The anxiety comes back. When at last she's ushered in to see Oliver Ryan he looks as pale and uncertain as she feels. After a stammering greeting and offer of tea, which she refuses, he finally says. 'I'm so sorry, Mrs Marriott – Eleanor - but there's a been a dreadful mistake.'

While he turns towards the window, the feeling of unreality creeps back. She fixes her eyes on the picture of the Queen that hangs between the windows then looks away.

'What is it?'

'I really don't know what to say.' He takes a deep breath. 'It appears that they made a mistake at the hospital where your... where the body of the man we thought might be your husband, was held. The body they've sent us is not that of a European but an unidentified Indian who was found dead on the line.' He pauses and looks at her as though expecting her to say something. She waits. 'I'm afraid... I'm so sorry... I don't know how to tell you this... I'm afraid they've cremated the other body.'

She feels strangely distant, as though none of it matters. Nothing matters.

'So I'll never know? I'll have nothing?'

'I am so sorry... we asked... as soon as we realized. There were no possessions found and they kept nothing, not even a hair. We were meant to do the DNA test here, you see.'

'What happened to him?'

He looks confused. 'Who?'

'The man you have here.'

'Er... I believe he committed suicide.'

'I want to see him.'

'I... I don't think you understand, Mrs Marriott. It isn't *your husband's* body we have here. This is the body of an *Indian* man-'

'I want to see him.'

'I really don't think...'

'I want to see him.'

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When she looks down she sees a man in his thirties, about the same age as Graham, with a smooth dark complexion and thick black hair. His eyes are closed and the sheet is pulled right up to his neck. There is a faint sickly sweet odour in the room.

She examines him, noting his full lower lip, the small scar on his forehead, perhaps from some childhood accident, the way his brows meet in the middle. She thinks of his family, who do not know where he is, who must be experiencing those familiar sensations that have been with her for so long but have now gone. She looks at him again. Whatever drove him to do it, whatever his suffering, it's all over. Nothing can touch him now. Ignoring Oliver's shocked protest, she bends and kisses him on the forehead.

On the plane back to London they are keeping pace with the rising sun. Pink-tinged clouds float against the pale blue sky; the air is clean, the colours pure. She will never know what happened to Graham but she knows that whenever she thinks of him she'll remember the peaceful face of that Indian. She is going home with something after all.