

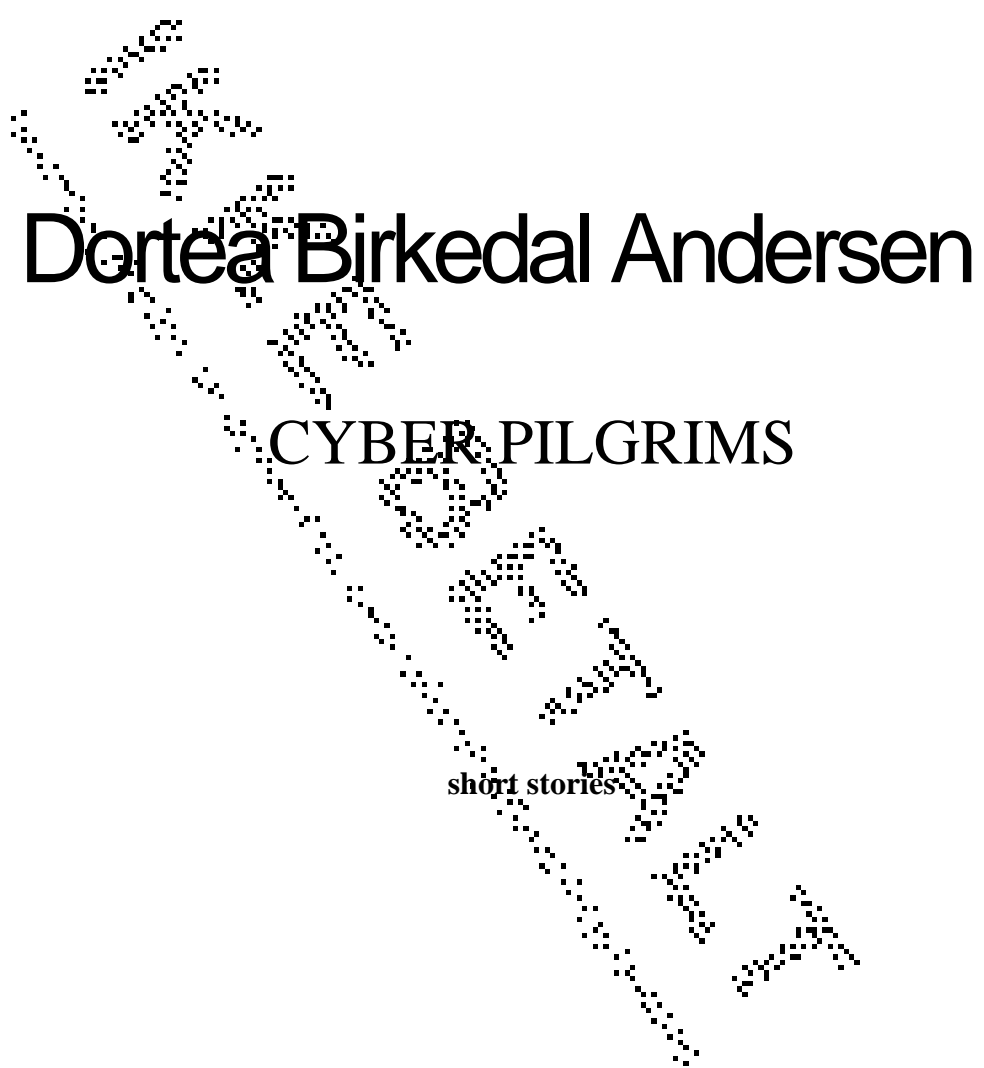
Dorteia Birkedal Andersen

CYBER PILGRIMS

short stories

**Net-Bog-Klubben
(autografisk manuskript)**

FOR BIRTH



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FOR BIRTH



UNDER A BEDSPREAD AT THE TAJ MAHAL

dorte a birkedal andersen

I bumped into Anja at the Supermarked just before closing time. She stood in front of the pasta section, eyeing farfalle and tagliatelli with that glazed, otherworldly look so common to influenza-victims, too stubborn to take to their beds.

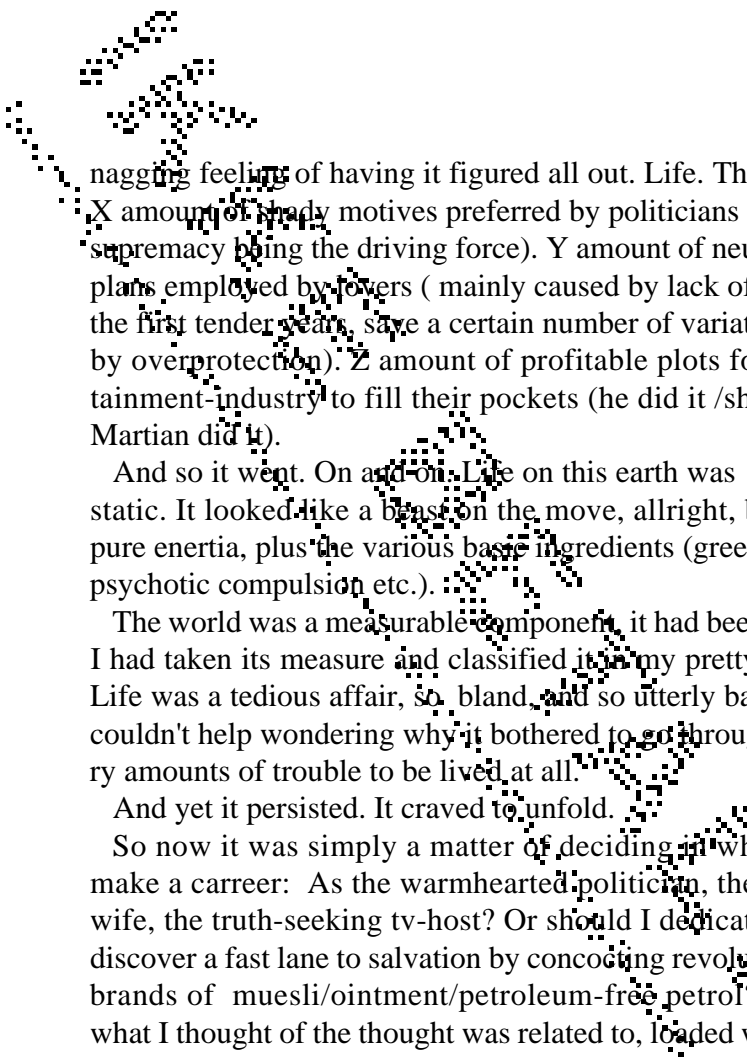
I was flabbergasted to see her. According to plan she should be by the sea, somewhere under a coconutpalm, sipping pina colada. She left for India, on a 3-months trip, less than a fortnight ago. What had happened? Why was she here?

Maybe it wasn't Anja after all. She showed no sign of recognition as our eyes touched across a pile of canned luncheon meat. Maybe she had a double, it's said that everybody has one, and this was hers, a very shy double at that. I wanted to say hello, but my gentle approaching sent her rushing off to hiding behind a tower of diet-coke crates. A most elusive specimen.

Nothing like Anja. Anja's the cheerfull type, chatty & confident. We used to take full advantage of waiting our turn at the checkout to debate each and every subject, be it local or global, and loud enough for all the shop to share. That's how I got her talked into going to India.

I love India. Must have been there 10 times or more. First time I was 19, had spent the summer saving up a little something by hoeing weeds in public parks and started my odysse hitchiking from the Statoil tank down the road.

A risky undertaking, some might say. But that's why I went. I wanted to give myself up to the world, let myself be shaken, x-rayed, cross-examined. Despite my young age I had long had the



nagging feeling of having it figured all out. Life. The structures: X amount of shady motives preferred by politicians (the lust for supremacy being the driving force). Y amount of neurotic game-plans employed by lovers (mainly caused by lack of care during the first tender years, save a certain number of variations piloted by overprotection). Z amount of profitable plots for the entertainment-industry to fill their pockets (he did it /she did it/ the Martian did it).

And so it went. On and on. Life on this earth was decodeable, static. It looked like a beast on the move, alright, but that was pure enertia, plus the various basic ingredients (greed, nepotism, psychotic compulsion etc.).

The world was a measurable component, it had been measured, I had taken its measure and classified it in my pretty little head. Life was a tedious affair, so bland, and so utterly banal that one couldn't help wondering why it bothered to go through such sorry amounts of trouble to be lived, at all.

And yet it persisted. It craved to unfold.

So now it was simply a matter of deciding in which field to make a career: As the warmhearted politician, the witty mid-wife, the truth-seeking tv-host? Or should I dedicate my life to discover a fast lane to salvation by concocting revolutionary new brands of muesli/ointment/petroleum-free petrol? No matter what I thought of the thought was related to, loaded with, stained by innumerable cliches.

I still had the secret hope that my hypothesis about the world as such would prove itself flawed. That my assertion, my analysis was fallacious from beginning to end. That someone, or something would show me, through their turbulence and spontaneity, that I

was mistaken. This never happened. Nor ought it to - according to my calculations.

India showed me Love at first sight. Its cacophony of colour and smells. Of forces pulling in all directions, each staging arguments in a language distinctly its own, and all of them complex. This divine and indescribable chaos, far surpassing the capabilities of even the most brilliant scientific brain.

Here no ultimate overview is possible, no final balance sheet ever completed. The picture has changed before the snapshot has even had time to set foot on the paper. All we can do is to immerse ourselves in fragments. Be flooded, delighted, perturbed. Acknowledge that classification is not the ultimate task. We need also to improvise.

That's the sort of thing I used to force-feed Anja, while waiting our turn in the queue, and always five minutes before closing time.

Here I was standing next to her double, her very shy double, chatting her up, while we crawled on ever so slowly towards the check-out, and the Branch Manager with his Brylcreamed hair flattened signs saying "beat this offer!" and dragged them back into the store in a most demonstrative way.

"It's me," said the double out of the blue, "it's me, Anja. I caught the first plane home."

"Anja," I replied, concentrating on the goods in my shopping trolley, I'd better not smile just yet. "How long did you stay?"

Now she herself was smiling.

"48 hours. But I'd made up my mind in the transit bus. Before even reaching Bombay proper. And when we got to the terminal I just ran across the road, into this huge very high-brow hotel..."

"The Taj Mahal?" I suggested.

"That's the one." She brushed some hair away from her face, arranged her groceries on the conveyer belt, paid, packed the shopping away and waited for me to do the same, talking all the while.

"The Taj. It's pricey. A ripp-off to be precise. But it's got air conditioning. And quilted bed spreads that one can hide under. The receptionist took care of the booking. And then I flew home."

"But why?" I asked, holding the door for her. We were the last to leave the shop. Plunged ourselves down on a green bench by the bus shelter. Anja opened a bottle of Freixenet (one of the simplest drinks to uncork without gadgets of any kind), took a sip, wiped the froth off the lip of the bottle and passed it on. I could see she was pondering how to present me with her "because".

"I'll just start at the beginning, okay?"

I nodded. I was in no hurry.

"Right. You've arrived. The very moment you step off the plane the heat and the stench hit you in the face. The air seems almost - palpable.

Weighed down by your sticky winter woollens, you totter across to the arrivals hall, it's interior consisting mainly of cement and linoleum tiles, plus incredible amounts of blasted neon-light-fittings kept in place by wire-meshing.

You find the building hideous, the decor nothing less than repellent. But once through passport control, baggage claim and all the other queues you look around again and perceive your opinion has changes. Concerning the architecture. Where previously you were on the verge of agitating for reinstatement of capital punishment, to have the architect done away with, you're now considering ordaining him the Order of the Elephant. Or something loftier still.

This place is cosy, once you get down to it. The mood predominantly friendly. It makes you feel safe.

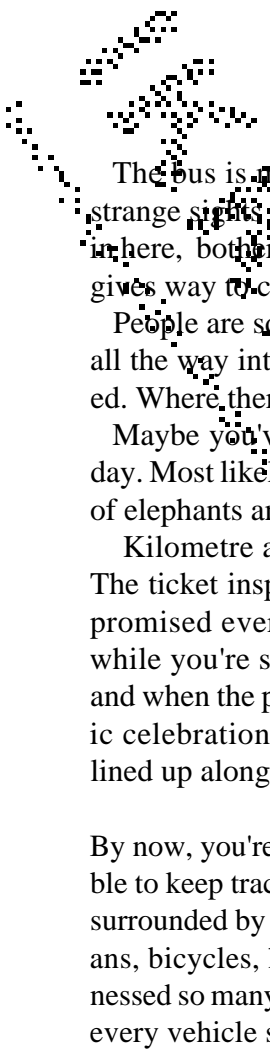
You have caught sight of the guarded glass doors, leading from International Arrivals out into the great unknown. Only customers to go, then they'll thrust you out into it.

You shuffle along, trying desperately to lose your place in the line, but one of the customs officials has taken a liking to you and while he's enjoying himself rummaging among your tampons and condoms and bras, you just stand there, numbed by fear, staring at the wall of human beings awaiting you beyond the door. They are dark. They are alien. They are packed close close together.

You've been pushed out. You are in the crowd now. Hordes of cab-drivers, rags bound around their heads, try to get a firmer grip on your luggage. Pimpily teenagers, equipped with headsets, tear at your sleeves to escort you off to obscure hotels. Sweat emms from the masses, like if in a sauna; your luggage weighs a ton, and screaming your head off won't change a thing.

As you're on the verge of fainting a safe-clad street sweeper motions you toward the airport bus with the tip of her broom. You take refuge inside its battered maw, unlace your boots and commence the changing of socks in a slow and orderly fashion in an attempt to calm yourself down.

It helps. It's still morning, remember. This thought cheers you up. The only thing that could make you feel worse than you already do, would be for it to be night and pitch-black, so that you wouldn't even be able to catch a glimpse of all the things scaring the wits out of you, seemingly for no reason whatsoever.



The bus is moving. Soon you've become absorbed by all the strange sights passing by outside its tinted windows. You're safe in here, bothered only by sticky seats and little by little your fear gives way to curiosity.

People are squating, shoulder by shoulder, lining the sidewalk all the way into town. The roundabouts, too, have been populated. Where there's no sidewalk they sit in the dust.

Maybe you've been lucky enough to arrive on a national holiday. Most likely the masses are waiting for colourfull processions of elephants and maharajas. Exactly. That's how it's got to be.

Kilometre after kilometre the people crowd by the roadside. The ticket inspector kindly helps you to open a window, you've promised everybody back home to take plenty of photos, and while you're struggling to sort out what festival this might be and when the procession is due - it dawns on you. This is no exotic celebration. This is everyday life in Bombay. The millions lined up along the roadside are all busy relieving themselves.

By now, you're so close to the city centre that it is no longer possible to keep track of what is happening on the pavement. The bus is surrounded by scooter-richaws, by trucks and by oxcarts, by pedestrians, bicycles, horse-drawn gharries. Never before have you witnessed so many people crammed into so little space. From each and every vehicle suitcases protrude. Crash helmets, infants, turbans, kneecaps, and in such profusion.

If only you hadn't asked the ticket collector to open that window. You've grown used to the stench of excrement, it's the pollution that's bothering you now. The city air seems devoid of oxygen; an aggressive chemical cocktail has taken its place. It settles into a

thin mean film on everything, including your face. Your skin feels like it's been treated with paint-strip.

You're having a go at closing the window, but to no avail. The bus has come to a halt at a crossroad and armies of beggars weave their way dimly through the multitude of vehicles to poke deformed limbs through YOUR open window. A one-legged ancient in greyish-white rags has made it into the bus itself, here he stands, dangling a half-rotten slice of pineapple right in front of your face, while wiping his bandaged hand in your pants.

And people back home think you are on holiday."

Halfway through her story Anja broke off.

"It was there, then, at that very moment that I decided to go back home as soon as I possibly could. Yep, I'll drink to that."

She lifted the bottle, knocked back the last mouthfull of sparkling wine. By now there were quite a few of us, there by the bus stop. A couple of job-less had joined us, each clutching a bottle of discount lager. A young blind guy with a carton of chocolate milk in his one hand and an aluminium wand in the other had settled in too. An elderly lady accompanied by a newly-brushed dachshund and a checkered shopping trolley had eased herself close, discreetly checking the trash-can for empties. Bus 14 came along and drove off again with no takers, as Anja continued her tale.

"So. What happened, then. What happened next?" prompted the blind guy, impatiently shaking his drink.

" Hmm, once I'd made up my mind to return as soon as I wanted, the urge to catch the very first plane home withdrew", Anja continued.

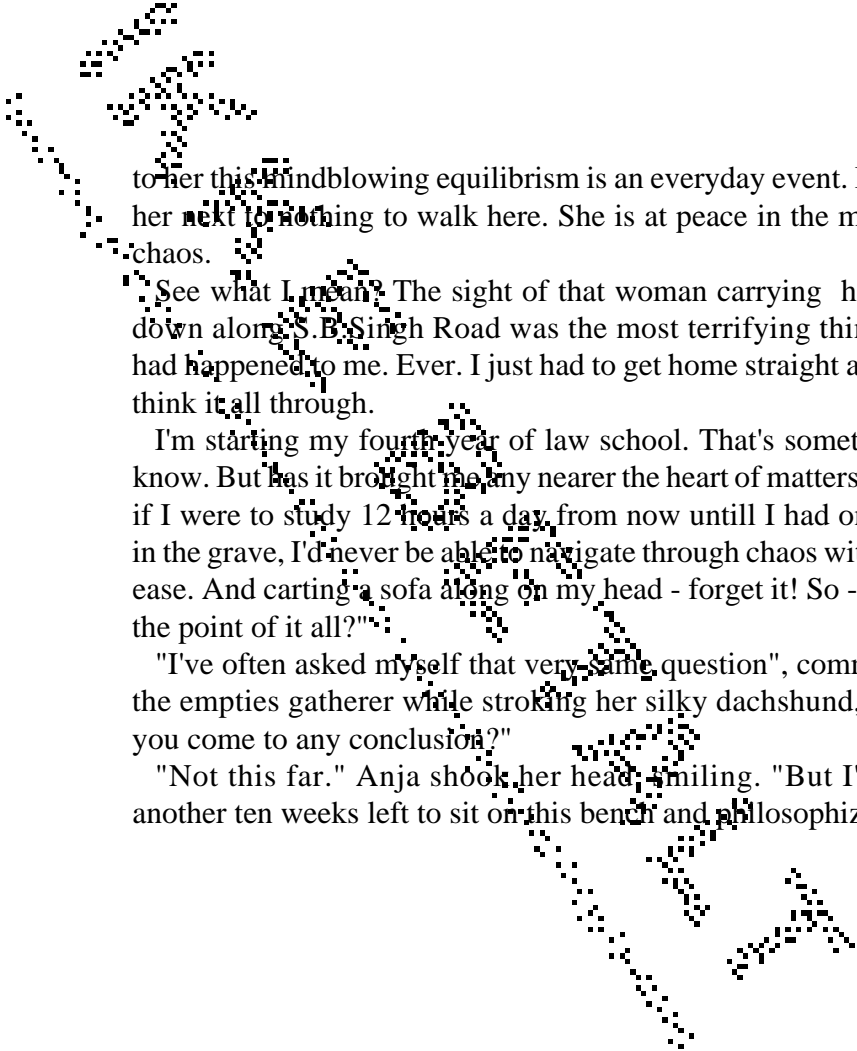
" I felt sort of restless. Leaning back, taking it easy and letting myself be carried along. Gradually I began to pick out a few details that weren't downright repulsive"

" For instance - there was this elephant, henna patterns adorning its forehead, standing by a juice stall, peacefully stuffing itself with sugar cane scrap. I saw a semi-circle of men and women, dressed in gold embroidered finery, seating themselves in the dust to dine off glistening green banana leaves. Somewhere a Sikh, wearing the most immaculate saffron turban, was selling vinyl baseball caps bearing the legend VVIP. Very Very Important Person."

"This, by the way, was where I started getting nervous again. People began to get off the bus. The ticket collector came down to ask when I wanted to alight. My reply was: "never". He must have encountered this syndrome before, because he said soothingly: "it is still a long way to the terminal," then offered me a cigarette which I greedily consumed even though I hadn't smoked since my confirmation. There's something immensely comforting in having a filter to chew on.

I kept hoping the bus might break down, so I could stay on it forever. But sadly we were getting closer and closer to downtown.

And then, as we drive along Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, as the last passengers are alighting, I see this woman in a cyclamen sari. She is walking through the crowd with a bamboo sofa on her head. An enormous yellow thing. Picture it - a sofa. Balancing up there. She cannot even be bothered to touch it. Poised as a dancer she makes her way through the multitude: elephants, lepers, roadworkers, vinyl cap sellers, a spotted bitch giving birth - and her couch never even budes. She is in perfect balance, she's smiling,



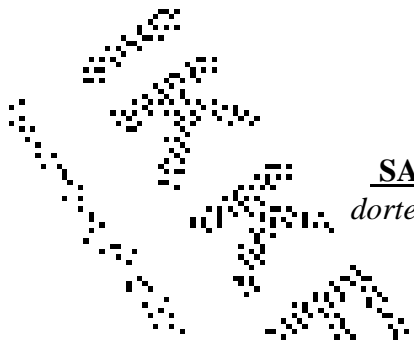
to her this mindblowing equilibrium is an everyday event. It costs her next to nothing to walk here. She is at peace in the midst of chaos.

See what I mean? The sight of that woman carrying her sofa down along S.B. Singh Road was the most terrifying thing that had happened to me. Ever. I just had to get home straight away to think it all through.

I'm starting my fourth year of law school. That's something. I know. But has it brought me any nearer the heart of matters? Even if I were to study 12 hours a day from now until I had one foot in the grave, I'd never be able to navigate through chaos with such ease. And carting a sofa along on my head - forget it! So - what's the point of it all?"

"I've often asked myself that very same question", commented the empties gatherer while stroking her silky dachshund, "have you come to any conclusion?"

"Not this far." Anja shook her head, smiling. "But I've got another ten weeks left to sit on this bench and philosophize".



SAMBA BELLEZA

dorte birkedal andersen

"Insist that the waiter opens the beer right in front of your eyes," says Gloria sharply.

"And check that the glass is absolutely empty when they hand it to you," Dante, her co-friend, adds.

"Before visiting the bathroom, make sure to finish your drink. Double-check your glass on return, just in case anyone has left drugs in it."


We are seated at Banzos pavement bar, in Pelourinho, Salvador's colonial gem of a redlight district. It's been facelifted recently. All spotless mansions with freshly varnished woodwork, the campanilas in new coats of cheerful pastel, the prostitutes chased further afield, or discrete enough to blend in.

A costumer stumbles out from the neighboring bar, to collapse in the gutter, shaking violently. Looks like an epileptic fit.

"...don't you pay him attention, he's just being cute for the tourists," Gloria continues her word-flow into my right ear.

"...and by Golly, remember to cross-examine the bill. Count the change, the waiters cheat worse than...," Dante rambles on to my left.

Helle and Kirsten are lazily chatting, they do not understand Portuguese. I too soon stop listening and instead start to ponder, what on earth could be wrong with the apartment. Gloria had sounded most enthusiastic on the phone. "Come straight away", she had said, "if you're not here by mid-afternoon, there are so many others awaiting this unique chance." Gloria's flat is SUCH a bargain and SUCH a beauty.



And now she's been dragging her wing, like a rook in distress, for hours on end. We've been shown busts of a dozen local benefactors, toured the cultural institutions, even had a guided stroll through 3 major bus terminals. Plus this never-ending lecture about the dangers of Salvador.

What could be wrong? Does the flat face the city dump? Has the flat above been converted into a kindergarten? Is a corpse hidden under the bed? Dante has gone to phone twice, in a frantic way, as if searching for someone to store it. Twenty-four hours on Brazilian soil is plenty to get anyone suspicious.

The rent has gone up, the square metres have shrunk, since the phone call, that's what's the matter and now it's too dark to go hunt for anything else. One mattress is missing, one bed plastered up in bricks, right next to the toilet, that doesn't flush.

Still it's cheaper for us to stay on here than get a room in a shoe-string hotel. Gloria eventually makes her very last sortie. The three of us try to work up a minimum of optimism concerning the fact that we're going to be stuck here for the next month. We draw lots to sort out who's sleeping where for the first 10 days, then work out a rotation scheme. The Fluffy is top prize. The Skinny is the one who is short of a mattress (but Gloria says she'll get it first thing in the morning...). The Pits is the one by the loo-door.

Now, with the beds distributed we go about our most basic emergency shopping. Pulses, potatoes, staples as such. We have no intention to eat them. They're needed to hide our valuables away. Plane tickets fit snugly under the rice. Someone's international vaccination-card and medical insurance peeps out from between two kilos of lime. The magnum carton of washing powder seems an imminent place to stash cash.

"Don't you guys dare empty the bin for sanitary pads", announces Fêta. "all my worldly goods are at the bottom of it."

After dinner, we head back towards Pelourinho. According to our guidebook (and Gloria), it's THE place to go for prime time nightlife.

The trip to Pelô works out nicely. We get on the right bus. We don't get mugged. Courtesy of Gloria's horror stories about assaults (she knows volumes of them, by heart) none of us have brought hand bags. Our luggage is minimal. A bit of cash wrapped in a piece of plastic bag, tucked away in the bra (Kirsten never even used to own a bra, but she's had to purchase one, for this very occasion). The key to the main entrance tied to our knickers with a generous piece of elastic. If somebody robs us, at least we will know.

We're in a flimsy mood, wanting to dance, all dolled up in mini's and summer sandals with chic high heels. We find a restaurant with live music and competent drinks, seemingly without tranquilizers.

The neighbourhood seems depressingly docile, is this really the creme de la creme de Brazil? There are scaffolds obstructing the view everywhere, clouds of dust, the back streets are undergoing major theme-park surgery. Vendors in pseudo national costumes retouch the gothic writing of shop signs with sickly silver paint. Gigolos and pushers peek out from Reggae Club with a laid-back lethargy, only equalled by tapeworm in cats. Tourists in confused clusters haste through it all, frantically snapping.

The band has eventually succeeded in lulling itself to sleep. We have a go at pretending to dance, since we're there anyway. It dawns on us why the few local dance-freaks are wearing trainers, despite the

head. The cobbled Largo slopes 45 degrees, ones ankles get damaged and the heels. And it dawns on us (quarter past midnight) that the last bus home leaves the square a quarter to.

Of course we could grab a cab to take us the 3 kilometres home, but who's got a nervous system sturdy enough to have faith in cabdrivers, this time of night ?

We decide to walk and spot potential gunmen all the way down along Avenida Sete, Gloria's told us herself, they'd be there. And every time a beggar tries hustling small change for coffee, or homeless youngsters search their private parts under battered up pieces of cardboard, we almost levitate with fear.

"Fancy this, no one has robbed us", Helle exclaims genuinely surprised. We're back home in our beds.

"Now who would have thought that possible," Kirsten replies while picking up an old paper bag from the floor. Only after she has thrown it into the garbage I understand what it is and react.

"Hey, wait a minute. Those are my traveller's checks. I taped them under the table".

"Lousy roll of tape you got yourself there", Kirsten smiles while I sort through the garbage.

"Mmm," I nod, "lousy tabletop too."

"Tomorrow, then," Helle is trying to cheer us up, "tomorrow we're going someplace really hot. Let's find some locals to show us around".

She is fixing everyone a nice cup of coffee while talking. We're short of filters and thermoses, that sort of things, so she pours the ground coffee directly into the boiling water with a sassy little shake of the wrist.

Kirsten can't bear it for long: "Please don't. My Visa card's in there somewhere."

Tropical chill-out: I'm under the cold shower, contemplating. The mingling of sun tan oil and the sand dripping down from my beachwear make the most intricate constellations. Kirsten, who's "won" the first shift on The Skinny (still missing its mattress but Gloria promised...), has treated herself to an illicit nap on The Fluffy. Helle comes charging in through the door with mangoes, papaya and happy energy:

"I've found someone who can show us around. Put on a dress or something. I brought him."

Put on something we do.

I don't like the guy. His face is sweaty-black in a hectic way, as if left in an acid bath nightly, maybe he smokes too much heroin. His rasta-hair is long and groomed according to latest fashion. The white in his eyes is muddled. All sweetness erased from his smile.

I don't even feel like exchanging one word with him. His handshake is soggy. He seems throughouthly corrupt.

I shake his hand. He can show us around. Bet you, he'll be known by name in every single den this side of the city limits. A prime guide, his hips are loose, he'll want to show off what a brilliant dancer he is. He'll find us some music. We need to dance.

And most likely he'll do his best to behave. He's hooked on Helle, watch him now, concocting plans for his very near future.

His name is Crocodil. He would care for a cup of coffee. I make some coffee for Crocodil, that way I don't have to look at him. On the verge of a minor disaster I remember Kirstens Visa card, still in the coffee bag. Close call, that one.

Crocodil has started fidgeting and fondling the various tins and containers. He's looking for sugar. No no, not there. That's lentils.

My peas are hidden under the lentils. This one is sugar. Did anyone sniff their fortune away in the sugar tin? Apparently not.

Now then. We're almost ready to go. Crocodil just needs to use the bathroom.

"Do you ask leaving him alone with the sanitary napkin bin?", I and Kirsten tease Helle.

"Considering the alternative," she replies dryly.

Crocodil is capoeirista, and before we even get as far as the lift he has started playing battlesongs for us on his berimbau. We hum along on the chorus, loudly chanting we pass in front of the doorman's enclosure, just to make sure he'll be able to remember the face of our new acquaintance.

The streets are unexpectedly quiet, why could that be, is it already late? Or is it Crocodil leading us down the darkest, most desolate allies? We're only three choruses from our apartment-block but have turned so many corners that we've completely lost our sense of orientation.

That might have made us stop and think things through, but something distracting is coming up. We run into a gang of Crocodils buddies. Broadshouldered, musclebound specimens with dubious vibes, the entire lot. One of them joins us. We never quite got his name, but internally call him The Mute. He's scared of Crocodil, staying put at his heel without uttering one single bark.

We're getting further and further away from the known parts of town, down this stinky passage, under that garbage-infested bridge, each of us on the outlook for streetsigns, we read them aloud in a ritualistic way, as if the reading aloud of the streetsigns will enable us to find them again, as if our mere recalling the street by its true name would make it return to us, and us to it.

Another of those derelict flights of stairs. Down the lane, just around the corner, this most desirable place awaits us, according to Crocodil: It's got SUCH a wonderful dance band and SUCH amounts of local hype.

After browsing through half a dozen slumbering dens, we chat up a lone costumer, busy entangling his legs with those of the bar stool, so as to keep vertical, while humming his hang-over blues.

"Oh, but it's Tuesday. It's partytime in Pelourinho. Why don't you Bellezas head down that way?"

Tuesday? Tonight? Is that so? We've lost track of the days, but presuming today is Tuesday, yesterday was Monday, the dreariest of dreary party-days, globally. Pelourinho deserves another chance. Here we're not missing out on much.

There's just one tiny problem. We can't find Pelo. We've got no clue whatsoever about our present whereabouts.

And Crocodil isn't exactly co-operative. The Mute has already started to duck.

"What's the matter with you gringos anyway," Crocodil thunders, "here I dedicate my entire evening to showing you around the truly authentic Salvador, how many tourists, do you reckon, are this lucky. And all you want is to run back down to Pelo and rub shoulders with all the other sheep."

"Yes," we all answer, sounds like a chorus. And Helle continues:

"You talked about this very hip place with wonderful music, you wanted to show us. If you aren't able to find it, then the least you could do is show us the way to Pelo."

Easy now. Crocodil is abolishing all trace of anger from his face, he strikes up a happy note on the berimbau, suddenly he



remembers this place, THE PLACE for us to go. It is just around the corner. A mere 5 minute drive by local bus.

But this is where we dig in our heels. It's almost 11 o'clock, we've toddled along behind Crocodil for more than an hour, ready to endure almost anything just to get to some friendly biotope with chilled beer and spicy samba. Almost anything, but not quite.

The city transport, for instance. We now know from hard-gained experience that all buses head back to the terminal quarter to twelve. And Crocodil's madly exiting hot-spot (how come he only just remembered it now - if it's truly that unforgettable) is situated somewhere in the 27th favela (slum). A trek back from there in the middle of the night doesn't sound terribly attractive, even wearing the most sensible of shoes.

We do not want to get involved in anything demanding the slightest surge of adrenalin. We just want to get back to good old Pelo, twist our ankles on the cobbled stone, flirt with the handsome young coffee-vendors, all the while discretely counting the change.

While debating for and against the excursion to Crocodil's slum, he has been naive enough to hear us up towards Avenida Sete, look there is the statue of Castro Alves, Gloria pointed it out for us only yesterday.

We can find our own way around from here and that makes us feel high. Crocodil can go get on his bus anytime he fancies, we won't interfere with that. But what about us ? Should we stroll by the flat and refresh ourselves first? Or take the left turn, heading directly for Pelourinho ?

Crocodil and The Mute lean against Castro Alves in a most defeated way, while we're yacking on. Their battle is lost now, whatever it was all about. Crocodil suggests we share a bottle of

beer before they get on the bus, and we feel too sorry for them to resist.

Despite him leading us down a lane, an alley, a staircase, down towards Cidade Baixa, awarded a total of 5 skulls and cross bones, exclamationmark, exclamationmark, according to Glorias list. But Gloria hops us off too, anytime she can get away with it. By now we feel so toughened that the mere acknowledgement of approaching danger makes us feel strangely safe.

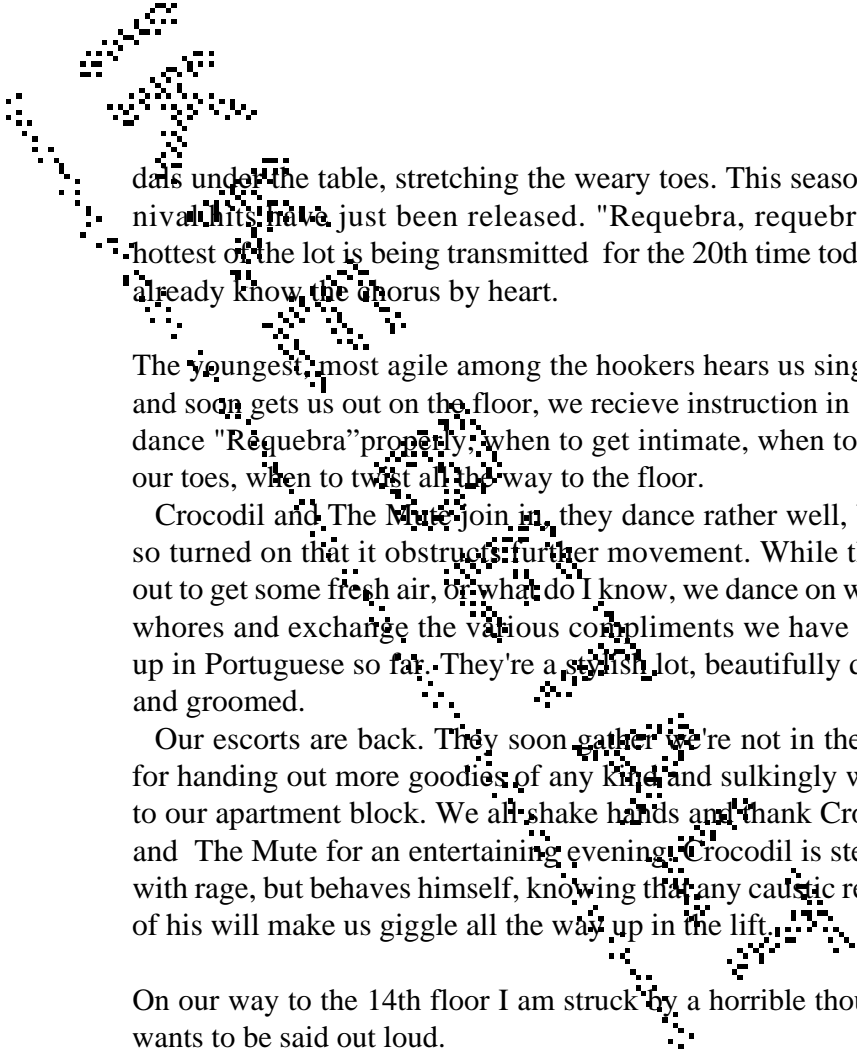
We've been following Crocodil through the scruffiest parts of town for hours on end, like hatchery chicks latched on to the wrong hen. And has anything horrible happened so far? Apart from our highly increased production of adrenalin, the experience has been uneventfull, bordering the trivial. So most likely it'll stay like that.

Anyway. We know our present whereabouts. In case of attack, the chances of minimum one of us making it home to the flat with the key to the main door securely tied to her knickers, seems very grand. A victorious thought.

Soon we find ourselves in a whorehouse with a stunning view across all of Cidade Baixa and the Todos os Santos bay. The older whores sit on the porch, in deckchairs, knitting, shortage of clients, it seems. They eye us suspiciously.

Inside the bar red lightbulbs are dangling from an assortment of gallows. People are dancing closely entwined, pissed, in a grave, almost dignified way. There's nothing shamefull about being horny in this town, it's an everyday mood.

We order several bottles of beer, keep pouring generously for Crocodil and The Mute, just to make sure they'll get sleepy faster than us, in case the beer has been drugged. The establishment is surprisingly plesant, we soon settle in, pushing off our chic san-



dals under the table, stretching the weary toes. This seasons carnival hits, have just been released. "Requebra, requebra", the hottest of the lot is being transmitted for the 20th time today. We already know the chorus by heart.

The youngest, most agile among the hookers hears us sing along and soon gets us out on the floor, we receive instruction in how to dance "Requebra" properly, when to get intimate, when to get on our toes, when to twist all the way to the floor.

Crocodil and The Mute join in, they dance rather well, but get so turned on that it obstructs further movement. While they go out to get some fresh air, or what do I know, we dance on with the whores and exchange the various compliments we have picked up in Portuguese so far. They're a stylish lot, beautifully dressed and groomed.

Our escorts are back. They soon gather we're not in the mood for handing out more goodies of any kind and sulkily walk us to our apartment block. We all shake hands and thank Crocodile and The Mute for an entertaining evening. Crocodil is steaming with rage, but behaves himself, knowing that any caustic remarks of his will make us giggle all the way up in the lift.

On our way to the 14th floor I am struck by a horrible thought. It wants to be said out loud.

"Has it dawned on you Bellezas that we know next to nothing about Gloria? We don't know her adress. We can't even spell her family name. Imagine, just for one second, her having a spare key to this illustrious flat. Picture her dropping by, say, a"

"....Tuesday night", Helle rounds off the sentence.

Kirsten is the first to reach the entrance door. She's got a way with disentangling her key from her knickers and getting it into the lock, before we've even located ours.

"The door's still locked," she reports in a matter of fact way. "Doesn't look like anybody has been around. But maybe we're better off checking that all the valuables still are in their proper place. Just in case."

After a couple of minutes I'm certain that we've been robbed. My US \$ are gone. Plus the passport. They should've been inside the woolen socks (dirty). They're not. Easy now. No instant panic. Is this Glorias doing? Or Crocodils? Does it need to be reported pronto? Or could we wait till tomorrow?

"So what have you two had pinched?" I ask bizniz-like. With a bit of luck the intruders haven't found our entire stash.

"Nothing," they answer, puzzled. "What exactly is it you're missing?"

"My dollars. The passport."

"Ah, those," Kirsten smiles while lounging herself on The Skinny as relaxed as is possible without a follow-up at the chiropractors', "I thought that stuff of yours was hidden behind the beef tomatoes".

"What beef tomatoes?" I ask, slightly bewildered.

"The ones you brought home yesterday. You left them in the vegetable drawer, remember. Bottom of fridge".

"Moi?"

"On second thought," giggles Helle, "it might have been Gloria..."

"....it might have been Crocodil!"



NEXT TRAIN FROM RANTHAMBORE

dorte a birkedal andersen

I am travelling on to Yogi Mahal. Tigers roam freely there, that's what they say.

The others will stay on in Jaipur. They don't care much for wild things. They care for hot baths, for soft beds, for well-prepared chicken tandoori.

Can't blame them, really. After three nights in the Northbound sleeper, huddled in bunks crammed with bedding, suitcases and footwear (never leave your shoes on the floor overnight. They go walkabout).

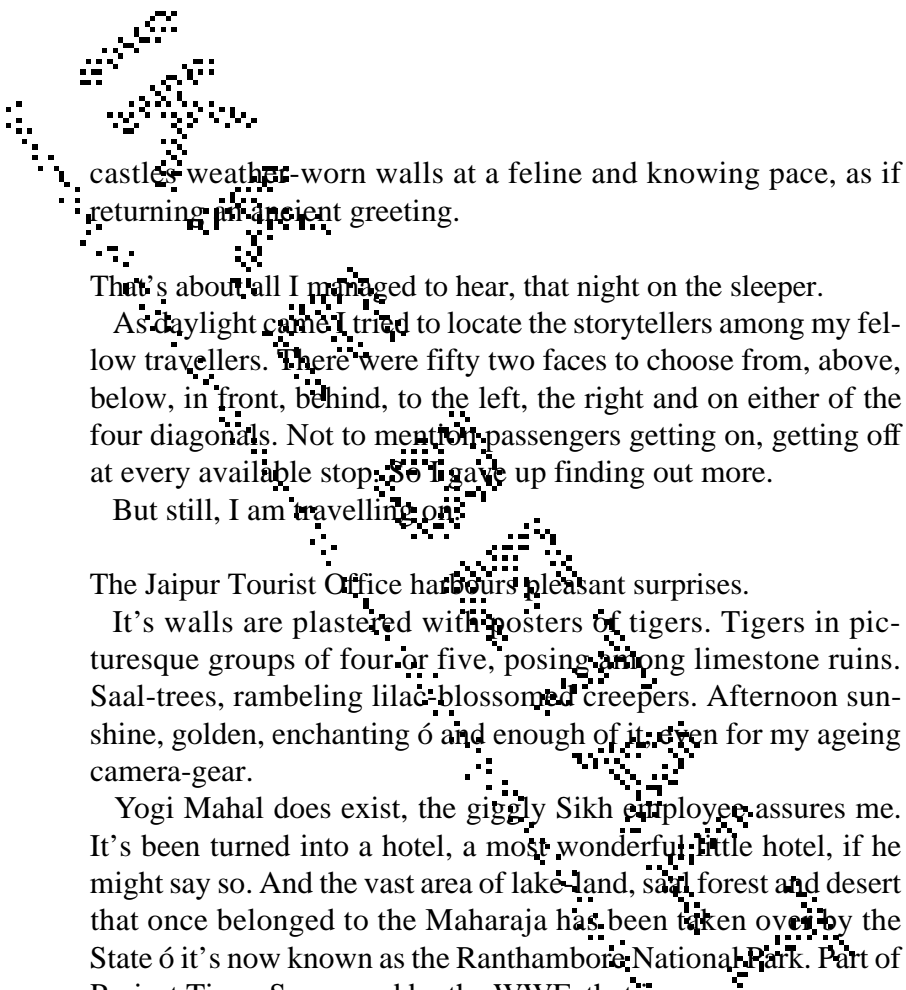
Some take sleepers to sleep. I take them to eavesdrop.

That's how I came to know about Yogi Mahal. I overheard two people talking. About a holy man, a Yogi. They say he used to dwell in a palm-grove, by the spring that feeds the lakes and streams of Ranthambore, in the desert state of Rajasthan.

The Yogi by the desert spring, meditating on time and on timelessness. As years went by his radiance grew and creatures of the wilderness were drawn to him ó they would follow him for walks all around the lake. Even tigers would come to him in broad daylight, to take darshan and sun themselves in his presence.

The Maharaja of Ranthambore heard of this, befriended the Yogi and was so satisfied with the advice offered him by the holy man that he built him a castle, a tiny red sandstone castle, complete with spires and balconies, by the palm spring; on the shores of Ranthambore lake.

They say even today, so many years later, tigers keep returning to Yogi Mahal. Every tigress will bring her cubs here, to contemplate in broad daylight by the banks of the lake, to encircle the



castles weather-worn walls at a feline and knowing pace, as if returning an ancient greeting.

That's about all I managed to hear, that night on the sleeper.

As daylight came I tried to locate the storytellers among my fellow travellers. There were fifty two faces to choose from, above, below, in front, behind, to the left, the right and on either of the four diagonals. Not to mention passengers getting on, getting off at every available stop. So I gave up finding out more.

But still, I am travelling on.

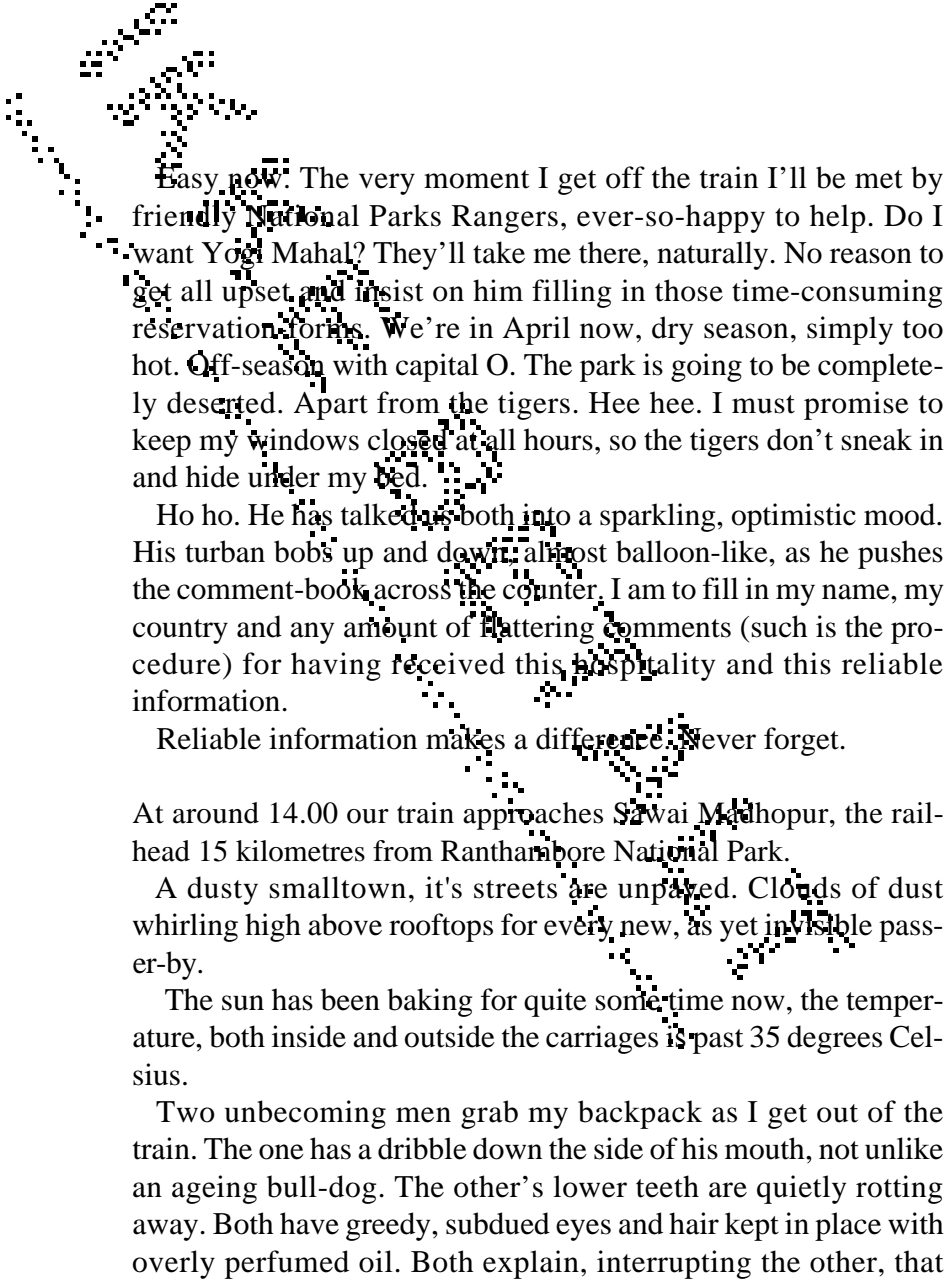
The Jaipur Tourist Office harbours pleasant surprises.

It's walls are plastered with posters of tigers. Tigers in picturesque groups of four or five, posing among limestone ruins. Saal-trees, rambeling lilac-blossomed creepers. Afternoon sunshine, golden, enchanting and enough of it, even for my ageing camera-gear.

Yogi Mahal does exist, the giggly Sikh employee assures me. It's been turned into a hotel, a most wonderful little hotel, if he might say so. And the vast area of lake-land, sand forest and desert that once belonged to the Maharaja has been taken over by the State and it's now known as the Ranthambore National Park. Part of Project Tiger. Sponsored by the WWF, that is.

How do I get there, what is the name of the nearest railhead, any public transport between the train-station and the Park entrance? When does the train leave, does he have a schedule handy? And, most important, how long will it take him to book me a room at the Yogi Mahal?

He pats my hand gently while twisting his sizeable moustache the wrong way around, I suppose in a gesture to calm me.



Easy now. The very moment I get off the train I'll be met by friendly National Parks Rangers, ever-so-happy to help. Do I want Yogi Mahal? They'll take me there, naturally. No reason to get all upset, and insist on him filling in those time-consuming reservation forms. We're in April now, dry season, simply too hot. Off-season with capital O. The park is going to be completely deserted. Apart from the tigers. Hee hee. I must promise to keep my windows closed at all hours, so the tigers don't sneak in and hide under my bed.

Ho ho. He has talked us both into a sparkling, optimistic mood. His turban bobs up and down, almost balloon-like, as he pushes the comment-book across the counter. I am to fill in my name, my country and any amount of flattering comments (such is the procedure) for having received this hospitality and this reliable information.

Reliable information makes a difference. Never forget.

At around 14.00 our train approaches Szwai Madhopur, the rail-head 15 kilometres from Ranthambore National Park.

A dusty smalltown, it's streets are unpaved. Clouds of dust whirling high above rooftops for every new, as yet invisible passer-by.

The sun has been baking for quite some time now, the temperature, both inside and outside the carriages is past 35 degrees Celsius.

Two unbecoming men grab my backpack as I get out of the train. The one has a dribble down the side of his mouth, not unlike an ageing bull-dog. The other's lower teeth are quietly rotting away. Both have greedy, subdued eyes and hair kept in place with overly perfumed oil. Both explain, interrupting the other, that

they've been employed by the National Parks Service to make us visitors feel at home.

Seemingly a pair of dubious touts, but I follow them anyway, not wanting to lose eye-contact with my luggage. To my great surprise they throw my pack into a most official-looking jeep with RANTHAMBORE N.P. - PROJECT TIGER painted on both doors, in white. Could these people really be working for the National Park?

No. Of course they couldn't. Of course not. Come to think of it. Any sign-painter could copy those words onto any vehicle in no time at all.

"Jump right in, Sister," barks Uncle Dribble, "we're going to find you a nice hotel."

"How much do you want for taking me to Yogi Mahal", I ask; my main goal being to distract them while I steal my luggage away from the back of their jeep.

There, I've got it. Strapped it onto my back and belted it on, to prevent them from sneaking it away again.

"Yogi Mahal is closed for the season," laughs Uncle Rot. "And all the hotels by the park are full. Come with us. We are going to help you. No problem. We know this tiny hotel. Special price for you, my friend. It's close by. Right here, in the city. Then you take jeep-service back and forth. Very cheap."

I ignore them and walk the few steps to the tonga stand. Twenty-something horse-drawn carts in all states of disrepair stand waiting under leafless trees. In August, after the heavy Monsoon, this must certainly be a lush spot, restful and sheltered.



In August, that is. Now it's April. The tumbling dust rules. And all we have for shelter is memory.

The horses just stand there, sweating it out. Bugs ramble their back-parts at leisure. The poor beasts of burden have given up brushing them off.

I feel sorry for them, their limp tails, their bony bellies; but I really need to get going and do my best to start negotiating with one of the tonga-drivers. It's not all that easy. Uncle Rot and Uncle Dribble have positioned themselves on either side of him.

No, the tonga-wallah, reluctantly admits, he isn't really looking for custom. He's just hanging around. To relax in the shade. He fearfully eyes my two foul-looking chaperones.

"Too risky to tonga out there", suggests Uncle Rot, "tigers waiting to attack behind every boulder".

"And there's a hill, very steep", Uncle Dribble continues, "he wouldn't want his animal to suffer such a trachea-ship".

"Get in the jeep", says Uncle Rot triumphantly.

While I scan the square for a bicycle rental, anything rather than continuing this forced intimacy. A whistle sounds over by Platform 3. It's the Delhi Express, possibly containing fresh loads of tourists.

My foster parents seem to suffer a few stressful moments. Should they stay here with me, or try to catch more of my kind?

Before they reach a final conclusion another jeep with a RANTHAMBORE N.P. paint job pulls up. Four well-groomed tourists with overnight bags tear past Uncle Rot & Uncle Dribble and jump into the open vehicle.

I jump in as well. I'm coming along for the ride. I like this jeep. The driver is wearing a lilac shirt.

We ride out of town. The four Frenchmen (for Frenchmen they are) seem a little confused by my presence, but nobody asks any questions. Do they take for granted that I, like they, am being taken to my pre-paid, insanely overrated hotel? I chat up the oldest of them, the most seasoned. Yes, they booked ahead from Delhi. Yes, it cost them an arm and a leg. But, by Golly, it'll be worth it. Their rooms have verandas overlooking the Ranthambore lake. Or at least, so they were told.

The driver's stopped the jeep, indicating that this is where the French are supposed to get off. We're still on the outskirts of Sawai Madhopur, parked outside an under construction hotel, bungalow-style. All the rooms have verandas. Why remains a mystery.

Disappointed, but not resisting, the French collect their bags and get out. In silence they drag their limbs towards the reception, will-less as horsetails. The heat is getting to them, the dust has tapped in. Inertia is busy depleting.

I stay in the jeep. I refuse to get off here. The driver looks friendly in his colourful shirt. He won't let me down. I know he won't.


"How much do you want for taking me into the park and arranging a room with a view", I ask politely. Sometimes a modest bribe can further communication between cultures.

He turns and smiles: "Acha, I'm the director of Yogi Mahal. Would you like to stay there?"

Would I? Acha, acha! The price has tripled since first announced by the giggly Sikh in Jaipur, but who cares by now?

Look. My Yogi Mahal.

A mogul miniature, towers and arches, palm-trees and peacocks; marble tiles, colonial cane furniture and liquorice-faced



langur monkeys on balconies. At the banks of a heavenly blue lake, islands of weeds in it. Crocodiles sunning themselves. Herds of sambar-deer seem to drift by, adding to the lucidity of the scene. This is not a site of this world, of our dense matters, blurred thoughts, circumspect planning ahead.

It's too luminous, it belongs somewhere else, in a vision, larger than mine. I get this eerie premonition that the very moment I set foot on Yogi Mahal, it will disappear.

"Are you going to sit in that jeep forever", my driver asks, slightly puzzled.

"Just another little while.

"You were so eager to get here, and now...."

"Do me a favour, will you, walk up those stairs."

"Acha acha, one knows when one's not wanted..."

He walks up the flight of stairs as if they were simply everyday earthbound stairs.

Very well then, if they let him walk up them, they just might let me. I follow him, up, through the first set of arches, unto the first floor balcony. Tea's served on a silvery tray. I settle into a colonial chair, not quite there yet, sambar-deer are still floating by, munching lakeweed, in a dreamlike choreography; white herons balancing one-leg-only on their chestnut backs. The mugger-crocodiles have acquired a serious sunburn, their backs are scaly and pink.

All around us the saal-clad hills are leafless and dry. Only here, by the lake, it is lush. The spring must be there, to the right, among tall palms and crooked rainforest trunks. I feel the humidity rising.

"Tell me about the tigers", I ask my driver, alias the Director, my friend in the lilac shirt, as he reappears with a fresh glass of tea in hand from the downstairs kitchen regions.

“The tigers, aacha”, he responds, “well, well, well, there used to be a female living in the palm grove over there, with her cubs. At times one would see her at sunset, bathing in the mud pools here, close by. But that’s history now, too many visitors. These days one only sights tigers from jeeps. Would you care to go for a game-drive this very afternoon? I can make arrangements, at special discount.”

Get out the purse. My driver picks me up for the game-drive at 17.30. He’s sleepy.

We encircle the beautiful lake at a laid-back pace, stopping to watch herds of sambar- and chital-deer grazing alongside wild boar and peacocks, while langurs comment from the trees. A gang of mongoose takes cover in tall grass. Crocodiles yawn on beds of Heavenly Blue Morning Glories.

My driver yawns ever deeper.

“Tiger”, he whispers sleepily.

Where, tiger where? I can’t see any tigers.

“Tiger, two days ago”, he mumbles. This is to be the chorus on the rest of our trip.

The sun sets into a gouache behind the ruins of Ranthambore Fort. Birds are whistling and hustling and chanting.

“Tiger, two days ago”, my driver recites, pointing to glades and to tree-trunks, to mudholes and withering shrub. And yonder. Two tigers. Two days ago.

“Tiger two days ago” is the codeword for tiger in past tense. Yesterday. Five years ago. Not to know. The driver certainly is in no mood to elaborate.

“No tiger - no tip”, is his only other statement.

Dusk is creeping closer as we roll on back to Yogi Mahal. No traffic allowed in the park after dark. Officially.

Sambar herds make loud noises out by the lake, getting themselves tangled up in lotus-stems, escaping obscured predators. We're back by the parking-lot now. Cook-wallah is waving at me from the stairs. I run to him and he guides me onto the balcony.

There she is. Striped Goddess in mudbath. Her body's elegantly stretched out, hind legs draped in greyish clay puddles. She lazily licks her paws, making sure to get all the grub out. She seems in no hurry at all.

A group of Indian tourists already populate the balcony, watching the tigress, hushed, almost breathless. A barely audible mumble escape them whenever Her Highness changes position. Cameras click, oblivious of the missing light.

She gets up now, deciding to leave the mudpool. She stretches, for all the world to see. Pads on, playfully, along the narrow strip of land separating the grove from the mudbath. The ultimate cat-walk. She seems to amuse herself like this, showing off to her public.

A high-pitched voice shrieks : "Tiger, tiger", somewhere in the distance. Jeep-loads of tourists come charging up the stairs, yelling: "Where is it, where", while Her Majesty makes herself invisible, diluting her form into darkness and tall grass.

Gone. She's gone. People raise their voices at once, it sounds like the entire balcony is calling long distance.

Only Cookwallah continues to whisper, as if to manifest that HE's not letting himself be swayed by public opinion.

"Noon's Mother", goes his hushed explanation. "Noon's Mother, she was".

It's getting late. Weary drivers round up reluctant tourists, time to drive back to dusty hotels.

Soon only Cookwallah, I and four chubby upperclass Indians are left on the balcony. The Young Masters have got their own vehicle. A police jeep, courtesy of a local bureaucrat. One of their Daddies is very high-up and that accesses certain privileges. Free board and lodging, for instance. At selected lodges throughout the state.

Oops. Is that what is happening here. I've been wondering all along why Yogi Mahal has been reported now full, now closed for the winter and in reality nobody's here. Apart from Cookwallah, me and now these four. Daddy must have booked them, well in advance.

"Which rooms are yours", I ask the least tipsy of them (they've all brought bottles, wrapped in brown paper bags. It could be cough medicine. But it smells more like Johnny Walker).

"We're just up the road", he explains, "Daddy tried to get us in here, at the Yogi, but everything's full."

"Come along for a ride", his friend suggests, kindly offering me his bottle (it's NOT cough medicine!), "you must feel terribly lonesome here, all by yourself. Lets go drive around the park till we see some tigers."

"Maybe tomorrow".

They all get up, collect their bottles and stagger to the parking-lot. There they go, zigzagging out along the game-drive. They spare us the siren but the blue light on the roof seems to start blinking all by itself.

I wake up in the middle of the night. Something's trying to get in through my window. One of Dad's cubs.

"Open quick, there's a tiger out here", he whispers, in rut.

“Go tell Daddy”, I hiss back, while slamming my window shut. What next? He’s at the door, a fragile turn-of-the-century thing; all glass panels and inlaid preciousness.

“The tiger’s eating me”, he babbles on, “open up, and straight away. So that I can take care of you.”

I locate my pesticide spray and keep it handy. If he breaks the door his eyes will be sorry.

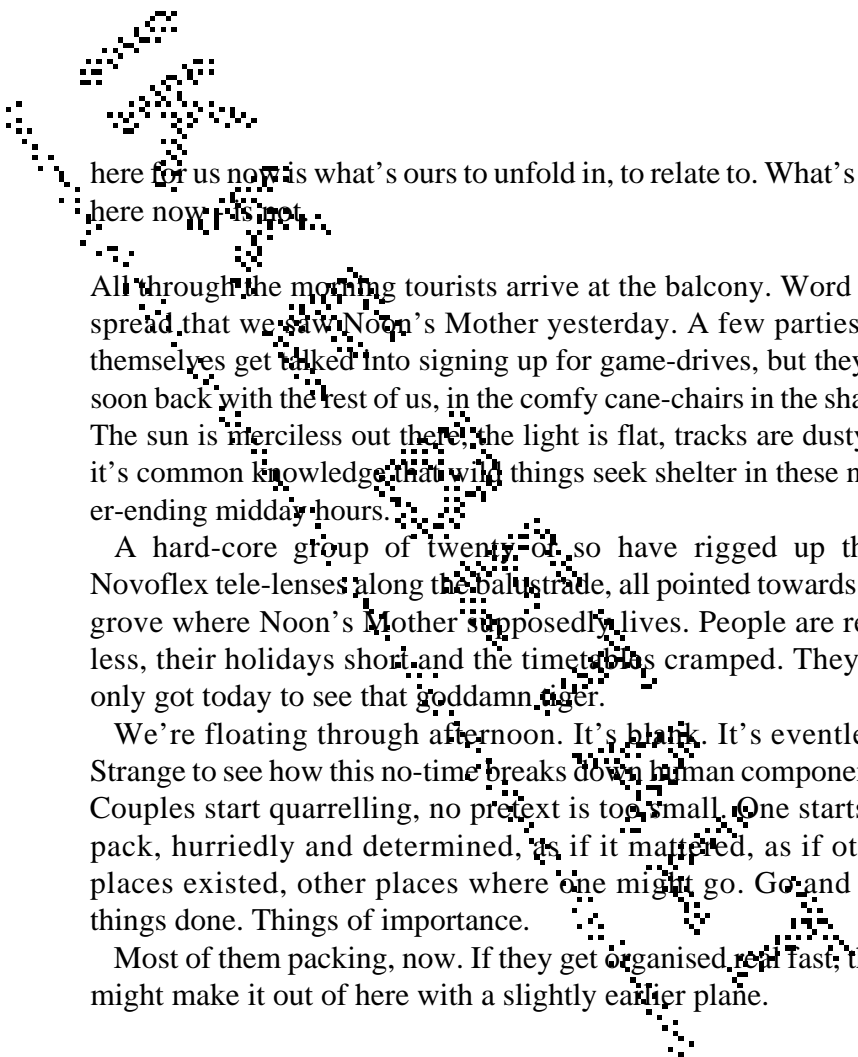
Eventually he seems to sober up a bit and shuffles off.

Next morning I’m at the balcony before 5.00 to see the sun rise over the palm grove. I’m hoping for glimpses of Noon’s Mother. Just one will do. Will do nicely. But she doesn’t come.

Around 7.00 Cookwallah calls. Breakfast is served at the ground floor terrace. A lively meal it turns out. Five grey-spotted birds with yellow rings around their eyes patrol the tablecloth. Up and down. Up & down. Up’n down. Not one bread-crumble goes unattended. A squirrel starts biting into my big toe. Maybe my nailpolish looks like strawberry jam. Here comes a jungle jay, landing confidently on my right shoulder while I’m forking in my scrambled-eggs-on-toast. It graciously gobbles down bites off the fork.

Business as usual. Mugger-crocodiles snoozing under waterlily-blanket. Sambar-deer splashing themselves in the lake. Herons fishing. I came to the park just yesterday but have already abandoned relating to time as time passing, minutes and seconds eagerly rushing by, going places, and within the hour. Time passing has passed away.

I’m half way into the time-mode, from which the sleepy driver operates. The sleepy driver who saw so many tigers in so many assorted places “two days ago”. It’s really quite simple. What’s



here for us now is what's ours to unfold in, to relate to. What's not here now is not.

All through the morning tourists arrive at the balcony. Word has spread that we saw Noon's Mother yesterday. A few parties let themselves get talked into signing up for game-drives, but they're soon back with the rest of us, in the comfy cane-chairs in the shade. The sun is merciless out there, the light is flat, tracks are dusty & it's common knowledge that wild things seek shelter in these never-ending midday hours.

A hard-core group of twenty or so have rigged up their Novoflex tele-lenses along the balustrade, all pointed towards the grove where Noon's Mother supposedly lives. People are restless, their holidays short and the timetable cramped. They've only got today to see that goddamn tiger.

We're floating through afternoon. It's blank. It's eventless. Strange to see how this no-time breaks down human components. Couples start quarrelling, no pretext is too small. One starts to pack, hurriedly and determined, as if it mattered, as if other places existed, other places where one might go. Go and get things done. Things of importance.

Most of them packing, now. If they get organised, real fast, they might make it out of here with a slightly earlier plane.

Soon I'm alone again. Sort of. A gang of young langur-monkeys have ventured down from roof of the palace to steal pages from the airmail-letter I was about to finish. They've squashed their loot beyond recognition. Amuse themselves throwing it back and forth.

Cookwallah's here with a fresh pot of tea. A jungle jay lands on my cup, helping itself to a drink. The tea is still steaming but that

doesn't bother the bird. I start my letter all over again, the langurs standing on the balustrade....

"Pssst, pssst", Cookwallah's back to pick up his tray. The teapot is empty; so time must have passed. "Pssst", he's nodding his head, to the balcony's far side. The tall grass. Something there, now, in the tall grass.

I get up and tip-toe to where he's standing.

"Noon", his lips form, letting the sound out slowly, caressing; mantra-like.

Noon somewhere in the tall grass. There. Hidden from curious eyes by the branches of a weeping willow. Her yellowness a continuation of the yellowness of dusty hills. Her eyes focused on infinity. She can't be hungry, her pose is restful. Two peacocks are scratching for grubs, just a few yards away, without a worry. Maybe they haven't seen her. Alone I could never have spotted her, despite the short distance. Twenty yards or so. I stretch out on the balcony floor, spying on her until time passing passes...

Two sets of jeep-doors slamming. Opening Hours again.

Noon gets on her feet in one sudden stretch, eyes fire in a flash that's both killing and healing. And then....she's gone.

I just lie there, recovering from the almost corporeal quality of her gaze. She has seen me, my innermost essence. This very moment I came into being. This very moment I vanished.

I discover that I'm being watched by a group of tourists loaded down with Novoflexes and zooms. I'm still lying belly-down on the marble tiles of the balcony floor. Such coolness in marble.

"Where's the tiger", they yell at me, those people up there, "show us the tiger".

I make an effort and get on my feet before breaking the news: "Gone, it's gone".

“That’s not fair”, they sneer back, “that’s not fair at all. We’ve heard rumours that you saw it yesterday. You’ve seen it twice. And we haven’t seen it at all. Better do something...” they keep bitching about in American, swinging their zooms around like annoyed horses’ tails.

Uncle Dribble and Uncle Rot, my old acquaintances from Sawai Madhopur, appear on the balcony while I’m busy rearranging my clothes. No happy reunion scenes here. Uncle Rot lies down flat, on the very spot I just got up from. No. Even he is not able to spot any tigers.

“But you promised us a tiger”, nags someone in the American group. “We won’t pay you the extra money until we’ve seen one.”

Uncles United round up their flock and escort them back to the waiting jeeps, time for a game drive, soon everyone’s gone.

Other groups of jeeps careen out as well. I stay put at Yogi Mahal. Cookwallah’s told me that Noon keeps her four-month old cubs hidden somewhere in the tall grass. That’s why she hangs around.

While we’re just the two of us, left alone on the balcony, I try to solve the riddle of Yogi Mahal. How about its rooms. Why can they be neither rented, nor borrowed, nor booked.

“You heard the official story. We’re closed for the winter”, Cookwallah answers, reluctantly.

“I heard the official story all right. And.....”

“Well. This is only hearsay, and don’t quote me. Hardly classifies as gossip, really...”

“But....”

“Hmmm. It’s been hinted at that certain of the Very Very High Ups have fallen in love with this place.”

"Which means?"

"They've just booked it. They've just booked it perpetually. For themselves."

"Do they come here a lot?"

"Hardly ever. They're too busy, you know."

But it soothes them, no doubt, to imagine they're here. Through their minds eye they climb to the balcony. They sit down in the cane-chairs, distracted by stress and by worldly affairs they start sipping their tea. And time passes. Time passes by. and then - all of a sudden - it's passed. They are here. At this very moment they're here taking in all this indescribable beauty.

So you see. They don't need to come here that often. Once is enough, really. Just once. And then - an open booking.

"What if one dropped by and found me here? Would you and the Director be in trouble?"

"No," he smiles, "they'd most certainly find you amusing."

The sound of a honking horn in the distance makes Cookwallah stop talking. He takes my hand, we run down the stairs, along the banks of the lake, till we reach the tipped-over trunk. Noon's Mother's catwalk. We climb onto it. And we wait.

The Uncles, each driving a jeep, race down the dirt-track, back towards Yogi Mahal. They've been at it. Hunting. Noon is running in front of them, her eyes blank with fear.

She reaches the tall grass, dives into it, away, away from the wheels. She squeezes right under our tree-trunk. And - gone.

Both Uncles heel the brakes. Their vehicles come to a standstill. The dust catches up and enveils them.

"Where's the cat, Cook", Uncle Dribble coughs

“Gone, Sir, so sorry”, Cookwallah responds in a seemingly subdued way.

“But we’ve paid to see it, one of the Americans choke.”

Uncle Rot shows his remaining teeth in a smile as he hushes his crowd.

“We’ll track down another one for you tomorrow.”

Back in Sawai Madhopur, I try to find out when the next North-bound train is due.

The Ticketwallah behind the counter is not much inclined to smalltalk, but eventually lowers his paper and whispers prophetically:

“The next train from Ranthambore”, he says “has just left.”