

MUSAFIR: THE TRAVELER

Today, Nidhi calls me.

“Hi, sweetheart. How are you?”

Her voice crackles with static, and I picture her standing alone at a wind-swept public telephone kiosk in the middle of a vast emptiness, tethering herself to the receiver with both hands, a scarf subduing her hair’s dreams of flight.

“Hello, Nidhi, my love. I’m having a rather splendid day. What about you?”

“I’m fine. Sorry at having to rush like this, but listen carefully. Protima Dadi’s health has gotten worse; we don’t think she has much more time. I’m calling all my relatives and asking them to come to Chandapur ASAP.”

She pauses. Her voice sounds flat, as if burdened by a dead weight not of her making. I imagine her words—stripped of emotion, naked—traversing hundreds of kilometers of sun-baked telephone wires hung out to dry on poles that stick out of the landscape.

“Kapil, sweetheart,” she says slowly, and I detect a hint of trouble through the crackle. “Could you come here, too? I need you by my side. Please.”

“Y-You want me to come there?”

“Yes. I really miss you, and I could use your strength now. It’s difficult to do this without you.”

“Nidhi, how will I get there?”

“Baby, remember the itinerary I put up on the fridge? Please come as soon as you can. If you want to talk to me, call this number and ask for me. The shopkeeper here will send me a message, and I’ll call you back when I can. All right? OK, I have to go. Have a safe trip. I love you.”

The monotone I hear reminds me of the flat line that appears on a patient’s monitor after he dies. My thoughts are racing. I have to look up this village now—I wonder if it is even on the map—and then figure out a way to get there. This is not my idea of a vacation.

I don’t speak Hindi, not even enough to buy vegetables for dinner or ask for directions. I have spent all my life outside of India, growing up, studying, and working in London, England. Last year, I received an offer from a major telecom company to work in India, the country of my ancestors. My wife, Nidhi,

who had grown up in India, agreed that it would be a great opportunity. So we moved to New Delhi.

I look at the itinerary with dread. It is tacked to the fridge with a magnet that proclaims *HAWAII* in the leaves of a palm tree.

New Delhi–
Kanpur–
Barabanki–
Azamgarh–
Chandapur!

I call upon Google Maps. New Delhi is easy enough; I live here. When I type in “Kanpur,” I am shown a large city about 450 kilometers to the south-east in the adjoining state of Uttar Pradesh. A flight or an air-conditioned train could easily get me there. Then comes Barabanki, a town about 120 kilometers to the northeast of Kanpur; I’m sure there’d be a train running there as well.

Here things begin to get complicated. Azamgarh turns out to be a small town nearly 300 kilometers further to the east.

Chandapur—the village of moonlight—is nowhere on the map.

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My mouth goes dry. I pan and zoom so quickly that I go cross-eyed, but while I find different Chandapurs in other parts of the country, I do not find the one I am looking for. With my heart pounding, I dial the number of the shopkeeper in my wife’s great-aunt’s village. He answers on what seems like the twentieth ring.

“*Ji?*” crackles a gruff voice.

“Hello,” I breathe heavily. I wonder how I ought to address my wife to this man; surely he wouldn’t know her name. “I am the *memsahib*’s husband speaking, from Delhi,” I say in English, but with my best Indian accent.

At first he doesn’t understand; so I repeat myself, louder and slower. He appears to comprehend this and replies energetically in Hindi. The silence his words leave in their wake is battered by static.

“Please ask her to call me as soon as possible,” I shout into the phone, enunciating each word carefully like it is a precious glass bowl.

“*Kya?*” he bellows, but I nearly lose the word in the accompanying static.

“Phone, phone. Phone me,” I yell, throwing all my sixteen years of private school education out the window.

I suppose he understands this murder of the English language on my part, for he lets loose a flurry of Hindi. I yell back something I hope is a form of

acknowledgment and hang up, fearing that I shall never hear from Nidhi again.

Next, I telephone the third most important woman to me in the world. I explain the situation to my secretary and, to her infinite credit, she understands at once and gets on the job of drawing up an itinerary and making reservations with fervor. I begin to pack but realize I have no idea of what to expect on this trip. Falling upon my limited experience of hiking in the English hills, I load my rucksack with mosquito repellent, a flashlight, spare batteries, suntan lotion, a bottle of fresh drinking water, and a pharmacy of pills to combat tropical diseases like fever, diarrhea, nausea, dehydration, and malaria. I pack four light cotton shirts, two pairs of shorts, and two pairs of trousers.

I have a seat in the air-conditioned first-class compartment of the Rajdhani, which leaves at two in the afternoon to Kanpur. My neighbor, a balding elderly gentleman, lowers *The Economist* and eyes me primly over his colorless reading glasses. He waits for me to settle down before greeting me. His eyebrows jump when I return the greeting.

130 “You are from England?” he says and adopts my clipped British accent. “Wonderful country. I personally spent a few years in London working for Unilever. Which part are you from?”

“London.”

“Oh, that’s marvellous,” he says, taking off his reading glasses. “What a world-class city that is. I have always maintained that those years were the best of my life. Such progress and beauty, unlike the decadence we have here.”

I nod my head, picturing Nidhi as I had seen her last. She had been dressed in black jeans, a dark blue *kurti*, and a matching *dupatta*. Her sunglasses were perched on her head, and she was waving to me from the entrance to her rail coach. I had heard the clink of her bangles and seen her lips form the words “I love you.” My neighbor brandishes his magazine like he is after an irritating fly.

“Our growth is lopsided,” he declares. “Despite all our technological advances, there is poverty everywhere. Mumbai has the world’s largest slum—Dharavi. Have you heard of it? It is in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. They shot *Slumdog Millionaire* there. That movie won eight Oscars.”

“Well, in India,” I venture, “poverty is not hidden like it is in London. There, the poor and the homeless are contained in certain areas. Here, they

are free to choose to be anywhere, on any footpath, at any signal, and that is why we see them everywhere.”

He puts his hand on his temple, where his hairline would have started in his younger days, runs it over his bald pate, and smoothes down the white tuft of hair at the back.

“This is not to say that India is better off than England,” I add. “I’m simply pointing out that we have similar problems at home, too, although maybe not as visible.”

“You bet we’re not better off than you,” he says, leaning so close I can smell the age of his skin. “The English knew how to run this country. For centuries, the Empire ran nations across the world. But you gave us our freedom too early.” He sits back, shaking his head pitifully, as if he has just learned about the wild ways of a colleague’s son.

“Look at Hong Kong,” he says, stretching his arm out and pointing with *The Economist* to the harsh, white tube lights above our heads. “You gave them their freedom fifty years after ours, and see how far ahead they are. If you hadn’t given us our freedom so early, we would have been more developed than America and China put together.” He retracts his hand and indicates the magazine. “I’m not saying this; the statistics are.”

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I watch him lean back in his seat with a satisfied grunt and wonder how the conversation got here so quickly. I am defending India to an Indian—who speaks with a put-on British accent—while being likened to an English imperialist, despite my skin’s being as brown as his. Thankfully, the exchange has run my neighbor out. He leans back and closes his eyes; in a couple of minutes, he is snoring lightly. I sigh, take my laptop out, and begin to work.

An hour from Kanpur, my neighbor awakens. He yawns, rubs his eyes with his knuckles, and looks around, smacking his lips. He sees me and brightens.

“My Englishman,” he exclaims. “How are you?”

“I am doing very well, thank you,” I reply, allowing myself a little smile. “Did you have a good nap?”

“Oh, it was wonderful.” He knocks the question astray with a small wave of his hand. He looks up and down the aisle, mumbles something about coffee, rubs his bald head, and settles back down with *The Economist*. The next hour passes peacefully, and as we approach Kanpur, both of us pack up.

“Well, it was lovely having met you,” I say, offering my hand.

“Please, the pleasure is all mine,” he says, grabbing my hand and working it like a village hand pump. “I wish you all the very best in life.”

I watch him walk away from me, carrying a briefcase in one hand and caressing his bald head with the other, and I feel sorry for him. Standing at that railway station in Kanpur in the midst of unknown masses of people entering and exiting trains, carrying on with the daily humdrum of their lives, I am overcome with a great sense of patriotism for the country of my ancestors. I take a deep breath, as if I could inhale all of India, with her myriad sights, sounds, smells, languages, dialects, colors, clothes, and infuse it with my existence—everything that India could produce in one breath that my entire existence in a drab, gray England could not.

Instead, I double over coughing, gagging on the stench that is the air at the Kanpur railway station. It stinks of a million feet and their footwear, of a million bodies sweating. My eyes water as I force my way out of the station. Outside, automobile fumes are added to the nauseating mix. I telephone the taxi driver sent to pick me up, anxious to get into the pleasant confines of air-conditioned comfort.

Kanpur is more than bustling; it is a mess. Lanes that seem to have been built for pedestrians and bullock-carts burst at the seams with cars and innumerable motorcycles. Vehicles are parked like cattle on the roads, engineering more chaos. The air is rent with cacophonous horns arguing with shouting vendors and film music; idle engines splutter out fumes the color of a swarm of mosquitoes, and dust hangs suspended like an installation in an art gallery, glinting in shafts of sunlight, scuttled by hurrying pairs of feet. Legend has it that the holy Ganges begins its polluted flow from Kanpur. I cut through the chaos, safely ensconced in my taxi.

The high-end Landmark Hotel, where my secretary has reserved a room for me, is akin to an oasis. It is serene and calm, where smartly-dressed employees buzz about purposefully, and if I didn't know I was in Kanpur, I could have guessed any city in India. The room is sufficient, and dinner is a quiet and calm affair. I toy with the thought of conducting another homicidal conversation with the shopkeeper in Chandapur but decide to wait; Nidhi might call in the morning. I turn in early; I have a longer day tomorrow—an unmapped and unplanned day that should get me to my wife's great-aunt's village.

At just past six in the morning, with the sun beginning to paint the sky a flaming orange, I reach the Kanpur bus stand. I find, exactly as my secretary had said I would, a local waiting to buy me a ticket and put me on the next

air-conditioned bus to Barabanki. I settle in and steal a glance at my neighbor. He is a young man with oily, dirty brown hair plastered down across the top of his forehead. His pimply face holds a grimace, and the shirt covering his thin frame resembles his hair but is more wrinkled. He makes no attempt to return my gaze; so I sit back and look out my expansive window. The dust bowl of Kanpur is gradually replaced by brown fields growing rice and sunflowers, and the teeming milieu eases into more free-flowing traffic.

At Barabanki, taxi drivers swarm around me. I look pointedly at a clean-shaven one and say, "Azamgarh."

He beckons me to follow him, speaking in rapid Hindi.

"How much?" I ask.

"Five thousand only," he says, holding up five stubby fingers.

"Too much," I reply, shaking my head.

I argue the price down to three-and-a-half thousand. Soon after we leave, the driver pulls into a petrol station and tanks up for the same amount, asking me to pay. An hour later, we stop for breakfast at a roadside *dhaba*. The food is passable, and I hope it won't upset my stomach; I take a diarrhea pill just in case.

When I come back to the parking area, I see all the drivers lounging about under the shade of a tamarind tree and go up to them. Standing in front of them, I steer an imaginary wheel.

"My taxi driver?" I ask, patting my chest and then pointing to a parked car.

The drivers look at each other. "Gone," says a bearded one, flipping his wrist and indicating a far-off place.

"What? Gone where?"

"Gone away, back," he says, writhing his wrist to indicate the seriousness of the matter. Smiles begin to form on a few lips, and a couple of drivers pass comments in the local language.

I am stranded in a parking lot between civilizations. I clench my fists and force an impassive face.

"Azamgarh," I tell the pack of drivers. They begin to confer amongst themselves, hissing and exclaiming as they try to work out the best option.

"Catch state bus," says the bearded one, who appears to have been assigned the role of speaker, and points beyond the parking lot. "Go to highway, put out hand, and stop bus." He puts out his own hand to illustrate and appears for a moment to be taking an oath.

Standing under the glaring sun, the first sixteen buses I flag down are all strikingly similar—rickety, the color of rust, leaning dangerously to one side with brakes squealing like banshees, and going anywhere but Azamgarh. The seventeenth bus has only one feature that sets it apart; it is going to Azamgarh.

The ticket costs a paltry hundred rupees. I lower myself and my rucksack onto a pair of empty seats, thankful to get out of the sun. The bus is only half full, but the ancient engine still has a tough time pulling. The acceleration is slow and loud, and we settle into a whiny trot; I pray we don't encounter any steep inclines along the way. It's close to eleven, and I estimate that we should reach Azamgarh in about seven hours at this pace. I wonder if the shopkeeper at Chandapur knows a trustworthy taxi driver he could send to Azamgarh to pick me up, but when I telephone him, I receive no answer. I plug in my iPod and fall into a sweaty slumber.

A deafening silence awakens me. The bus has stopped, and passengers are filing out. One man indicates the action of eating. I wipe away the drool from the side of my mouth and follow them.

134 I return to the steaming bus, having eaten my fill and taken another diarrhea pill. When the driver returns and attempts to start the bus, the engine wheezes like an asthmatic patient; it gasps and sputters but refuses to come to life. I can hear the driver coaxing and cajoling and even cursing, but to no avail. Some passengers begin to ask questions of the conductor, who in turn scurries into the driver's cabin and holds a hurried conference. A little while later, he emerges and makes an announcement. The passengers click their tongues and mutter; they pick up their belongings and begin to exit the bus. A small man with dry, curly hair taps me on the shoulder and indicates for me to leave as well.

Outside, the road appears to melt in the midday heat. I seek out the small man; he is sitting at a tea stall, wiping his face with a hand towel. Beside him sits his wife, who further hides her face with the end of her red sari at my approach, and two boys in brown shorts. I point to the bus and say, "What happened?"

He replies in Hindi. I shake my head and say, "English." The children giggle, but the man silences them with a single word.

"Bus break down," he tells me. "Engine die."

I find an empty spot on a roughly cut stone bench. I don't feel any closer to Nidhi, even though I left Delhi a whole day ago. There is no way ahead

or back. I don't know where I am and don't speak the language. I have never felt more lost.

"Please."

I look up. The small man is standing in front of me, his towel balanced on the back of his neck.

"Where you go?"

"Azamgarh."

"No sad," he says, waving his hand at me like he is wiping a stain off my windshield. "Bus come, we all go Azamgarh."

I sit up.

"Another bus come?" I ask.

He nods and smiles. He calls out to a shopkeeper, who brings me a glass of lime soda. Startled, I decline the fizzing drink.

"Take," says the man and points upwards, as if to heaven. "Good for sun."

A small crowd is starting to gather around us, and I accept the drink, not wanting to create a scene.

"Why you go Azamgarh?" asks the small man, pulling at both ends of his towel.

His directness surprises me, and I grope for an answer. Sheltered under a canopy of trees, I begin telling the story of my life. The marooned busload of villagers from the interiors of Uttar Pradesh, none of whom I shall ever see again, forms an irregular circle around me. A cud-chewing cow is seated beside me, black splotched with white, as if by an errant house-painter. I speak slowly and loudly, with my best impression of an Indian accent and as many grammatical omissions as possible. A young man with a wisp of a mustache, wearing a bright blue shirt and carrying fire in his eyes, positions himself beside me and translates into Hindi for the group, setting up a steady double stream of narration. My audience is round-eyed when I describe London and England. When I tell them about moving back to India, they nod their appreciation. As I recount the phone call from my wife yesterday morning—how long ago that seems now—asking me to come to Chandapur, one man jumps to his feet and celebrates as though he has won the lottery. A din goes up from the others. My translator leans towards me and says excitedly, "He is saying Chandapur next to his village." Hearty congratulations are passed around. Another man shouts, "Bus!" A commotion ensues as luggage is heaved atop the newly-arrived bus and people file in. As the bus pulls away with a prolonged groan, its previous passengers are quickly

filled in on my story, and I am exhorted to continue. Somebody brings out a packet of *namkeen*, and my audience begins to munch noisily as I describe my journey from Delhi.

“And that is how I am on this bus,” I conclude.

I receive spontaneous applause. My small friend gets up, still pulling at the towel on the back of his neck, calls the conductor, and threads his way to the driver’s cabin. The audience is now getting noisy, each person trying to tell me something. Breakaway conversations start up. Children shyly come up and touch my knee or arm before turning and fleeing to their mother’s protective embrace. A few minutes later, there is a perceptible increase in the sound of the engine. The bus is accelerating, something I had not thought possible.

The small man returns from the driver’s cabin and declares, “I say driver your story. I say you go Azamgarh fast.” The conductor beside him nods. “He say he go fast. We reach Azamgarh three hours.” He holds up three fingers on his right hand to reinforce his achievement.

A cheer goes up from the passengers. A box of sweets is passed around, and there is much slapping of backs. The man whose village is next to Chandapur sits beside me and tells me not to worry; he will drop me home if need be. Somebody starts up a song, and soon the entire bus is singing, barely finishing one song before starting another. I clap along to the capricious beat, feeling like every song is being dedicated to me.

“English song, English song,” shouts somebody, and the chant is picked up. All my protests are overpowered; I stand up to sing amidst cheers. My audience quickly shushes itself, and the sudden silence is overwhelming.

“*Yesterday*,” I croak, and I know I’m off-key, “*all my troubles seemed so far away*.”

Sporadic clapping begins as different listeners try to zero in on the beat.

“*Now it looks as though they’re here to stay. Oh, I believe in yesterday. Suddenly.*”

I stop. My choice of song has caused a perceptible drop in the festive spirit in the bus. Undeterred, some youngsters ask for an English song that they know—“Happy Birthday.” This joint rendition is followed by “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” and “Jingle Bells.” At this point, the older generation decides to wrest back control of the playlist with a Hindi song. It is apparently a popular one, for a collective whoop goes up in the bus. My time in the spotlight done, I sit back down and resume clapping.

True to his word, the driver brings the bus into the Azamgarh bus stand three hours later, at about five in the afternoon. Good-byes are called out, and people alight from the bus smiling. My friendly neighbor bats away rickshaw and taxi drivers swarming the exit and pulls me to another bus. He buys me a ticket despite my protests and bundles me in. This bus is full and departs even before we sit down. Immediately, other people begin to engage my neighbor in conversation, covering their mouths as if afraid of letting any word spill out. They throw surreptitious glances at me. In this world of dhotis and turbans and small shoulder bags, I feel like a cornstalk in a rice field with my city-tailored shirt and shorts and rucksack. My neighbor launches into my story in the local language, gesturing expansively, as though he were trying to act it out as well. I sit there and smile, wondering how much of it he is fabricating and exaggerating. Every now and then, there is a collective gasp and people look at me. When he is finished, he leans back and indicates vaguely to some people.

“They go Chandapur,” he tells me. “I say your story. They say they take you.” Meanwhile, I watch the story spread like wildfire through the rest of the bus.

A reed-like man with oily black hair comes up the aisle and stands beside our seat. He looks down at me with a greasy smile and smooths out the ends of his mustache. Even though he is clutching a leather pouch in one hand, he holds on to the backrests of the seats with both his hands and leans in towards me. I note that his gray safari suit doesn't have a single visible wrinkle.

“Hello, sir,” he addresses me.

I see my neighbor's head jerk up, but the intruder doesn't accord him any respect. Instead, he points to the same vague people my neighbor had.

“They go different Chandapur,” he says. “I go correct Chandapur. You come with me.”

My neighbor stands up and yells at the thin man, who in turn defends himself with the vehemence of the wrongly accused. A heated argument ensues, which my neighbor wins, being portly and having the general support of this end of the bus. The oily-haired man is chased away to the front of the bus.

Soon after, the bus lurches to a halt, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Some passengers begin to alight. My neighbor indicates that I should do the same, gives me a yellow-stained smile, and wishes me good luck. As I head towards the exit, I pass the thin man in the safari suit sitting in an aisle seat.

He looks at me and utters a plaintive “Sir!” I throw a glance to the back of the bus and see my erstwhile neighbor frown and shake his head. Somebody else calls out something; other passengers around me wave me forward. I ignore the repeated “sir” and alight.

Five men with shoulder bags and three women holding the hands of four children wait for me, along with three goats. The bus thunders off like a dying bull, with people waving and shouting good-bye to me. We cross the highway and start walking down a mud path.

Before long, I hear bells chiming behind me and turn to see a bullock-cart trundling down the path. The men stick their hands out, and the driver stops the cart. A conversation ensues; then one of them turns to me, holds up ten fingers, and points to the driver of the cart. I get the hint, pay the man, and hoist myself onto the back of the cart amongst the hay. The bullocks pull me away from my latest travel companions, and I wave good-bye to them. The children run behind the cart for some distance in their tattered clothes and bare feet, flailing spread-out palms and grinning broadly before turning back.

138 I have never ridden a bullock-cart before, and the sensations are unfamiliar. The ride is bumpy but strangely calming. The bullocks pull to the rhythm of their bells, dragonflies swoop lazily in the still air, and the broccoli-shaped trees on either side of the path are touched by the sinking sun. We ride in this manner until the sun disappears, leaving behind faint traces of orange and pink. On the opposite side of the sky, a full moon is suspended in the midst of rapidly darkening indigo. There is a liberal sprinkling of stars, more than I recall ever having seen before. I lie down in the hay and lose myself in the studded sky.

I feel thoroughly relaxed by the time the cart trundles past the first house. This is followed by more dwellings, and then there it is—the village of Chandapur, bathed in full-moon brilliance. My cart driver pulls into an open space in the middle of the dwellings. I jump down, dust off the hay, and look around, suddenly unsure. The porches to all the houses are empty; some are illuminated by a kerosene lamp.

A stringy-looking man is sitting and chewing a betel leaf by a shop’s shuttered entrance. I wonder if this is the accomplice with whom I first killed the Queen’s English on this journey. He points across the ground to one of the houses. I duck into the low entrance.

By the weak light of a kerosene lamp turned down, I see an old woman lying on a cot and a few women around her, but one of them catches my eye.

She has silken hair, black as the night amongst the earthy brown of the others. Her skin is olive and her long, delicate fingers stroke the older woman's hand. Her lithe figure sits lightly, as if she doesn't wish to burden the cot. She hears me enter, turns, and smiles.