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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book was born as I was hungry. Let me explain. In the spring of 1996, my second book, a novel, came out in Canada. It didn't fare well. Reviews were puzzled, or dismissive. It sold little. The readers ignored it. Despite my best efforts at plugging the novel on the radio, the media circuit made no difference. The book did not move. So, I lived the choice of bookstores: the first standing in a row to play baseball or soccer, and mine was the garage, unshined, and that no one wanted on their lawn. I watched quickly and quietly.

The grace did not affect me too much. I had already moved on to another story, a novel set in Portugal in 1910. Only I was feeling restless. And I had a little money.

So I flew to Bombay. This is not so logical (you realize those things: that a star in India will beat the realness out of any living creature, that a little money can go a long way there, and that a novel set in Portugal in 1910 may have very little to do with Portugal in 1938).

I had been to India before, in the north, for five months. On that first trip I had come to the subcontinent completely unprepared. Actually, I had a preparation of one word. When I told a friend who knew the country well of my travel plans, he said calmly, "They speak a funny English in India. They like words like bamboole." I remembered his words as my plane started to descend towards Delhi, so the word bamboole was my one preparation for the rich, noisy, functioning madness of India. I used the word on occasion, and much he told, it served me well. To a clerk at a train station I said, "I don't think the line would be so expensive. You're not trying to bamboole me, are you?" He smiled and chorused, "No sir! There is no bamboole here. I have quoted you the correct line."

This second time to India I knew better what to expect and I knew what I wanted. I would settle in a hill station and write my novel. I had visions of myself sitting at a table on a large veranda, my notes spread out in front of me next to a steaming cup of tea. Green hills heavy with mist would lie

at my feet and the short cries of monkeys would fill my ears. The weather would be just right, requiring a light sweater mornings and evenings, and something short-sleeved midday. This set up, plus in hand, for the sake of greater truth, I would move Portugal into a fiction. That's what fiction is about, isn't it: the selective transfiguring of reality? The matter of it is being out to account? What need did I have to go to Portugal?

The lady who ran the place would tell me stories about the struggle to beat the British out. We would agree on what I was to have for lunch and supper the next day. After my writing day was over, I would go for walks in the rolling hills of the tea estate.

Cryptomatically, the novel appeared, completed and sold. It happened in Montreal, not far from Bombay, a small hill station with some monkey, but no tea estate. It's a mystery peculiar to would-be writers. Your theme is good, so are your characters. Your characters are so much with life they practically need breath themselves. The plot you've mapped out for them is grand, crisp and gripping. You've done your research, gathering the facts—historical, social, climatic, military—that will give your story its feel of authenticity. The dialogue zips along, crackling with wit. The descriptions burst with colour, contrast and telling detail. Really, your story can only be good. But it all adds up to nothing. In spite of the obvious, stirring promise of it, there comes a moment when you realize that the village that has been pursuing you all along from the back of your mind is spouting the flat, night truth: it won't work. An element is missing, that spark that brings to life a real story, regardless of whether the history or the food is right. Your story is emotionally dead, that's the crux of it. The discovery is devastating and—destroying, I tell you. It leaves you with an aching hunger.

From Montreal I mailed the notes of my Indian novel. I mailed them to a fictitious address in Bombay, with a return address, equally fictitious, in Delhi. After the clerk had stamped the envelope and thrown it into a carting bin, I sat down, glass and dish unwashed. "What now, Tolstoy? What other bright idea do you have for your life?" I asked myself.

Well, I still had a little money and I was still feeling restless. I got up and walked out of the post office to explore the coast of India.

I would have liked to say, "I'm a doctor," to those who asked me what I did, doctors being the current purveyors of magic and miracle. But I'm sure we would have had a bus accident around the next bend, and with all eyes fixed on me I would have to explain, amidst the crying and moaning of victims, that I meant to say that, so that people in help there see the government over the mischief. I would have to explain that as a writer-officer I was a Bachelor's in philosophy, went to the class of what meaning such a word might really have. I would have to admit that I had hardly reached Bangalore, and so on. I stuck to the humble, medical truth.

Along the way, here and there, I get the response, "I wonder? Is that so? I have a story for you." Most times the stories were little more than memories, short of breath and short of life.

I arrived in the town of Pondicherry, a tiny self-governing Union Territory south of Madras, on the coast of Tamil Nadu. Its population and size fit it an inconspicuous part of India—by comparison, Prince Edward Island is a giant within Canada—its history has set it apart. For Pondicherry was once the capital of that most modest of colonial empires, French India. The French would have liked to rival the British, very much so, but the only Raj they managed to get was a handful of small ports. They clung to these for nearly three hundred years. They left Pondicherry in 1954, leaving behind nice white buildings, broad streets at right angles to each other, street names such as rue de la Marine and rue Saint-Louis, and lamps, caps for the policemen.

I was at the Indian Coffee House, on Nicker Street. It's one big room with green walls and a high ceiling. Fans whirl above you to keep the warm, humid air moving. The place is furnished in capacity with identical square tables, each with its complement of four chairs. You sit where you can, with whoever is at a table. The coffee is good and they serve French toast. Conversation is easy to come by, and so, a grey, bright-eyed elderly man with great shock of fine white hair was talking to me. I confirmed to him that Canada was cold and that French was indeed spoken in parts of it and that I liked India and so on and so forth—the usual light talk between friendly, curious Indians and foreign backpackers. He took it up, slow of word with a widening of the eyes and a nodding of the head. It was time to go. I had my hand up, trying to catch my waiter's eye to get the bill.

Then the elderly man said, "I have a story that will make you believe in God."

I stopped waving my hand. But I was suspicious. Was this a Jehovah's Witness, knocking at my



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Pi.gets.picked.up,..taken.to.a.hospital,..call.me.pi.I.grew.up.in.India's.. "I.began.to.imitate.Richard.Park
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