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Richard House: Agra

Day 1

A businessman (not unhandsome) joins our train at Gwalior // European. Grey eyes. Smart summer lightweight suit // he sits opposite Buzz, by the window and says nothing, but his eye is on us // The windows are tinted. Even so, nothing holds back the mid-day heat // he's sweating... but cute (I know?)

Buzz (for the record) sits with his arms folded, silent, unmoved // Not sure what's brought on his mood // he's stewing - giving the businessman the evil eye // Sunshine - red rock - India // day 7: Kolkata > Gaya > Varanasi > next... Agra // When Buzz first asked I wasn't sure. India? Three weeks? Buzz? // not counting Chicago (and definitely not counting Tel Aviv) this is our first joint trip // Buzz has a house to sell, and a house to buy. He's constantly online – 'brokering' // t e d i o u s - I'm deliberately not thinking about the UK

When the guard comes to the carriage, Buzz asks: // wait for it... // 'when does the filth express get into sh*t station?' // Don't think the businessman heard // his attention doesn't veer from the hard landscape // red dust and scrub, a few bald outcrops, mounted with palaces // all distant, in silhouette // He doesn't know what to do with his hands

Some idiocy on arrival at Agra // Buzz is determined not to use pre-pay booths // he jumps in and out of rickshaws to find the cheapest deal // I'm too tired to disagree // We should go to the booth like everyone else // buy a ticket, give the receipt to the rickshaw driver, who'll take us to our hotel // Instead, we wander the parking lot trying to pick our ride // a gang of touts wheel about us, grab our luggage, sit us in a cab, and demand an unrealistic fee // we argue with the drivers, with each other, then switch rickshaws // Our businessman buys his ticket from the booth. No problem // he rides by while we haul luggage across an open square // For the first time he turns to watch // Buzz blanks him // I manage a smile and feel the pang of a missed opportunity // // After 5 attempts Buzz gets a price he can live with // I should be happy we're on our way // Problem 1: our rickshaw is a bicycle without a motor or gears // (the other rickshaws were motorized, hence the higher price) // to get us to move the driver has to stand to pedal // Problem 2: you can't drive to Hotel Sheela - concrete barriers block the road // no taxis, no rickshaws - access by foot only // Plus: I weigh 71 kilos, and Buzz around 76+ // our combined luggage weighs, at least, another 100 // all of which has to be peddled 5 or 8 miles // the driver must weigh 55 kilos, tops

I don't watch as Buzz pays // I don't want to become annoyed // The driver stays with us, we won't get our hotel discount until he leaves // he's keen to secure work for tomorrow, but not too insistent // he doesn't smile, doesn't banter or hassle for money // hadn't noticed before: his hair is parted and slicked back, close-shaved. Stylish // his body is staggeringly lean, but he's stronger than I imagined // Buzz shushes him away - a grown man, an adult, shushed away like a pest

Agra looks cleaner than other cities. Completely unexpected // Buzz doesn't want to see the Taj Mahal until tomorrow // The whole point is that first view from the gatehouse // that one vantage point // // He wants to eat at a rooftop restaurant in Taj Gange, right in the neighbourhood // has me go up first – and bang: there's the Taj // remarkable, improbable, huge. So white it doesn't look real // I find a table, manage Buzz up the stairs then to his seat (with his back to the Taj) // all without him getting a peek // As the sun sets the Taj appears to grow // brighter, bigger than every other building, it stands forward and softens from pink to mauve to grey // a proposition, a verb, ready to do something: spin, light up, launch // I'm here with the wrong person // I should be with a lover, not a friend

At sunset boys come to the rooftops - pigeon racers // can't be older than 8 or 9 // they stand high on tatty walls and roofs // They release their birds and swirl rags and ends of rope // conduct their flocks with gestures and whistles // the birds gather, swing over the city, are sent away, called back // they morph, more of a swarm than a flock, and wheel above Taj Mahal // the sound of their wings makes an applause-like report // seriously spectacular: a powder-blue sky specked with birds and neon kites // The idea is: one flock will mob another, send it down // sometimes these mobbings end in brawls // good money is made from who wins and who loses

At ten o' clock the electricity fails for the neighbourhood for the night.

Day 2

Through the night our room throbbed to the noise from the generator // I didn't sleep well // Buzz burned a mosquito coil which filled the room with smoke and made him snore // my dreams were disturbed,

fractured: men on trains, men in rickshaws, men who continuously turn away // Both of us woken by the early call to prayer // three calls, all slightly off-key, two were the usual thin tinny wail // the loudest, soft and mellow, sweetened the air // Buzz won't shut up about his house // he's technically homeless, he says, until the money comes through // he doesn't trust Barclays... who does?

Waiting for breakfast. An international crowd at Hotel Sheela – so many tourists // can't figure out the nationality of table next to us // keep switching from French to Spanish to Italian // the mother threatens to slap her child. Dirty, she says, dirty // they saw the Taj yesterday and disagree on what to visit today // Buzz is busy. Organizing. Ready to go before I've even had coffee // I know exactly what he's thinking // The Taj opened at six. There will be a queue // (we checked with the guards outside the westgate last night) // Buzz gave each of the guards a jolly 'night night' // you could see active dislike in the soldiers' non-response // I'm not ready for a day of Buzz's enthusiasm, or the attentions of hawkers and traders

The tickets cost 25 rupees for Indian nationals, and 750 for 'non-Indians' // A European woman in a sari has taken exception to the difference // She calls the price divisory and racist // I'm too hot to be bothered and Buzz is too bothered about the delay she's causing // Ordinarily he'd weigh in there with her // After travelling half-way across the globe, the fee is irrelevant // anyway, 750 rupees for half-a-day of not being pestered is well worth the price // (hawkers and touts aren't allowed into the complex) // // Walking to the gate we're invited to buy cards, t-shirts, marble chess pieces // variously scaled models of the Taj. Some, strangely, modeled from cow turds (!?) // // The merchants are actively aggressive // one keeps slipping small alabaster models of the Taj into Buzz's pocket, has hold of his arm - won't let go // and becomes offended when Buzz finally marches off // Buzz says he doesn't (or won't) understand the word 'no' // on cue, there's a woman outside the westgate – same as all the others we've seen // she stands, absolutely static. A sign about her neck, black paint on cardboard, that says 'NO'

First view of the Taj is through the portal of the main gatehouse // Everything here is presumed, devised, calculated // Buzz stands dead-centre, silent // Behind and before us are people - more and more people // each vie for the same spot, the same vantage point: that first full view // // Buzz is too amazed to smile // // Infinitely satisfied // The view stretches before him grander than he could have imagined // // a petite lawn, a channel of water, light and balanced fountains // the monument is raised on a platform,

absolutely massive // astoundingly delicate as if crafted from sugar // // It doesn't matter how many people crowd the pathways and lawns // above anything else, it is intimate

When Buzz finally turns to me, he asks, 'Why didn't we ever get together?' // This is too casual to be unpremeditated. Buzz doesn't do casual // we're in Buzz's universe // his heart's favourite home // the most singular monument to devotion // and he's asking me why I don't love him // // My inability to answer is his answer // // Buzz nods to himself, walks down the steps. Fine, whatever, written all over him // // I'm done. I won't participate in this // So I'm leaving

Back at the westgate I have to work against the flow of the crowd // Out of the compound there's another commotion // there are three women with the 'NO' signs, and a whole mob of men about them // It's ugly. The women keep their eyes shut. The men holler and threaten, wild with rage // I squeeze through and find myself face to face with the businessman from the train. The man from Gwalior // I break away from the crowd. The businessman follows after // Once free, we both check our pockets for our wallets. He says: I genuinely don't know what that was about // then introduces himself. Steven // Steven has a slight stutter, and he asks what I've done with my friend // I point back at the compound, and he touches my arm, perhaps by accident // We both smile, because we both know that this is going to be easy

Steven has a room at the Sheraton // despite his stutter, he moves business along // He doesn't want to drink, he says, and he doesn't want to talk // Within five minutes I'm shucking off his polo shirt // Down to his shorts. I ask him what he wants. What he likes // This, he says, is fine // We kiss a little // I suggest that we lay on the bed. Instead he sits in a chair // I keep standing // He's a little rougher than I like

Long story short // just when it matters, I loose concentration // what I hear in my head is Buzz whispering // *ask the guard when the filth express gets into sh*t station?* // I'm hearing house prices, mortgage negotiations, complaints about Barclays // That's it. The moment's lost

Steven asks for the time, he has some kind of business meeting // If I like I could wait, and he would be back in two hours // He's suddenly awkward, back to stuttering // Nice, he says. N-n-n-n-nice. Fuh-fuh-

fine // Nice? Fine? I'm used to the clichés, 'hot' maybe, but nice? Fine? // I tell him that this is tempting, but I have business of my own at my hotel // I squeeze his shoulder as I leave and we say the usual things

By the time I'm in the auto-rickshaw I'm in a bad mood and forget to haggle // a thirty-rupee drive becomes a fifty-rupee rip-off // It's only pennies, but then it always is only pennies // I'm beginning to feel short changed

Buzz is in full irritation mode by the time I make it back // He's been waiting, he says. He needs to check his emails. What if the bank need to get hold of him? // he has a bad feeling – today is when the deal closes, the money is transferred // he sells his house, he buys another. Blah-di-blah // // After the Taj he'd returned to the hotel for a nap // his gentle hour of recovery was spoiled by a monkey // which sat on the hut's tin roof, jumping and hammering // It wasn't made easier by two hotel staff waggling sticks and throwing rocks who stirred the animal into a rage // I have to listen to this twice // He stretches out and tips his toes together // He says: what I said earlier wasn't serious. It was just a question // He wants to know where I was // It's this place, he says by way of an apology. Being here // I should leave it alone but I can't // I'm busy changing. I disagree // You can't ask a question like that without meaning it, I tell him // I've been hijacked // the whole trip is a dumb plan to corner me - and what for? // If anything was going to happen between us wouldn't it have happened already? // How can he not see this? // I know, even as I speak that what I'm saying will be a source of deep and great regret // But I don't shut up: it was blackmail, I tell him. The whole trip. Blackmail // The impact of this statement is immediate, and more awful than I could have imagined // Buzz immediately hardens, switches off

We agree to travel separately for a while. It's nothing big. Buzz's suggestion, in fact // It's hard to figure out exactly what to do // Buzz wants more time in Agra. I'm for moving on to Jodhpur // He's keener to see Jaipur // Even as we talk we confuse the cities: Jodhpur. Jaipur

Our arrangement is efficient // Jodhpur is an overnight train ride beyond Jaipur // so we agree to meet in three days times in Jaipur, outside the Hawa Mahal – a big pink palace // If there's need to change the plan we'll be in touch by email // we'll stop in Jaipur for a couple of days, then head on to Mumbai // This seems watertight // Buzz, who has been dependent thus far, is happy with the arrangement // I'm surprised. This has been relatively easy. I'm trying not to jump at the break // Time apart is a good idea. We're tetchy with each other, intolerant // Once you start behaving like that it's hard to stop. I'm just as culpable as Buzz // A break will be good; we're too much in each other's pockets // So it's agreed. We'll go and check our email // then head to the station to arrange our travel

The chairs at the internet shop are so unsteady it's an effort to sit and type // Buzz checks on his house. I browse on-line newspapers, weather reports // // Buzz perches forward, focused // he types fast, a little snappy as if the person he is writing to annoys him // The connection isn't secure and occasionally drops // Buzz huffs at the slightest provocation and complains // I've one message from Tom, a mutual friend // I've just opened it when Buzz pushes himself away from the keyboard // He's done. Am I ready? Let's go to the station // I quickly read Mark's message. There isn't much to it // Just to ask how I'm getting along with Buzz // Mark is a mutual friend who couldn't quite see the point in the trip // Buzz, Mark reports, has sent him an odd email. There's no time to look into this // I pay. Buzz stands at the door. As the man takes the money Buzz steps into the street // just as two auto-rickshaws pass in opposite direction // It happens too quickly for me to do anything // struck by one rickshaw Buzz is knocked into the path of the other // Everything stops and focuses down to this one small spot // // I have to push through people standing in the doorway to get out // The rickshaws have stopped – horns blurt along the street // One of the rickshaws blocks my view // When I step round it I find Buzz on his back, knees up, hands up // dazed, blinking at the sky, dust settling about him // I squat by his side // He blinks. Lifts up his head // I tell him not to move // Buzz chuckles: I'm fine // He rolls to his side then struggles to sit upright // Me: Don't move // Buzz: I'm fine. I'm alright // I check his head, his neck, arms, legs. Insist that he remains

still until I'm satisfied he's all right // It's hard to tell but he appears undamaged // I bounced, he says.
Christ, I'm so fat I bounced. My hip hit the rickshaw

The rickshaw is screwed. The driver tugs at a loose front panel // I'm immediately on my feet, finger right in his face warning him to say something // anything // go on, ask us for money // The drivers, people in the street, the manager of the internet shop are all shouting // hands up and waving, outraged // Buzz, now upright, wants to know what I'm doing // I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine. Everything is OK // He holds his hands above his head, which somehow quells the disagreement // // inexplicably, he offers to pay both rickshaw drivers for the fares they've lost

Eventually the police arrive // Up and down the street rickshaws and motorbikes are caught up and horns continue to sound // In the spaces between the vehicles people stand to watch // I head Buzz back into the shop and make him sit down. Someone kindly offers him water // Once again I check his arms and legs // I have him stand, twist his torso, tell him to put his wallet away // It's impossible that nothing can be damaged

In the street one of the policemen is accepting money // // When he comes into the shop he's folding bills away // first words out of his mouth are that there is a fine // Your friend, he says, in perfect English, has damaged both of the vehicles

Back at the hotel I make him strip off and inspect him again // There is a red blotch reaching from his right buttock to his hip. He hit meat, but not the bone // Both elbows are a little scuffed and dirty // more amazing than this his scars are gone // all of the welts and lesions // the karposi – gone. Completely gone // He knows - it's the new drug - it's working // the only issue is numbness in his fingers and toes

I tell him there's no way I'm leaving now // Him: That's stupid. Me: You don't know. You could be in shock // You might have fractured something but don't know it yet // Him: I'm fine // Me: I saw you flying. You were horizontal before you hit the ground // Buzz looks pleased. Horizontal? // I sweep my hand out. As good as. Flat as a pancake // and then it occurs to me – I don't know why. This wasn't an accident // Buzz deliberately stepped into the road. Probably to stop me going to the station

Day 3

We take the day easy. Stick to the hotel compound // Everything back to normal, except I still want to go to Jodhpur // Buzz sits with his notebooks, me with my book // he wants to know what Mark was asking in his email

In the late afternoon a yellow cloud blows through the compound // a squall throws up sand, leaves, and seeds, rattles the tin awnings and chases dogs to cover // We are sitting with a woman from Seattle, and take cover together // She chats with Buzz, although he's uncharacteristically quiet // She asks if we've seen the women with the 'NO' signs // It's amazing, she says. Courageous and inspiring, because the men here are unbelievable // Her guide, she says, is a little fresh. She's worried // I warned him not to fall in love with me, she says // It's happened three times already. Once in Nepal, and twice here // I don't want to go with him today. Yesterday he was all touchy-feely // I told him my boyfriend would be unhappy // and he said he would take me somewhere my boyfriend would never find me // I told him: how am I supposed to feel good now you've told me that? // How am I supposed to feel comfortable? // I suggest we go with her on the trip today // // Once the guide arrives, I change my mind // He's a boy, honestly, nothing more than a child // He might be harassing her, but it's nothing a smart slap wouldn't sort out // anyway, there's a suggestion that this is a game

Buzz won't talk to me when I say I'm still going to Jodhpur

I leave Buzz at the compound // It's a cold farewell, uncomfortable for both of us // But we're assured to meet in three days in Jaipur as agreed // // Agra Fort Station is even more decrepit than Gaya Station // Dogs wander about the platform and become excited as people gather for the trains // The floor is shattered in the ticket hall, and on the footbridge, high up and wired in, I'm confronted by a monkey //

Grey, dirty, the animal saunters along the middle of the walkway // It's tail broken, a bald stub // It sits and watches as I walk by. I'm convinced it will attack

After an hour and a half delay the train comes in // A boy with a cleft upper lip follows me the length of the platform // something wrong with his hip, so it's not too hard to out-stride him // I give him a packet of biscuits and he still waits for money // I remember what the American woman was saying earlier // she said she's used to seeing everything, 'and I mean everything' // But in most places people know how to say thank you - whatever their circumstances // It doesn't happen here. Someone will take what you offer and demand more // She's right. The boy is thin. I can see the bones in his arms, the veins. I can see sores on his skin // I've given him a pack of biscuits and I want him to say thank you // His clothes are truly wretched, torn and gritted with oil and dirt // and the thing is, this isn't unusual // he isn't the only unfed, diseased, physically challenged child on the platform // but the worst thought is that I'm completely indifferent // I'm not troubled by this and I should be. My money does nothing but sustain misery // I try not to ask myself what justifies this? How bad does something have to be for this to become so normal? // // The boy is soon forgotten in the hurry to find my berth // Once again, someone has taken my seat: a fat business man who pretends to sleep // A woman in the lower bunk indicates the bunk above her // I don't think so // Unwilling to be nice I shake the man's leg, and make him move

As I lay, covered with 2 blankets, the man sleeps on the floor // his belly: big fat bladder, lolls onto the linoleum // In his sleep he pinches himself through his trousers // You could cut the fat from his gut // feed the poor at Agra station for a comfortable month

When I wake, I'm alone. I check my bags are ok, straighten the bedclothes, sit up // it's strange not to have Buzz's company // Outside, the land is flat and red. Desert, pretty much // Trees look like they've been pruned. From the stubs flourish a pompom of leaves // There's no trash. No plastic bags // The first peacock I see I mistake for a bush

A break of two days

Day 3:

Back to meet Buzz. Jaipur is a huge sprawl, low lying, grotty India in full assault // In each city the rickshaw drivers have their own little speech // ignoring them doesn't work // walking by a pee-stinking wall, a smiling rickshaw driver blocks my path // The man is well-spoken, speaks good English // He says he's a decent Muslim boy who just needs work: where do I want to go? // I can't see Buzz navigating this on his own – not good to imagine // My guess is, when we meet, he's going to be mightily out of sorts // My guess is all the romance will be beaten out of him // it isn't a good thought, and I'm not proud of my part in this // If Buzz is high maintenance, then that's how it is // You take people as they come // all of Buzz's tantrums, all of the hard work are just part of the package // The rickshaw drivers I could do without

Jaipur has shopping malls which skirt the main centre // These malls are empty, half-built, with scrubby forecourts: mostly designer clothes and jewellery stores // and always men with mops cleaning up // Those elusive monied classes are here somewhere – even if only to shop // There are rats in the street, alongside 4 x 4's, Levi stores with doormen // It's the first time I've not been pressured to buy something // and the first time in India I've felt a little too travel-worn to enter anywhere I'd like

The hotel is funky. In a good way // Behind the check-in desk, a sign: 'keep our customers happy, they keep us in business. Mr. Singh' // The sign faces the customer not the clerk // There are no rooms available in the hotel // there is an option to stay in Mr. Singh's house // The room is large. The bed is a foam mattress with no top sheet // The walls are ringed with white fitted wardrobes with gold fittings // a small votive with a statue of Ganesha // Above the bed, leaning forward, the portrait of a guru, a furry plastic lay hangs from the frame // I've an hour before I meet Buzz // I pick the shirt he bought me for the trip, and checking myself in the mirror I try not to dislike it // it will please him and it seems that some effort needs to be made // As I lock the room the bearded Mr. Singh asks me not to smoke in the house, if this is alright // My room is where they keep the Holy Book // His daughter has a sweet smile // She waves as I say goodbye

The rickshaw driver is a little fruity, and clocks me as soon as I'm outside // He asks if I have a girlfriend, many girlfriends // looks at me a little too long (and not the road) // I've bought the tickets to Udaipur // an upgrade to second class, and pre-booked a hotel overlooking the floating palace // I will tell Buzz that Jodhpur was interesting, and say it so he'll guess I've not enjoyed my time alone // In Udaipur we will dress smartly. We will have dinner above the lake // we will begin our last week gently, without hassle // I run through what would be good to do, and give myself a little talking to // I need to be easy on Buzz, less abrasive. I should be nicer // The fruity rickshaw driver drops me at the gate to the old town, beside the government shop // As I get out it begins to rain. Better than walking in the heat, he says // The walk to the Mahal is short, if I remember the map right // The city is a simple grid. Up one block, over two

It's a long walk, made more difficult by a sudden flurry of rain // People run for cover and crowd under a covered walkway // Row upon row of booths set in groups. Metal workers hang aluminium pots in rows // men with sacks of powdered gypsum, tables with tabs and crystals // Turning left takes me past shops not booths: glass doors, tables, blankets and bedcovers // handsewn pillows, stores with bright rows of printed and tie-dyed saris - bright, shiny reds and yellows // Finally the palace itself // The Mahal has been repainted. Gold tips on ornate windows. Walls, a pink wash detailed with white lines // On the corner a shrine // People shelter from the rain and lightening which comes in bright cracks // The pavement in front of the palace is cordoned off // Standing close to the temple I can't see Buzz // When the rain breaks I run to the opposite side of the road

It's unusual for Buzz to be late // He's a stickler. Always on time. Promptness is important // If you're late for an evening with Buzz it can upset the whole night

Still no show, but no worries. This is India // As I walk off a vendor calls to me, he guesses where I'm from // Why do you look German when you are English? // I tell him it isn't deliberate, and he laughs // It's the beard. If you shave you will look English // And further down, another vendor - You are French! // Another: you have an Indian mother? (Because my hair is short, my skin is dark)

Back at the Mahal // // Behind me, a handsome man, one of a number sat at a booth // behind him, elephant designs stitched onto a blanket, vibrant dyed scarves // silk, all richly coloured and embroidered // You are back, he says. You should come in the morning // At eight o'clock in the sun it is nice. Now there is no colour // He waves his hand, dismissing the building. It is drab in this light... // // Buzz is still not here // // The building is nothing more than a façade // fancy as an iced cake // one small room behind the windows at the upper levels. A place to watch the street // the seats of power are gracefully decorated // I ask the vendor if he has seen anyone waiting? // No one waits. Everyone comes and takes a picture // He asks if I want my photograph taken. I say no, and laughing, he asks if I trust him // Do you think I will run away with your camera? // I explain I'm waiting for a friend. He was supposed to be here an hour ago. He is English // The man shrugs. If I like I could come into his shop, wait, and maybe look // It crosses my mind that this is a seduction // It would be interesting to take up his offer, to sit and look at material I do not want // It would be interesting to seduce this man, to see how possible, how sincere this exchange might be

Another hour // nothing

My final return // The vendor comes out of the stall, his hand stroking his belly // And so no friend? You will wait in my shop? His question is more of a command // I walk away, cross the roundabout to police whistles // I imagine that Buzz would be irritated to see me flirting with a young man // A man who is probably his type

I take a rickshaw back // The man is so skinny, so undernourished, he has to stand to pedal // It's taking so much effort that he gets out to push // I'm too tall anyway, and have to crouch under the plastic hood, which does nothing to stop the rain // I'm irritated with Buzz, irritated at India – for whatever has caused

him to be late // We will not make our train tonight // That's a loss of £30. Rebooking is going to be impossible

There's no word from him by email // No message either. No SMS. Nothing // Instead there's a message from Mark // Buzz has sent some strange emails // Little letters to people, which just isn't like him // In the email to Mark, he'd written about how jealous he'd been of our friendship // and said 'he forgave him' // the bank are calling. They are 'concerned' not to have heard from him either // These aren't big things, Mark concludes, just worrisome // it isn't like Buzz to be like this. I agree. This is worrying

I wait in the manager's office for the phone // A young German boy is asking about the hospitals // He heard they are good here // A woman, American, talks to one of the staff, a boy hosing the floor // She says: how are you? Are you happy? Are you tired? Are you sad? // The man appears puzzled // he stops what he is doing to shrug

I call the hotel in Agra // // It takes three attempts // the manager in Agra is unhelpful // I offer the phone to the clerk and explain // My friend was supposed to meet me today. In Jaipur. // I'm worried because he has not arrived // The clerk listens, then smiles // He holds up the phone and speaks directly in Hindi // after a brief exchange he holds the phone away from his ear // Buzz, according to their records, never stopped at Hotel Sheela // I insist: Buzz's name will be in the register, right under mine // his name and his passport details // Another short chat // the clerk says that there is no such name in his directory // The manager from Agra hangs up // The Jaipur clerk holds the receiver out to me // Would I like him to speak to the police? // I've no idea what kind of mess this will cause // It is, after all, only one day's delay // Buzz will be here tomorrow // The clerk takes the details and says that he will call Hotel Sheela in the morning // Sometimes, everything is a little easier in the morning // Sometimes someone different answers the phone

I email Mark again to ask if Buzz has been in touch // and if so, what he might have said about his travel plans // It will take a day to hear back, by which time Buzz should be here // We'll need to adjust our plans to get to Udaipur

Day 4

No messages this morning

I woke with an idea: Buzz has gone to Udaipur // It's just like the twit to make a mistake like that // all Buzz has to do is mess up one detail. It's entirely possible // There is no doubt. It's a typical Buzz error // The only place that would make sense is the floating palace at Udaipur, out in the lake // I lie in bed and listen to the movements of the Singh household as they go about their day // Mr. Singh, also in bed, shouts directions while his wife discusses business with him // Today, your friend will arrive. Today. I am certain.

If Buzz has gone to Udaipur I would have certainly heard about it // such a mistake would somehow be my fault // Buzz's rage would be incandescent // the email would burn its way through // the internet would righteously shudder at my folly

No Buzz at the Mahal

I'm tired of waiting // tired with the hassle associated with walking, the unending 'hello's' // the stops and starts, the stuttering flow // the young vendor asks if I am still looking for my friend? // I tell him yes, and ask if he has seen anyone waiting. A man about my age, very tall, very pale, an Englishman // He would look uneasy, I say // The vendor shakes his head. No one has been here waiting // People come, take their photographs and people go.

He's not here

Still not here

No Buzz // bloody hell

After a while no one speaks to me // My presence makes people uncomfortable // The vendor comes out to charm the other tourists // sometimes I see him watching, sometimes he nods // It's hard to know at what point this becomes an issue // One night? To nights? A week? // At what point do I make an official report?

At night the ornate façade of Muti Mahal recedes

Back at the hotel I check my email again // Mark has contacted Martin, who heard from Buzz just after I left Agra // In his message Buzz mentioned only that our plans were to move on to Udaipur // There are no other messages // No reply from Buzz // I send another message to Buzz, this time attaching a tag so I will be notified when the message is received // and when the message is opened // The receipt saying that it has been successfully delivered arrives immediately // I think this is deliberate. This is punishment. It is pure spite // so Buzz is out there collecting his email, but not answering

Day 5

No answer from the stream of emails I sent last night

...back at the Mahal // Walking through the west gate I buy a packet of biscuits // On the cover a rosy-faced child holds up her monkey-like hands (no thumbs) // from her mouth comes a speech-bubble: lower taxes = more biscuits // This culture is unreadable // The vendor greets me with a hand on my shoulder // We stand side by side facing the Mahal sharing my biscuits // He asks: This friend is a special friend? // I answer: Yes. But he's a putz // A putz? // It's Yiddish. I think it means he's an idiot // He doesn't understand. I attempt to mimic a fool. // He is a clown, I say, and he seems to understand. // Him: How many years this friend? // Me: A long time // Him: Is he an underpants friend? // Now it's my turn not to understand. Underpants? // Underpants. From when you were a boy, running around? // At home we speak every day. // I think you are his brother. // I think sometimes I am.

Even if Buzz shows up I will think of this place as a miserable place // The palace as a backdrop to a sorry place to a pitiful drama.

nothing

nothing

nothing

no show

I've finally had enough

I check my email and find I only have messages from England // Others are alarmed // Buzz has not written in a week // such silence is remarkable for a man who must always have the last word // In four messages the same question: has something happened to Buzz? // worse news, the bank have contacted Mark. The money has been transferred out of his account // I'm not sure I understand // Closing down the application I decide to ask the manager to contact the police

The manager arranges for the police to come to the hotel // We meet at the rooftop restaurant // There are no other tourists about // Two men clean, one hosing the other sweeping with a squeegee, both curious about our small group // It's much simpler than I had imagined. The police have checked with the hotel in Agra // Both Buzz and I appear on the register // According to the register Buzz left the same day as me. There's no destination noted // I ask if it is possible to check with other hotels? // he was interested in visiting the Taj Mahal again // The officer shrugs, sits further forward // This happens a lot, he says. People miss each other all the time // The police officer takes all of my details // Arrival, departure, plans of where we were going, where we have been // My passport, date of issue, the visa - when it expires and how long it is valid // I give a full description of Buzz, which he repeats to me // He takes contact details and says that he will be in touch with a crime number // no matter what happens // Procedure, procedure

I'm woken by a call from England. Mark says there is an investigation into Buzz's absence // the bank are concerned about fraud // I tell Mark that this would be typical. Buzz gets kidnapped and ripped off // Mark says I have this all wrong // the bank are investigating Buzz – he is the one they suspect of fraud

I speak directly to the consulate's attaché // The man sounds young. His voice is impeccably English, with a clear radio definition // Have you reported this to the police? I say yes // the hotel brought an officer directly to the hotel to speak to me // He took me to the Mahal and we waited in his jeep // Did he give you a copy of his report? // the man doesn't believe that I've spoken with the police. He wants a crime number // He asks about Buzz. About money. About how we've managed on our holiday // I can tell he doesn't trust me. He's sending another police officer. I am to wait // The officer will take down my details

I dream of Buzz's parents: they sit at a table // Their feebleness is sickening // I'm woken by a call from Mark. It's in the papers // Buzz has disappeared with a good deal of money (how?) // the report says that I have been detained for questioning // // the police have arrived // // I know he's gone // // // But I don't know why

